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BRILLA: Shining on Through a Pandemic

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BRILLA: Shining on Through a Pandemic

Cover Page Footnote

BRILLA: Shining on Through a Pandemic A Personal Experience Submission for the Journal of Multicultural Affairs February 2021

BRILLA: Shining on Through a Pandemic

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*A partnership is a partnership;
pandemic, or no pandemic.
School buildings open or closed, masks on or off.
In-person or on-screen.
A partnership is a partnership.*

The Beginning

As a university Spanish instructor (first author), I have always believed in the importance of taking language learning out of the traditional classroom. In Fall 2019, the most dedicated, creative, and gifted teachers I have ever had the pleasure of encountering in my almost 25 years in education agreed to partner with my students and me to make this happen. They allowed me and my students into their lives, their school, and their classrooms. Ultimately, they invited my group to monopolize the primary school cafeteria two mornings a week. In collaboration with district and school administrators, Dual Language (DL) classroom teachers, and a university Spanish professor, this special experience came to be known as BRILLA: Bilingual Readiness through Interaction, Language, Literacy and Alliances (see Table 1).

Table 1

Overview of the BRILLA program

Bilingual Readiness through Interaction, Language, Literacy and Alliances	
Objectives	Who
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Undergraduate lab students (ULS) and dual language students, all emergent bilinguals, develop their bilingualism and biliteracy alongside each other. ULS see the value of bilingualism and bilingual education first-hand in a community, in the hope that as future voters and policy makers, they will support these notions and programs in society. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ULS studying Spanish as a modern language. Spanish-dominant pre-kindergarten and kindergarten students enrolled in Dual Language classrooms at a local primary school.
What	Where
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> BRILLA takes place during the ULS Lab class times. 75 minutes once a week during the scheduled course time; 10-12 meetings during a traditional university semester. ULS prepare the reading of a book, and activities connected to the reading that directly connect to the pre-K or kindergarten curriculum for the week; mathematics activities connected to state standards (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, TEKS) may also be included. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local Independent School District, Primary School, Cafeteria.

Best practices in community engagement suggest that the engagement should be regular and sustained. One-time or isolated projects are not beneficial for either end of a community partnership (Butin, 2007). Thus, Tuesdays and Thursdays became sustained interactions of mutual admiration between university emergent bilinguals and emergent bilinguals enrolled in Pre-K and Kindergarten DL. Children enrolled in DL Spanish–English were paired one to one with university lab students (ULS) studying their third semester of the Spanish language, and representing most majors offered at the university. One semester at a time, one hour at a time, regular opportunities for human connection through language and laughter emerged as ULS met with DL students. ULS prepared literacy and mathematics activities connected to DL weekly curriculum and to state standards that provided content for academic and conversational practice in the target language. From the university to the local schools, from professor to classroom teachers, and from monolingualism to bilingualism, bridges were constructed. BRILLA provided a space for emergent bilinguals of all ages to develop their bilingualism and biliteracy together. *Brilla* is Spanish for *shine*. Usually an in-person experience for ULS and DL students at a local primary school, the BRILLA program in Fall 2020, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, was entirely over Zoom. Emerging from the shadows of Covid-19, this narrative explores the challenges and triumphs of a unique partnership in education during an unprecedented time.

Spring 2020: Going Virtual

In March 2020, after eight months of in-person togetherness, program participants were all separated by quarantine. But, a partnership is a partnership. Following the

initial shut-down across most of the globe, BRILLA lost the *interaction* piece as public school buildings were closed for DL students, and ULS were no longer on campus, but dispersed to homes all over the United States. ULS provided videos for their DL friends, or *amiguitos*. The videos were as personal as they were educational. ULS shared their homes and families in quarantine with their DL partners (also at home staying safe) in recorded lesson videos. One ULS shared her parents' ranch, and involved her siblings in giving the ranch animals speaking voices, in Spanish, to enliven a reading for her DL partner. It became clear that the silliest ULS was not just fun in person. Giving that ULS a camera, a microphone, and the kind of time that only a quarantine can afford made them even more engaging.

The focus remained around reading books to the children, asking comprehension and prediction questions in the target language, and always remaining connected to state standards, and scope and sequence for PreK and Kinder curriculum. Only there was no one to respond during a lesson. ULS paused during their videos for answers, like Dora the Explorer, the popular Nickelodeon character, posing questions to her young audiences, and then blinking in heightened anticipation of correct answers. Academic language in Spanish continued through activities and songs connected to the reading for the day, read over a Zoom recording with ULS in a tiny box at the top of the screen. The situation was far from ideal. But, tireless, tenacious colleagues at the DL school site passed the videos from each university *compañero* to their corresponding *amiguito*. These ULS and DL students had been meeting weekly for seven weeks and could not let the partnership end so abruptly, especially as so much else was changing. Maybe the video lessons offered parents and guardians a few moments of peace, as their

children were able to see and hear from the university partners. Maybe they provided a few moments of joy.

