

Developing *Liderazgo*: Leaders as Learners and Advocates for Bilingual Education

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ABSTRACT: School leaders are key to the success of dual language bilingual education (DLBE) programs, yet there is limited research on how these leaders develop. In this case study, we examine how a Latina DLBE leader developed *liderazgo* as she supported her bilingual teachers' learning. With a critical sociocultural lens conceptualizing development within a collective zone of proximal development (ZPD), we analyzed teacher meetings, co-planning, debriefs, and *pláticas*. Findings reveal how *liderazgo* development is a transformational process propelled by three interrelated praxes: commitment to collaborative learning, recognition of systemic inequities, and growing advocacy. Our study contributes to the conceptualization of *liderazgo* development and offers implications for high-quality and equitable DLBE.

KEYWORDS: Bilingual education, dual language, teacher preparation, bilingual leadership

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As dual language bilingual education (DLBE) programs continue to grow in different contexts, research is needed to better understand how leaders sustain high-quality, equity-driven programs. Such leadership is especially critical in the current sociopolitical climate in the U.S., in which anti-immigrant rhetoric, English-only ideologies, funding cuts, and challenges to culturally and linguistically

sustaining education increasingly threaten bilingual education and the communities these programs serve. The need for ongoing professional learning is especially apparent in new-immigrant destinations and contexts that are still developing infrastructure to center multilingual learners (MLs) in bilingual education. In newer immigrant destinations, similar to our context located in the Mid-Atlantic region, programs serving MLs are often underdeveloped and led by leaders who have little preparation specific to DLBE (Chesnut & Morita-Mullaney, 2023; Menken & Solorza, 2015; Morita-Mullaney & Stallings, 2018). Research is needed to better understand leader learning within these developing contexts to grow and sustain equity-oriented DLBE models.

Our study begins to address this research gap by illuminating the developmental process that a leader and her team experienced in order to sustain and strengthen a DLBE program that explicitly centers MLs, the first of its kind in a district located in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Given that the leader is uniquely positioned as both a program leader and professional development facilitator, we explore how she supports DLBE teacher learning while simultaneously developing her own leadership. Through an in-depth examination of one leader's collaborative learning process, our study offers implications for supporting leaders in sustaining DLBE programs in developing contexts.

Literature Review

A growing body of research has documented the characteristics of leadership needed to sustain high-quality and equitable DLBE programs (i.e., Blair, 2025; DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2016; Menken, 2017; Scanlan & Lopez, 2014; Wiemelt & Welton, 2015). Drawing on transformative and social justice leadership, LatCrit theory, and bilingualism research, Wiemelt and Welton (2015) conceptualize *liderazgo* (leadership) as “the breadth of leadership capacity needed to support the school success of EBLs [emergent bilingual language students]” (p. 85). *Liderazgo* highlights the uniqueness of critical leadership in DLBE programs, emphasizing the importance of understanding bilingualism and biliteracy, centering the experiential knowledge of multilinguals as a strength, and challenging linguisticism and racism in bilingual schools (Wiemelt & Welton, 2015).

The concept of *liderazgo* draws from research that has found that equity-centered DLBE leaders focus on ensuring that emergent bilinguals experience linguistic development in both program languages, high-quality curriculum, culturally sustaining pedagogies, and sociocultural integration and belonging (Leu Bonanno, 2023; Scanlan & López, 2014). Such leaders must navigate and combat restrictive English-only policies and deficit discourses by engaging in courageous leadership (Long et al., 2016), centering students' linguistic and cultural assets (Scanlan & López, 2014), and setting and maintaining high expectations for MLs in their programs (Alanís & Rodríguez, 2008; Rodríguez & Alanís, 2011).

In contrast, research has found that school leaders without DLBE knowledge, understanding, and commitment to sustaining bilingualism (i.e., *liderazgo*) are more likely to dismantle existing programs than leaders who are knowledgeable about and believe in bilingual education (DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2020; Menken & Solorza, 2015). Similarly, schools without *liderazgo* experience challenges communicating across their schools' linguistically and culturally diverse communities (Schwabsky, 2013). These challenges are particularly acute in regions where the infrastructure supporting DLBE programming and educator preparation programs is underdeveloped (Blair, 2025; Chesnut & Morita-Mullaney, 2023; Morita-Mullaney, 2019).

Importantly, DLBE leaders do not develop *liderazgo* alone. Instead, they enact distributive leadership by engaging multiple stakeholders; cultivating trust, shared commitments, and collaboration among educators; and supporting professional development and collaborative planning centered on MLs' assets and aligned with DLBE goals (Blair, 2025; Hernández, 2022; Hunt, 2011; Leu Bonanno, 2023; Souto-Manning et al., 2016). Research underscores the importance of asset-based collaboration with linguistically and culturally diverse families and school staff (DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2016; Leu Bonanno, 2023; Phillips et al., 2023; Souto-Manning et al., 2016; Wiemelt & Welton, 2015).

Given the central role of leadership in advancing DLBE goals rooted in critical consciousness (Heiman et al., 2024; Palmer, 2018), additional research is needed to understand bilingual school leaders' developmental pathways toward justice-oriented *liderazgo* (DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2016, 2020; Wiemelt & Welton, 2015), especially in regions with limited access to DLBE educator preparation. In particular, research is needed on how practicing DLBE leaders—engaged in the day-to-day work of launching and sustaining new DLBE programs—experience situated (Putnam & Borko, 2000) *liderazgo* development alongside their teachers; how university partners may support this process; and the tensions that may arise in this ongoing work.

Our study is guided by the following questions: (1) How did a new DLBE leader develop *liderazgo* and engage in learning with her teachers and our research team? (2) What tensions did the DLBE leader navigate as she engaged in learning and praxis enacting DLBE goals?

Conceptual Framework

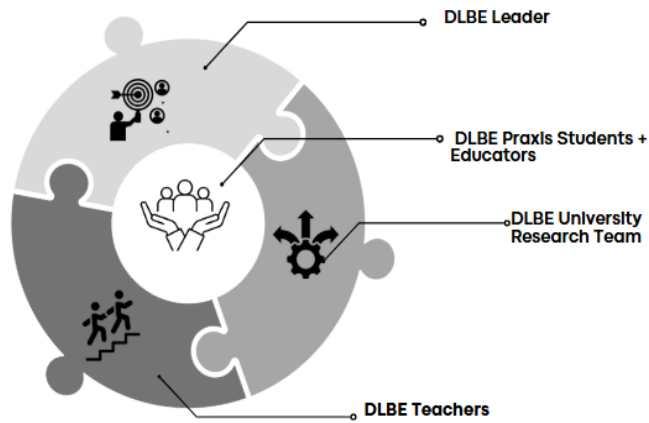
Our study is grounded in critical sociocultural theory and decolonial and humanizing approaches to research. Sociocultural theory posits that learning is sociohistorically situated and mediated by social interaction, dialogue, and joint productive activity within a collective zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978; Moll, 2014). The zone of proximal development (ZPD) refers to the developmental space in which learning is collaboratively constructed as individuals engage in complex tasks alongside more knowledgeable others through dialogue, mediation, and shared activity. Informed by Freire (2005) and Teemant and

Sherman (2022), we view critical sociocultural processes of learning in DLBE contexts as ongoing and transformative, rather than merely additive, as well as tied to the development of critical consciousness. This concept is defined by Freire (2005) as “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (p. 35).

Our study adheres to humanizing and decolonizing approaches to research that challenge extractive traditions in educational inquiry, advocating instead for research conducted *with* communities by centering their assets and needs, amplifying their voices, and contributing to justice-oriented change (Carter Andrews et al., 2021). These approaches call for researchers and community members to build knowledge together and engage in ongoing dialogic relationships so that people’s humanity, agency, and lived experiences are foregrounded (Carter Andrews et al., 2021; Paris & Winn, 2013; San Pedro & Kinloch, 2017). Thus, in this study, we attempted to constantly position ourselves and our research participants as partners in transformative praxis and co-learning.

Anchored in these critical socio-cultural theories and approaches, and building on Wiemelt and Welton’s (2015) definition of *liderazgo*, we conceptualize *liderazgo* development as the ongoing process of transformational learning of DLBE leadership ideologies, knowledge, and practices that takes place as leaders engage in collaborative praxis with fellow bilingual educators in ways that are aligned with the goals of DLBE schooling.

Figure 1 illustrates how we conceptualize the process of *liderazgo* development within a collective ZPD (Martin-Beltrán et al., 2017). We chose a circular visual representation for this conceptual framework, instead of a linear one, to illustrate how learning and relationships develop through ongoing interaction and collective meaning-making. The circular form reflects our view of *liderazgo* development as a dynamic, expansive, and transformative process. In the middle of the circle (represented by the hands and people), we situate our shared goals to develop DLBE praxis that centers the humanity of students while cultivating bilingualism, academic excellence, and sociocultural competence with a lens of critical consciousness. Building on Freire’s (2005) idea of praxis as “reflection and action on the world in order to transform it” (p. 51) and drawing on teacher-learning scholarship that uses this concept to examine the cyclical movement between theory and practice in educators’ learning (Teemant & Sherman, 2022), we conceptualize praxis as both *doing* and *learning* DLBE pedagogies and leadership. We contend that a collective ZPD affords a space that supports multidirectional learning. Our study focuses on this collective ZPD as we investigate how the leader’s *liderazgo development* was mediated and supported by dialogical collaboration with teachers and our research team.

Figure 1*Conceptualizing Our Collective Zone of Proximal Development*

It is important to acknowledge that our collective ZPD was situated in the social context of a school and district where expertise related to DLBE goals and praxis was unevenly distributed and still emerging. This socio-historical context inevitably presented constraints and tensions, as well as opportunities for new learning and advocacy.

Methods: Research as Collaborative Praxis

This study builds on Melinda's two decades of research-practice partnerships with an urban Mid-Atlantic school district in the US, which serves the highest proportion of multilingual learners in the state (approximately 20% of the student population). Throughout this longstanding collaboration, Melinda and her university team have worked alongside educators, students, and families to advance educational equity for multilingual learners. The focal data for this study (approved by the IRB at our university and the district research office) were collected during the first year of our collaboration with River Elementary School (RES). All names used in this paper are pseudonyms. Recent state and district policies called for expanding DLBE programs as a model to better serve MLs. At the time our study began, RES was the only school in the district to frame its DLBE model as a bilingual maintenance 50/50 dual language model that centered multilingual learners as its majority population.

The student population at RES is 95% Latine, 3% Black, and 1% White, with 75% classified as English Learners and 92% qualifying for free and reduced lunch. The DLBE program is a strand within the school and includes two DLBE teachers per grade level (K-5). Language arts was taught by one teacher in

Spanish and the other teacher in English. Math was taught in Spanish, while science, social studies, and specials were taught in English.

Melinda reached out to the RES principal to better understand the school context and discuss the possibility of RES participating in our ongoing study in district schools. The principal directed our team to meet with Ms. Yanez, the DLBE program coordinator, who invited us to her DLBE teacher meeting. Trust with Ms. Yanez developed over time through personal interactions and was further strengthened by shared linguistic, cultural, and professional identities between Ms. Yanez and Astrid and Sandra. This supported more open conversations about her leadership experiences and the challenges of coordinating the DLBE strand. Importantly, we maintain an ongoing partnership that is evolving, even as we write this manuscript. While reflecting with Ms. Yanez to include her voice in a co-authored conference presentation and to member-check our interpretations (fall of 2024, spring of 2026), she offered new insights during retrospective *pláticas* (conversations) that we include in this paper.

***La Líder* and Her Context**

La líder (the leader) of the DLBE program at RES is Serena Yanez, a Latina bilingual educator who grew up in Puerto Rico, earned her Bachelor of Arts and teaching certification in elementary education, and taught for ten years before being recruited to teach in an urban school district in the Mid-Atlantic region of the U.S. After serving as a classroom teacher and teacher leader for 4 years in a Spanish immersion program in a different school in the same district, Ms. Yanez was hired to join the administrative team of the dual language maintenance bilingual program at RES as the new DL Coordinator.