Fall 2020: Staying Virtual

The separation of ULS and DL would continue as Fall 2020 came into focus. The public schools were open but, understandably, not allowing visitors on campuses—a simple, straight-forward measure among many to reduce exposures. But a partnership is a partnership, pandemic or no pandemic. The plan would remain as it had been the two previous BRILLA semesters: two sessions on Tuesdays, and two on Thursdays; one from 8–9 a.m. on each day for DL PreK and one from 9:30–10:30 a.m. each day for DL Kinder—a total of four BRILLA blocks per week. In one enormous Google doc, 75 ULS created their own Zoom links and pasted the contact information for the semester next to their names. DL teachers added DL student names and copied the Zoom links into the children's individual Schoology accounts as *assignments*, so that the links would be accessible each Tuesday and Thursday for log-in. The weekly task of connecting ULS and DL students over WiFi seemed simple enough. Each child, with the help of a teacher or aide at the school site with them, would click on the link and see their university *compañero* waiting for them, ready to read and sing and count and play, virtually.

Shining from afar is natural for the sun and stars, but the realities of BRILLA from a distance were varied. Among the challenges were: (a) WiFi that was only mostly reliable on both sides of the connection, (b) full classes of DL children who were quarantined at times, (c) Zoom links that did not work the first or second time around, (d) little hands-on assistance for teachers, and (e) normal classroom noise

and distractions detracting from the ULS on screen. Floating from Zoom to Zoom was a university instructor who could not help her primary school colleagues with the nuts and bolts or with daily challenges of connecting 75 primary DL students with 75 ULS over the course of two days a week, during two one-hour blocks each of those days. The thing is, though, when it worked, it worked. And it was beautiful.

For the first few weeks of the Fall 2020 BRILLA semester, ULS were trained in the same ways as always. Course readings and discussions in the target language covered basic child development, best practices in literacy instruction, direction to the state standards, the value of multilingualism in life and in society, and the importance of DL programs for children and for a community. Resources were shared among ULS that could be used virtually and effectively with small children. Practice lessons were delivered and critiqued. After these weeks of preparation, 75 ULS logged into their Zoom links (from home or on campus) at their assigned times, and waited for their *amiguito* to appear.

The instructor would spend each BRILLA session popping from one Zoom meeting to the next on the Google doc, while fielding text messages from ULS and the six incredible, selfless, multi-tasking DL teachers who were managing everything for 20 DL students in each of their classes on their side, at the school site. On the best days, everyone connected, there were no technology challenges, and every Zoom meeting found students of all ages talking, reading, singing, counting, rhyming, and adding in Spanish. On the challenging days, many ULS and their *amiguitos* simply did not connect for technological reasons, and those that did connect had a hard time keeping a child's attention on a screen. And, on the worst days, some 5-year-olds, some 20-year-olds, and some educators clicked

out of Zoom feeling frustrated, tired, and a little bit sad. But, there was always the promise of the next week.

Joy in Disguise

Despite the distance and the protocols, the group brainstormed ways to get the ULS and the DL students together—even for just a wave, or a socially-distanced smile. In a modified Trunk or Treat event, *Desfile de los Dulces*, the answer revealed itself as simple as 1, 2, 3: cars, costumes and chocolate (see Figure 1)! ULS drove to the school site and lined up their cars in the parking lot. Cars were decorated with signs that had the children's names: “¡BRILLA, Jesús!” “¡Hola, Josefina!” and ULS (masked, gloved, and behind closed car doors) handed candy out of windows to a parade of DL students they had been desperate to meet. Many ULS came in costume, and some brought their roommates who deigned to dress up and add to the fun (see Figure 2). In a surprising turn of events, the children wanted the signs with their names on them. So, the group spent some time removing the personalized signs from the cars and handing them to the children to take home.

Figure 1

DL Students Lining Up to Meet their ULS Partners During Desfile de los Dulces Event



Figure 2

ULS Greet their DL Students with Costumes and Personalized Signs



This was a time during the school year, October, when the children were not being permitted outside of the classroom much, so as not to mix student groups. The health and safety of everyone at the school site remained of the utmost importance. School meals happened in the classroom. Music and art happened in the classroom. There was no going to the gym for an event or to play. The teachers were especially grateful to have a reason to get the kiddos out of the room for even a short period of time. The ULS waved as they drove off, leaving smiles, *dulces*, and plenty of sweetness behind them.

Después de Todo

A partnership is a partnership, but there is nothing easy about bringing human beings together during a pandemic. The *Desfile de los Dulces* was the one and only time I ever saw the 75 ULS from the Fall of 2020 in-person. Perhaps, surprisingly, I was able to recognize every, single one of them because I had seen their faces over Zoom for several weeks. Language and laughter are still the building blocks of human connection, and those had not been masked or rendered inaccessible. As it turns out, for everyone involved in BRILLA, being connected virtually did not mean being only virtually connected.