The focus data for this study were collected during Ms. Yanez's second year at the school, when she was still relatively new to her leadership role. Hence, while Ms. Yanez entered our study with extensive bilingual teaching experience and an emerging identity as a DLBE teacher leader, she shared that much of her DL leadership growth happened during our research partnership. Throughout the collaboration, grounded in her own personal and professional experiences, she demonstrated a strong desire to deepen her understanding of DLBE (for herself and her teachers).

Ms. Yanez invited us to attend her first DLBE staff meeting of the year to discuss our research project focusing on how teachers enact DLBE instruction and to listen to the teachers' expertise and questions about DLBE pedagogies. Following the meeting, Ms. Yanez shared that her teachers needed professional development specific to DLBE and expressed her desire to continue her own professional learning. In response, we adjusted our approach and refocused our research on collaborating with Ms. Yanez to design and facilitate school-based professional learning opportunities for her DLBE team.

Authors' Positionality

We approach this study as educators, advocates, and researchers with extensive experience in bilingual education. Melinda is a multilingual (English, Spanish, Portuguese) teacher educator and researcher who has been working with this local school and community for two decades to elevate the voices of multilingual learners and their teachers. Astrid and Sandra share linguistic and cultural backgrounds with Ms. Yanez, including navigating life as Latina immigrant teachers in the U.S. Despite these commonalities, we were critically aware of the hierarchies of power perpetuated by the researcher-participant dichotomy. Inspired by humanizing research and decolonizing approaches (Paris & Winn, 2013; San Pedro & Kinloch, 2017), we constantly sought to honor our participants' assets and agency, and viewed Ms. Yanez as our *colega*, our partner in learning. This approach led to a multidirectional relationship that was characterized by *confianza* (trust), *respeto* (respect), and shared inquiry.

Data Collection and Analysis

Across one school year, our research team engaged in an ongoing cycle of co-planning, co-facilitation, and debriefing of four after-school DLBE team meetings with Ms. Yanez (see Praxis cycle illustrated in Figure 2). During the meetings, our research team acted as participant observers, jotting down field notes, which we elaborated with ongoing analysis memos. Across the year, we engaged in several *pláticas* with Ms. Yanez; which, according to Fierros and Delgado Bernal (2016), are in-depth dialogues that allow for mutual vulnerability and collaborative knowledge-building. We chose *pláticas* because they are a decolonial, feminist, and culturally-grounded method (Fierro & Delgado Bernal, 2016) that aligns with our humanizing approach to research. *Pláticas* allowed us to create a relational space of trust, reciprocity, and genuine conversations where Ms. Yanez's knowledge, experiences, and reflections could be honored. This method is particularly important because it supported a two-way dialogue that wove together the personal and professional dimensions of leadership, including successes, challenges, and tensions within DLBE contexts.

Our meetings and *pláticas* allowed us to closely analyze discourse and identify shifts in thinking that illustrated *liderazgo development*. Across the first school year, our team engaged in 16 different meetings with Ms. Yanez (including debriefs, reflections, and co-planning for the RPs) that were audio recorded. These conversations were on average one hour (ranging from 30 to 90 minutes). Following the first year of the study, we conducted three additional recorded *pláticas* with Ms. Yanez to retrospectively reflect on our collaboration, prepare a conference presentation on the study (which she co-authored), and provide feedback on this manuscript.

For this case study (Merriam, 1988), our recursive data analysis utilized constant-comparative methods to identify themes across data sources (Saldaña, 2021). Data analysis began with open coding and triangulation of field notes and transcribed audio recordings from the DLBE meetings, co-planning and debrief sessions, and *pláticas* with Ms. Yanez.

All authors wrote analysis memos to note patterns across the data, and we met as a research team to compare our memos and identify common themes. For example, we noted that Ms. Yanez's commitment to learning became salient, and this theme was confirmed in our analysis of debriefs and teacher sessions. Thus, in subsequent coding phases, we sought to understand her learning in the context of our collective ZPD and identified key moments with her teachers and our team that revealed growth in her *liderazgo*. During axial coding, we identified recurring patterns in how Ms. Yanez deepened her understanding of DLBE goals, navigated challenges in her learning journey, and strengthened her advocacy, all of which reflected key dimensions of *liderazgo* (Wiemelt & Welton, 2015). As a team, we consolidated our codes into three themes that we conceptualize as central dimensions of *liderazgo development*: (1) *ganas de aprender* (eagerness to learn) when Ms. Yanez positioned herself as a learner and facilitator of teachers' learning, (2) navigating tensions, and (3) advocating for DLBE goals in connection to a larger vision that seeks to build upon MLs' strengths.

Findings

The first section of the findings describes the situated learning activities in which Ms. Yanez, the teachers, and our team engaged collaboratively, co-constructing and expanding a collective ZPD. Our findings reveal how this collective ZPD simultaneously buttressed Ms. Yanez's *liderazgo* development, teachers' learning, and our own understanding. The following three sections discuss the key actions, dispositions, and tensions that shaped Ms. Yanez's evolving understanding of DLBE praxis and contributed to her ongoing *liderazgo* development.

Co-constructing Collective ZPD Spaces for *Liderazgo* Development

Ms. Yanez demonstrated a strong commitment to collaborating with our team, and we aimed to meet Ms. Yanez and her DLBE team where they were in their own praxis, that is, in their ongoing process of critically reflecting on and acting upon the goals, possibilities, and tensions of DLBE implementation. Ms. Yanez, with the support of our team as thought-partners, designed and facilitated collaborative professional development praxis spaces where teachers' voices were heard and their thinking pushed. Within our collective ZPD, we co-constructed professional learning opportunities and engaged in collaborative

dialogue with Ms. Yanez to reflect on teachers' learning and her own *liderazgo development*.

In collaboration with our team, Ms. Yanez re-designed teacher meetings to more intentionally focus on professional learning related to DLBE goals. Different from other spaces in the school, Ms. Yanez advocated for this DLBE team space to prioritize dual language instruction and teacher reflection on MLs' learning. In this paper, we refer to these sessions as *reuniones pedagógicas* because the focus was on teaching and learning (i.e., *pedagogía de lenguaje dual*). Rather than relying on the "banking method" (Freire, 2005) of transmitting information to teachers, such as through policy mandates, these *reuniones pedagógicas* (henceforth RPs) positioned teachers as co-constructors of knowledge as they engaged in praxis together.

Figure 2

Leader-Educator Praxis Cycle

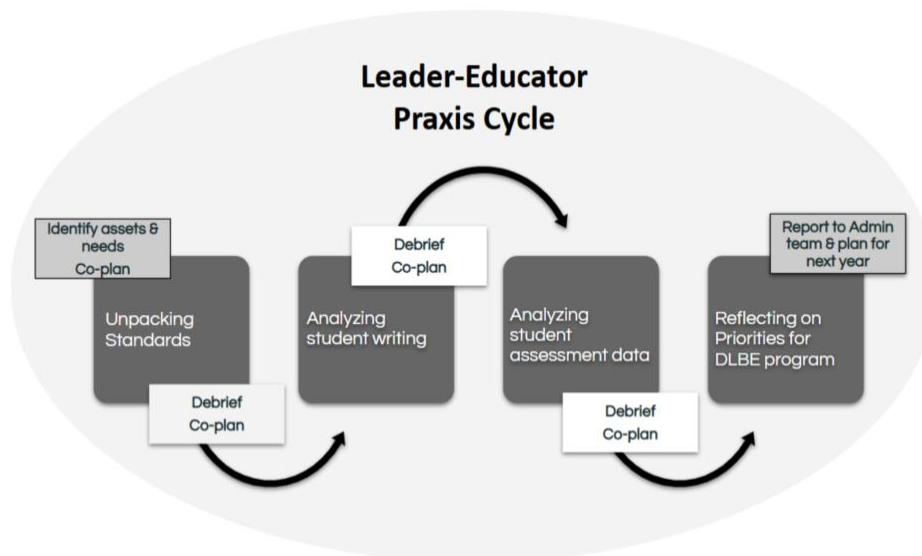


Figure 2 shows our praxis cycle, which included identifying educators' needs and strengths, co-planning *RPs*, engaging in joint productive activities during the *RPs*, and debriefing *RPs* with our leader-partner. The dark gray boxes in Figure 2 represent the four *reuniones pedagógicas* that occurred throughout the year, and the white boxes represent debrief sessions with Ms. Yanez in which we reflected on successes and areas for improvement to inform planning for subsequent *RPs*. During our initial meetings with Ms. Yanez to identify her priorities (light gray box), she demonstrated growing *liderazgo* as she recognized her teachers' lived experiences. She noted that her teachers connected well with students with whom they shared cultural and linguistic capital, even as they grappled with limited preparation in DLBE pedagogies. Furthermore, Ms. Yanez invited teachers to identify their own instructional practices and learning priorities.

Ms. Yanez identified an area for learning when she explained that many teachers were overwhelmed by the district curriculum (that was not built for a DLBE

program) and teachers were unaware of how the language arts standards connected across their Spanish and English literacy instruction. In response, the first RP (represented as the first dark gray box in Figure 2) our team planned together with Ms. Yanez was to guide teachers to unpack and prioritize language arts standards across languages. As teachers collaborated in cross-language teams, it became evident that collaborating in this way was a new experience for many.

Ms. Yanez identified writing as an area of instructional growth based on her classroom observations. Thus, the second RP we co-planned was designed to analyze student writing in a way that honored students' bilingualism/biliteracy and connected to the language arts standards discussed in the first RP. English and Spanish teachers brought in samples of students' writing to share and analyze with their *colegas*. Ms. Yanez mentioned that this was a pivotal learning opportunity as it was the first time (in her career thus far) where teachers had the time to collaboratively look at student work together across languages.

The third RP was planned by Ms. Yanez on her own to analyze mid-year assessment data. Ms. Yanez took time to disaggregate the data by grade, language, and classroom, making sure each teacher pair had assessment results that were most relevant to them. This RP was a unique opportunity for English and Spanish teachers working with the same students to engage in collaborative conversations to analyze and compare data across languages. Ms. Yanez's facilitation showed evidence of her *liderazgo* development as she intentionally planned teacher-to-teacher interaction, which allowed them to analyze the data together. This was very different from other top-down and tense data meetings we witnessed elsewhere in the district because, instead of using the meeting to only monitor results, Ms. Yanez positioned the teachers as analysts of the data and empowered them "to use the data to inform our instruction" (Ms. Yanez, RP, February 2023).

The fourth RP was co-planned with Ms. Yanez; although she asked our team to lead the facilitation of this meeting so she could listen to how teachers reflected on our collective work across that school year. In cross-language and same-language groups, teachers reflected on what they learned and what worked well in their DLBE RPs and identified areas of growth in terms of curriculum and instruction, collaboration and co-planning, and professional learning. Teachers highlighted how unpacking language arts standards together was a powerful learning experience, and they mentioned how they were developing a better working relationship with their cross-language partner teachers. The teachers identified a need for more co-planning time with each other, which sparked a pilot project the following year.

The white boxes in Figure 2 represent reflective debriefs between Ms. Yanez and our team, where we collaboratively analyzed the teacher learning that occurred during the RPs. These reflections directly informed the co-planning of subsequent sessions and interactions with teachers. Ms. Yanez developed a relationship of *confianza* (trust) with our team outside of these debriefs with

additional coaching sessions with Sandra, where Ms. Yanez could consider ways to support teachers in between meetings through coaching visits.

Through this iterative process, we observed Ms. Yanez developing *liderazgo* by critically reflecting on her facilitation of the RPs and the impact on teachers' engagement and growth. She noted, "I think it was useful and pertinent... they left with strategies and information they can use." She also recognized teachers' active participation across grade levels, noting, "*todos tuvieron participación activa... pudieron colaborar para no repetir lo mismo.*" [Everyone actively participated... and they could collaborate in order not to repeat the same thing in their lessons.] This statement illustrated her growing attention to fostering collaboration across languages and adapting practices based on teacher needs.