If the DL teachers had not been willing to sacrifice their time, energy and talent,

during one of the most challenging years of their educational careers, I fear that the bright lights of BRILLA may have faded away like so many other pre-pandemic programs and ways of life. Teachers make human connections possible. They are the light bearers who lead the way. Even when schools went dark, screens lit up, and classroom teachers worldwide kept learning alive, maintaining the glow of friendship and hope. To my DL colleagues who are the light in so many people's lives—the children, their families, the community—there is no adequate way to thank you for what you do. *Qué continúen a brillar.*

A Classroom Teacher's Perspective

There are many ways to communicate; language is just one of them. What do you do when you don't understand the other person's language? You learn it! Bilingualism and multilingualism have become increasingly important in a globalized society—so important that one university's Spanish department created a lab course titled BRILLA: Bilingual Readiness through Interaction, Language, Literacy and Alliances. A local primary school and their DL Spanish students were fortunate to become a part of it. My initial thoughts, as a DL teacher (second author), regarding the BRILLA program when it began in 2019 was "Great! I'll take as much help as I can get for my students to review phonological, numeracy, and conversational skills!" The university's intention was to have their Spanish Lab students, at intermediate proficiency, create weekly language and literacy development experiences for my DL students. My perspective was that it would be a great way for the DL Spanish students to increase biliteracy and promote bilingualism, while interacting weekly with college students. I believe both the university Spanish

instructor and I had a shared goal of positive language interactions, where both sets of students could learn from one another. What this partnership has done is more than just bring languages together; it has connected communities and cultures in innovative ways.

Each week the DL students looked forward to the days they would “go to college,” as they called it, though it was really them going to spend an hour in the school cafeteria being read to, interacting, and conversing with ULS. The 4- and 5-year-olds felt they themselves were actual college students. Who knows, maybe in some sort of way they really were getting a college education. Technically, they were learning what the university was teaching their “college friends.” Every time my DL students would return to class from their meeting with their ULS, they could not wait to share what they had learned and what they had talked about.

When the pandemic hit, program participants all began to learn how to communicate in different ways. Teachers began with simple FaceTime calls and quickly shifted to full-on Zoom meetings. Getting Pre-K and Kinders to focus on academics at home was challenging; however, by the time the school year ended, it had become almost natural to many participants. Everyone was trying to find some way to bring normalcy to the children at home, something that would help them understand that even though their teachers had to remain at home to keep everyone safe, they were still there, thinking about them, wanting them to be successful and preparing them for the following school year. The videos from the ULS definitely helped the DL students feel that teachers had not forgotten about them, and teachers were all still here for them. The only difference was that teachers and their students were

seeing each other through a screen rather than in person.

As fall semester of the 2020–2021 school year approached, I was very excited to be back in the classroom with my students. As frightening as the pandemic might be, I was ready to be where I knew students needed me the most. Children need social interaction, especially those who are learning more than one language. It is important to provide bilingual students with social situations to help them develop their biliteracy skills. My school’s partnership with BRILLA is a great way to help students become the developing and emerging bilinguals that teachers want them to be.

COVID precautions meant fewer students in the classroom, face coverings, social distancing, and no visitors in the school building. However, with the help of Google, Zoom, and Schoology, DL students once again began to meet with ULS twice a week. Using QR codes, students would pick up their iPads, scan their QR codes that would log them in to Schoology, click on their BRILLA course, and then click on the Zoom link that would immediately take them to the Zoom application where their meeting would appear. Now their 60 minutes of learning through social interaction would begin. Like anything else, the process of having DL students participate in virtual meetings was not as simple as just putting them on an iPad. It took hours of careful planning and preparation of everyone involved to make it happen, but the end result was worth it. DL students went from being very shy and not wanting to talk or respond to questions asked, to having full conversations with the ULS.

Most educators go to college knowing what they want their future to look like, the difference they want to make, and the impact they want to leave in their students’ lives. ULS in the BRILLA program all have

different future goals and paths they want to take, and so far, not one has been an Education major, but by taking this Spanish course they came to understand the importance of multilingualism in their future. Although the ULS all had different majors of study, I was pleasantly surprised at how prepared their lessons were for my DL students. It was truly amazing to observe the ULS speak and interact with my DL students, getting to know my DL students' strengths and weaknesses, changing their lessons week after week to accommodate their needs. This showed the dedication the ULS had to the BRILLA program and their desire to make a difference in my DL students' lives.

The pandemic has changed almost every aspect of life. The way people learn, work, socialize, and interact with one another all look different than before. The old *normal* way of life has been altered, but people have not given up completely. The

pandemic might have physically separated everyone, but socializing is human nature, and people find ways to adapt. The BRILLA program began pre-pandemic, meeting in person with a shared goal of providing positive language interactions. Now the participants have gone through the pandemic, meeting virtually online, and the program's goal has never changed. No matter the circumstances, I am grateful that the school and the DL students were chosen to be a part of this partnership that continues to *shine* and bring language and culture together.

References

- Butin, Dan W. (2007). Focusing our aim: Strengthening faculty commitment to community engagement. *Change*, 39(6), 34–39. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40178270>

Appendix A

Table 1

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Appendix B

Figure 1

DL Students Lining Up to Meet their ULS Partners During Desfile de los Dulces Event



Appendix C

Figure 2

ULS Greet their DL Students with Costumes and Personalized Signs