At the end of the first year, Ms. Yanez organized and co-planned a meeting with the administrative team at her school, including the principal, assistant principal, and PD lead teachers (represented as the final light gray box in Figure 2). She mobilized the relationship with our team to present what we had learned together to advocate for changes. Our team presented our findings, centering teacher voices from the final reflection meeting to highlight what teachers learned and what they wanted to see change. Ms. Yanez utilized this meeting as a springboard to advocate for a pilot to develop biliteracy units the following year. Ms. Yanez summarized her school's priority boldly, taking greater ownership of the direction of her program: "*Collaborative planning es una de las áreas que tenemos como prioridad mejorar para el próximo año.*" [Collaborative planning is one of the areas we have as a priority to improve the program next year.] We observed her becoming a more vocal leader as she interacted with the rest of the administrative team.

Figure 3

Liderazgo Development Process

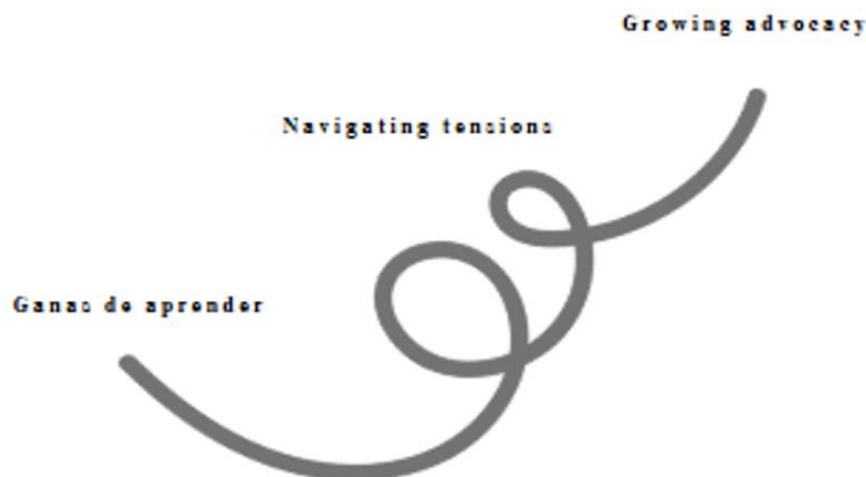


Figure 3 depicts our observations of this dual language leader's engagement in ongoing learning alongside our team and her teachers, conceptualizing *liderazgo* development as a dynamic, spiraling process of learning and reflection that evolves non-linearly. Through engaging in praxis with her teachers and reflecting on goals with our team in our collective ZPD, Ms. Yanez was becoming a stronger DLBE leader. We identified key actions and leader dispositions that gave momentum to Ms. Yanez's *liderazgo* development: (1) commitment to collaborative learning and expanding her own and her teachers' understanding of DLBE instruction; (2) recognizing systemic inequities and grappling with inherent challenges to achieving DLBE program goals; (3) growing advocacy for the DLBE program goals, teachers, and community. For the purposes of analysis, we present evidence in three subsections to foreground each of these themes separately, while recognizing these themes are interrelated.

Ganas de Aprender Collaboratively

Throughout our partnership, Ms. Yanez demonstrated that she was full of *ganas de aprender* (eagerness to learn), consistently showing a deep commitment to her teachers' learning, her students' learning, and her own learning. Early in our collaboration, in our November 2024 *plática*, she mentioned, "Me encanta aprender, como líder [uno] tiene que aprender para hacer un trabajo efectivo y de calidad." [I love to learn, as a leader one has to learn to do an effective and high-quality job.] In this first quote, not only did she express her passion for learning, but she also recognized learning as a critical part of leadership. Importantly, Ms. Yanez recognized the value of learning in collaboration with other educators. This allowed her to engage her team in the co-construction of the collective ZPD space we discussed earlier. Designing, reflecting, and engaging in pedagogical activities with her teachers increased her teams' DLBE pedagogical knowledge and allowed her to hone her own knowledge as she responded to teachers' insights and questions.

At the first RP with her DLBE team, she told her team that this is "important work and we're here to do this together," reiterating her belief that teachers need to learn in collaboration. Another example of her commitment to collaborative learning was evident during debriefing meetings with our team, where she positioned herself as a fellow learner, working toward the larger goal of expanding bilingual education. In our January 2023 debrief, she told us:

Entonces les expliqué mi punto de vista y el Big Picture. De que inmersión va a crecer, de que necesitamos seguir aprendiendo, mejorando y fundamentando el programa y por esa razón yo iba a seguir apoyando eso y que pienso que ellos también se beneficiarán por las oportunidades para todos los teachers van a aumentar.

[So, I explained to them my point of view and the Big Picture. That immersion is going to grow, that we need to continue to learn, improve and

substantiate (or uphold the rationale for) the program, and for that reason I was going to continue supporting this [the learning] and that I think that they will also benefit from the opportunities for all the teachers that are going to grow.]

In this quote from our January debrief meeting, she explained “We need to continue learning, improving and substantiating (or upholding the rationale) for this program.” By using “we need” (*necesitamos*), Ms. Yanez positions herself as a learner, learning alongside her teachers. We also see Ms. Yanez demonstrating her *liderazgo* by recognizing that teacher learning is an essential aspect of upholding and substantiating (*fundamentando*) the DLBE program in their local context. While she did not yet name the importance of social justice central to DLBE, she did recognize the district’s shift toward valuing bilingualism and the multilingual assets that Latine communities bring to schools, and how this shift is advantageous to her community of teachers and students.

As she deepened her understanding of DLBE pedagogies, in collaboration with others, Ms. Yanez started to identify structural challenges that were precluding her team from deeper collaboration and cross-linguistic work. As we will see in the next section, naming these tensions was a first step to address them, which continued to expand her learning and justice orientation.

Navigating Tensions to Enact DLBE Goals

The process of developing *liderazgo* in a DLBE program is tension-ridden as language and education are inextricably linked to systems of power, privilege, and oppression. We found that, over time, Ms. Yanez began to recognize and navigate the tensions her team was experiencing connected to systemic inequities, particularly the limited DLBE knowledge among school-based and district-level leaders. Ms. Yanez took it upon herself to justify the DLBE program goals of bilingualism, biliteracy, and multiculturalism to educate her administrative team (principal, vice principals, instructional lead teachers), which is further evidence of her *liderazgo* development. Reflecting on her efforts, she shared in our June 2024 *plática*:

La [información de las metas de DL] comparto también con el grupo de admin. A mí me sorprende que les cuesta mucho trabajo entender el DL program. Ellos lo comparan con ESOL [English for Speakers of Other Languages]. Los compara como ellos. Para ellos ESOL and DL is the same thing. Y he tenido que explicarles como ESOL es un programa para apoyar y acelerar el desarrollo del lenguaje en inglés. Sin embargo, acá [in DL] se desarrollan todos los componentes del lenguaje. Si hay un... se cubre el currículo del condado, pero en ambos idiomas.

Me gusta que puedo reforzar los beneficios del programa con la data. Eso es algo que la data ha hecho que ellos puedan entender el valor del programa un poco más. Cuando ven que una estudiante en 5.º grado puede

leer, hablar, escribir ambos idiomas, pero eficientemente, comparado con uno que ha estado en el programa regular que no puede hacer lo mismo en ambos idiomas. So, yo creo que la data es lo más que les ha ayudado a ellos entender el valor del programa, que les falta entender.

[I also share [information about DLBE goals] with my administrative team. It surprises me that it is very hard for them to understand the DL program. They compare it with ESOL [English for Speakers of Other Languages]. They compare us with them. To them, ESOL and DL is the same thing. And I have had to explain to them how ESOL is a program to support and accelerate English language development. In contrast, here [in DL] we develop all the components/modalities of language. Yes, there is... we teach the county's curriculum, but in both languages.

I like that I can constantly show the benefits of the program with data. That is something that data has done, so that they could understand the value of the program a bit more. When they see that a 5th grade student can read, speak, write in both languages, but in an effective way, compared with a student who has been in the regular program who cannot do the same in both languages. So, I think that showing the data is what has helped them the most to understand the value of the program; which they still need to better understand.]

In this quote, she explained that she was surprised how difficult it was for her fellow administrators to understand the goals of DLBE. She recognized that other leaders in her school and district viewed MLs through a monolingual lens that narrowly focused on their English proficiency and literacy, without regard to students' bilingual resources. In response, she explained how the DLBE program was more than simply developing English proficiency but rather about developing MLs' wider linguistic repertoire across the curriculum. In order to advocate for the program, Ms. Yanez took time to disaggregate student data in Spanish and English from the DLBE program, not only to support her DLBE teachers' analysis of student learning bilingually, but also to show fellow leaders evidence of the benefits of the program and mobilize their support. As Ms. Yanez conveyed in the quote above, *liderazgo* in DLBE programs calls upon leaders to understand the complexity of developing two languages and ways to promote evidence-based practices that go beyond traditional monolingual mandates that only focus on English development.

Our findings also revealed the ways that Ms. Yanez was transforming as she worked through tensions and the complexity of supporting teachers across languages to promote DLBE program goals of bilingualism, biliteracy, and sociocultural competence in her context. Despite her own bilingualism, Ms. Yanez felt obliged to lead school meetings predominantly in English, an approach modeled by a system that positioned English as the only language for educators' learning and collaboration (i.e., school-wide and district PD meetings were conducted in English only). Yet, in her *pláticas* with our team, she described the linguistic discrimination she faced in her interactions with school and district leaders where she felt she could not fully express the depth of her professional knowledge in English alone. Her experiences resonate with findings from previous

research with Latine and educators of color who are often required to do extra work (Amanti, 2019; Amos, 2016; Marx et al., 2023) to validate their teaching, leadership, and language practices in educational systems historically dominated by whiteness and English monolingual practices (Chávez-Moreno, 2021; Freire et al., 2022; Wiemelt & Welton, 2015). As a DLBE leader, she described taking on the role of “interpreter” of district mandates and professional development (offered exclusively in English) for Spanish-dominant teachers. This role allowed her to leverage her multilingual repertoire and uphold her commitment to supporting teachers, albeit at the cost of additional responsibilities.

Through constant dialogue with our team about these English hegemonic pressures and our co-construction of bilingual RPs, Ms. Yanez developed greater clarity on how being bilingual informed her ability not only to serve as a language broker, but also to support teacher learning bilingually. We noticed her language shifting across the year as she facilitated the first RP, mostly in English, using Spanish only when working with small groups of Latine teachers. However, later in the year, she collaborated with us to redesign their professional learning to more explicitly leverage her own and her teachers’ bilingual repertoires. For example, in RP2 and RP3, Ms. Yanez encouraged teachers to use Spanish and translanguaging in their joint activities. This is further evidence of developing *liderazgo* that values educators’ multilingual language practices.

When she reflected about how her own experiences becoming bilingual influenced her work as a DLBE leader, in our June 2023 *plática*, she showed evidence of her *liderazgo* development toward a more asset-based perspective about her own, her teachers’, and her students’ multilingualism.

This experience helped me, of course, to know how important it is to be bilingual, how beneficial it is to be bilingual, to be able to express your thoughts and feelings in both languages. And it helped me to be more empathic with the teachers and with the students because I know how it feels. I know how the process is in your brain. I know the difficulties you can have along the way. So, I can be more empathetic.

Ms. Yanez’s reflection illustrates how recognizing her own personal experiences with bilingualism became an important resource for developing a more asset-based, empathetic and humanizing approach to DLBE leadership.

At the beginning of our partnership, Ms. Yanez openly acknowledged her uncertainty about how to promote curricular and instructional connections across English and Spanish classrooms. This made sense considering the contradictions related to DLBE instruction in a district that has historically promoted English-only instruction and language separation in world-language immersion programs. But, she also simultaneously professed her willingness to learn and make sense of these new ideas, based on how she witnessed our team supported teachers to make cross-linguistic connections during RPs. In our January 2025 debrief, she shared:

Ms. Yanez: *Pero ese es un ejemplo of why I wasn't feeling comfortable talking about crossing languages because lo que yo he aprendido es you*

[English] do your thing, you [Spanish] do your thing. And we're not going to use the same books. We are not going to use the same materials. *Y por eso no me sentía cómoda hablando de algo que hasta el momento no he estudiado o no domino.*

Sandra: *Tiene total sentido, ¿Cómo se siente ahora?*

Ms. Yanez: It makes sense, and I was open... I am open to learn and make sense *porque no se le dijo que utilizaran lo mismo, sino que apoyaran ese proceso de connection [entre lenguajes]*

[Ms. Yanez: But that is an example of why I wasn't feeling comfortable talking about crossing languages because what I have learned is that you do your thing, you do your thing [Spanish-English separation] And we're not going to use the same books. We are not going to use the same materials. And that is why I did not feel comfortable talking about something that, so far, I have not studied or have not mastered.

Sandra: That makes a lot of sense, how do you feel now?

Ms. Yanez: It makes sense and I was open... I am open to learn and make sense... because we did not tell them to use the same [materials], but to support the process of connection [between languages].]

This exchange revealed that Ms. Yanez's initial hesitation reflected institutional models that positioned Spanish and English as separate instructional spaces. Her shift from "I wasn't feeling comfortable" to "I am open to learn" showed an important moment in her *liderazgo* development, as she began to understand cross-linguistic connections as crucial instructional supports in DLBE spaces.

At the end of the year, she explained to our team how she learned the importance of cross-linguistic connections for bilingual students and teachers. In the following quote, she admitted that she had mistakenly assumed that cross-language collaboration with teachers would be too difficult to implement; but she received positive feedback from her teachers.

Y con toda la sinceridad, yo pensaba que [teacher collaboration to ensure cross-linguistic connections] no iba a funcionar tanto, que no iba a ser tan efectivo y que los maestros quizás se le iba a ser complejo entenderlo y aplicarlo en el salón de clases. Me equivoqué. Toda la retroalimentación que recibimos de los maestros fue totalmente positiva y estaban bien motivados a continuar lo que lo que aprendieron durante ese tiempo... Así que se puede mejorar intentando cosas diferentes.

[To be fully honest, I thought that [teacher collaboration to ensure cross-linguistic connections] was not going to work that much, that it was not going to be effective and that maybe the teachers would find it too complex to understand and implement it in the classroom. I was wrong. All of the feedback that we received from the teachers was completely positive and

they were very motivated to continue what they learned during this time... So, one can improve by trying different things.]

That is, she reflected on how our collaborative learning experiences changed her and her teachers' mindsets about cross-linguistic connections and encouraged them to try this DLBE pedagogy new to them.

Thus, we observed several moments when Ms. Yanez grappled with systemic tensions. The lack of district understanding of DLBE goals, English hegemony, and language separation policies, in particular, became pivotal opportunities for *liderazgo* growth. We found that her learning from these tensions was scaffolded by the dialogue in our collective ZPD, highlighting the importance of thought-partners, in and outside of schools, for bilingual leaders. We observed how Ms. Yanez's discourse describing her school reality and tensions, vis-à-vis DLBE goals, became more asset-based and equity-oriented. These new understandings, in turn, buttressed her capacity to advocate for further improvements in her program. Through collective inquiry and critical reflection, she increasingly recognized and interrogated the limited district-level resources available to support DLBE educators and leaders. This advocacy is a central component of her *liderazgo* development and the focus of the final section of our findings.

Growing Advocacy for Teachers and Asset-based Understandings of Multilingual Learners

Our last finding highlights how Ms. Yanez's *liderazgo* development involved acknowledging tensions and critiquing policies that impacted her DLBE program. This acknowledgement inspired her to advocate for changes to provide more responsive and asset-based professional learning for DLBE educators and to increase the whole staff's understanding of DLBE vision and goals, centering MLs.

To support collaborative teacher learning, Ms. Yanez advocated for the time and space to meet together with DLBE teachers, including securing funds from the district to compensate teachers for professional learning. In the following quote, Ms. Yanez explained how she advocated to find PD funds for her teachers to stay after school for the *reuniones pedagógicas*, recognizing the time that teachers invest in their collaborative learning and work was worthy of pay. Her strategies included establishing a calendar to ensure teacher payment, making RPs voluntary to honor teacher choice while trusting that educators were committed enough to attend and ensuring the school and district recognized the RPs as legitimate PD. In our November 2022 co-planning meeting, she explained:

Ms. Yanez: *Es que las reuniones de Dual Language obviamente son fuera del horario escolar, así que pedí que me pagaran esas reuniones. Pude conseguir que pagaran cinco. Y son voluntarias. No es mandatorio.*

Sandra: *Pero todos los profes vinieron que fue bueno.*

Ms. Yanez: *Sí. Y sí, no se excusan. Son... Si tienen el compromiso. So, hacer el calendario ahora me gustaría porque así me aseguro de que sí las van a pagar. Porque si no las van a pagar no las voy a llevar a cabo, porque sé que en un momento va a explotar algo y va a ser fuerte.*

[**Ms. Yanez:** The Dual Language meetings are obviously outside of the school schedule, so I asked for payment for these meetings. I was able to get funding for teachers to attend five meetings. And they are voluntary. They are not mandatory]

Sandra: But all your teachers came, that was good.

Ms. Yanez: Yes. And yes, they don't excuse themselves. They are... yes they are committed. So, now I would like to make a calendar so that I make sure that they will be paid. Because if they don't pay the teachers, I won't have the meetings because I know that at some point something will explode and that is going to be strong.]

This quote demonstrates her developing *liderazgo* as she engaged in advocacy to ensure teachers were paid for participating in PD focusing on DLBE pedagogies (different from district-mandated PD that did not address DLBE goals) and recognized that her teachers were part of the growing movement to expand bilingual education in local public schools.

As the leader of the DLBE program, Ms. Yanez also exhibited *liderazgo* development by raising awareness of the DLBE goals, which she did by making them visible around the school and discussing them with teachers and administrators, as she indicated in her words from our June 2023 *plática*:

I started by printing the mission and vision of the program to the teachers, so they know about it because a lot of them didn't know what was the vision and mission of the program.... *He estado hablando mucho de los beneficios que tiene nuestro programa, las grandes oportunidades que le brinda a los estudiantes que un programa regular no le brinda*

[I started by printing the mission and vision of the program to the teachers, so they know about it because a lot of them didn't know what was the vision and mission of the program... I have been talking a lot about the benefits that our program has, the great opportunities that it provides students that a regular program does not offer.]

Over the course of the year, Ms. Yanez increasingly centered the benefits of the DLBE program for multilingual learners in her conversations with us and teachers. In this way, she demonstrated her growing understanding of DLBE goals as a way to contest subtractive schooling by tapping into students' and families' linguistic and experiential knowledge as a strength.

As she worked together with teachers in the RPs, Ms. Yanez elevated teacher voices and explicitly recognized their work and unique contribution to the DLBE program. Over time, she developed a counter-narrative in an English-dominant context where multilingual learners' and educators' home languages were largely ignored. In the January RP, for example, she reminded teachers, "In

the Dual Language program, we build upon our *strengths*.” By naming the DLBE program as distinctively asset-based (emphasizing the word “strengths”) and using the collective “we” to include herself and her teachers, Ms. Yanez was discursively constructing a team of educator-advocates for multilingual learners. We observed this growing momentum across the school year and into the following year.

As she was reflecting on her many responsibilities as DLBE leader, she demonstrated that she had assumed the position of a program ambassador and advocate who is responsible for sharing and strengthening the DLBE goals, mission, and vision with the entire staff at the school, including the English-only strand. These advocacy qualities were illustrated in the following quotation from our November 2024 *plática*:

Comparto y refuerzo lo que es la visión, la misión del programa con los maestros y todo el staff. Mi escuela no es toda dual language. Así que somos un programa dentro de una escuela grande. Así que constantemente tengo que estar explicando y reforzando cuál es nuestra misión y nuestra visión.

[I share and reinforce the vision, the mission of the program with the teachers and all the staff. My school is not completely Dual Language. That is, we are a program within a large school. Thus, I constantly have to explain and reinforce what our mission and our vision is.]

Her commitment and willingness to educate all teachers and administrators in her school about the DLBE program increased over the year, evidencing her *liderazgo* growth.

In addition to advocacy within her school, Ms. Yanez collaborated with a fellow DLBE leader from another school to ask district leaders for more PD for teachers on foundations of DLBE and differentiation strategies. This is further evidence of her *liderazgo* development as she became bolder and spoke out to leaders with more power in the district. Her advocacy contributed to district leadership partnering with our university team to expand DLBE PD for other schools through a series of workshops for DL coordinators the following year.

In sum, our study sheds light on how Ms. Yanez’s commitment to her ML students and teachers and *ganas de aprender* within a collective ZPD emboldened her to grapple with systemic tensions and to advocate for her multilingual teachers and students. These collaborative conditions, dispositions, and tensions worked together to support her *liderazgo* development.

Conclusion and Implications

Our study contributes to theoretical understandings of bilingual leadership, or *liderazgo* development, which we conceptualize as an ongoing process of learning within a collective ZPD. We extend research on *liderazgo* by showing that critical bilingual leadership involves not only supporting teacher learning but also

engaging in learning alongside teachers, making leadership development and teacher learning interconnected and reciprocal processes. Our findings suggest that, as leaders position themselves as learners and engage in supportive and collaborative learning with teachers, they are more equipped to navigate tensions to be able to advocate for DLBE goals.

Our findings indicate that to support *liderazgo* development, we need to build on leaders' assets and engage with them in work that is responsive to their school community. When leaders and teachers engage in critical reflection and co-construct pedagogical knowledge to meet the needs of their students in DLBE programs, they engage in an ongoing dialogue with the DLBE field (Palmer, 2018). Our study revealed how grappling with tensions inherent to developing bilingualism, biliteracy, and critical consciousness can lead to opportunities for increased advocacy. As Ms. Yanez and her teacher team collaboratively developed deeper understanding of DLBE pedagogies, they were able to more clearly see the structural injustices that impeded further progress (e.g., lack of co-planning time across languages, strict language separation mandates, no Spanish-medium PD) and began to advocate for change.

Our study offers a realistic picture of how *liderazgo* development can happen through ongoing site-based learning, supported by a partnership between a leader, her teacher team, and a university-based team, which offers implications for how to grow and sustain DLBE programs. By shedding light on one DLBE leader's journey, we hope to inform other growing programs that are seeking to support ongoing professional learning for educator-leaders in newer-immigrant destinations where it is critical to develop and sustain DLBE programs with a commitment to justice. While this study provides an in-depth examination of one leader's development, we acknowledge that our focus on a single leader in a developing context limits the scope of our implications.

Finally, as a research team, we learned more about the importance of responsive and human-centered university-school collaborations. In our study, we were both researchers and learners in constant dialogue with educators to meet them where they were in their praxis cycle. This process of co-constructing research and practice priorities taught us to critically listen to a DLBE leader as she envisioned teacher learning experiences, to interrogate our own assumptions, and to reflect on our collective learning and impact. By engaging in the spiraling process of mutual development, our research team supported Ms. Yanez's *liderazgo* development and school change. Building on this foundation, we have continued working with Ms. Yanez and other DLBE educators across the district to develop high-quality and equitable DLBE programs (Martin-Beltrán et al., 2025). In our last *plática* in late Spring 2026, Ms. Yanez shared how she continues to support collaborative DL teacher learning and advocated for additional teacher compensation for this job-embedded professional development.

From a broader decolonial perspective, our findings suggest that DLBE leadership development is most powerful when knowledge is co-constructed among educators, leaders, and university partners rather than transmitted through top-down models of professional learning. University-school partnerships can

serve as spaces for collective inquiry and transformation that honor local expertise, challenge dominant assumptions about leadership and language education, and support the development of contextually grounded approaches to justice-oriented DLBE leadership. Our study calls for future research and praxis that attend to the collective and ongoing nature of DLBE leadership development, recognizing that leaders and teachers strengthen their practice through sustained, site-based learning with and from one another.

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