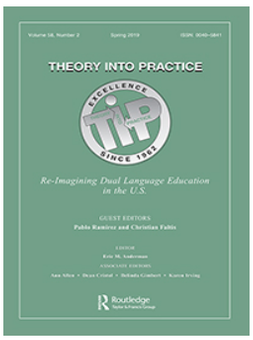

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# The Expansion of Dual Language Bilingual Education into New Communities and Languages: The Case of Hebrew in a New York City Public Middle School

*This article describes a case study of dual language bilingual education (DLBE) that challenges the model's traditional mold while offering important insights into its utility for communities of less commonly taught languages. We begin with an outline of the expansion of DLBE in New York City, part of a broader national trend. We then explore a new Hebrew-English DLBE program at a traditional New York City public middle school, documenting the program's establishment and evolution over its first few years. Following this, we examine the school's replacement of DLBE with a "heritage language program" model and show how both options are mismatched to the community's actual needs or interests and ultimately restrict the possibilities for Hebrew learning. Specifically, we contribute to growing critiques of rigidity in program models, showing how at times adherence to the model is prioritized over the actual needs of students and their families—even when school leaders maintain they are implementing DLBE for the community. We argue that alternatives to DLBE with greater flexibility can serve crucial goals for local communities.*

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This article describes a case study of dual language bilingual education (DLBE) that challenges the model's traditional mold while offering important insights into its utility for communities of less commonly taught languages. We begin with a general policy outline of the expansion of DLBE programs in

New York City, which is part of a broader national trend. We then explore the genesis of a new Hebrew-English DLBE program at a traditional New York City public middle school, documenting the program's establishment and evolution over the first few years of its existence. Following this, we examine the school's replacement of its DLBE model with a "heritage language program" model, documenting how both options are mismatched to the community's actual needs or interests and limit the possibilities for Hebrew learning. Specifically, we contribute to growing critiques of the rigidity associated with certain program models—particularly DLBE (García, Menken, Velasco, & Vogel, 2018; García, 2009; Gort & Sembiante, 2015; Martínez, Hikida, & Durán, 2015; Palmer, Martínez, Mateus, & Henderson, 2014)—showing how at times adherence to the model is prioritized over the actual needs of students and their families, even when school leaders maintain they are implementing DLBE for the community. We argue that alternatives with greater flexibility can serve crucial goals for local communities.

## The Expansion of DLBE in New York City

Nationally, dual language bilingual education programs are on the rise (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). While the number of bilingual programs in New York City public schools has dramatically declined over the past 16 years, dual language bilingual education programs have continued to expand. This growth is because DLBE programs are attractive to a wide range of New York City families, resulting in long wait lists at many city schools (Harris, 2015). An agent of further expansion, the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE), has awarded approximately $1 million of incentive funding annually to city schools to expand or create new DLBE programs: 40 schools in 2015–2016, 29 schools in 2016–2017, and 39 schools in 2017–2018 (New York City Department of Education [NYCDOE], 2016, 2017).[1]

One of the interesting results of this expansion has been the growth of DLBE programs in less commonly taught languages. These programs are no longer only available in Spanish and Chinese (the two most widely spoken languages in the city after English) but now include languages such as: Bengali, French, Haitian Creole, Arabic, Japanese, Russian, and Korean (NYC Department of Education [NYCDOE], 2015). This has resulted in the diversification of students participating in DLBE and new reach into communities that traditionally have not been part of bilingual education.

The New York City Department of Education's Dual Language Guidelines (2015) define DLBE programs by their composition, format, and learning objectives and maintain that a DLBE program should combine a 50/50 mix of students who speak English at home with students who speak a language other than English at home and are designated English language learners (or emergent bilinguals). In addition to idealizing an equal balance of English monolinguals and target-language monolinguals, DLBE programs in New York and elsewhere have been widely structured to strictly separate the use of the two languages during daily instruction. As the guidelines state, "The two languages are separated by time, space, or teacher and are not used simultaneously… . Translation by the teacher is totally prohibited" (NYCDOE, 2015, n. p.). It is important to note that New York's DLBE guidelines are not extemporaneous but rather are aligned with research encouraging strict language separation and student composition quotas (Howard, Sugarman, Christian, Lindholm-Leary, & Rogers, 2007; Lindholm-Leary & Genessee, 2010; Soltero, 2016).

However, these DLBE structures are increasingly being critiqued as dual language dogma by researchers who argue that such beliefs are rooted in ideologies of linguistic purism (García et al., 2018; García, 2009; Gort & Sembiante, 2015;

[1] Schools received $20,000 to start a new DLBE program, whereas they only received $10,000 to begin a new transitional bilingual education (TBE) program (the other form of bilingual education that can be provided in city schools)—indicative of the NYCDOE's targeted efforts to expand DLBE programs over other bilingual program models (NYCDOE, 2016).

Martínez et al., 2015; Palmer et al., 2014). We have also contributed to these critiques by arguing that rigid language separation and the engineering of student populations in DLBE do not accurately address or reflect students' and teachers' fluid and dynamic language practices, especially because the student population of the program we studied differed significantly from stated DLBE policy (Menken & Avni, 2017). The present article incorporates data from interviews with families to expand such critiques by noting how the inflexibility of the DLBE program model in New York City is mismatched to actual community needs and interests, even when school leaders maintain they are implementing DLBE for the community.

## Hebrew DLBE at a New York City Middle School

The school where we conducted our research, which we will refer to as "Multilingual Public Middle School" (MPMS),[2] represents the latest wave of new DLBE programs in New York City schools. It is a traditional public middle school serving students in sixth to eighth grades where the school began offering DLBE in Mandarin in 2012 and added DLBE programs in Spanish and Russian soon thereafter. In 2015, the school successfully secured NYCDOE incentive funding and further expanded its dual language programming by opening a new Hebrew-English DLBE track. Our research at MPMS began in September 2016, when the Hebrew program was entering its second year of implementation, and extended until January 2018. Data collection consisted of weekly classroom observations from September 2016 to September 2017, as well as interviews with school administrators, teachers, parents, and students from January 2017 to January 2018.

[2] MPMS reports that students are 26% Latinx, 36% White, 8% Black, and 29% Asian, 11% of students are designated English language learners, and the Title I population of the school is 75%. The school's DLBE programs are unzoned, meaning any student living in the borough in which the school is located who attended a DLBE public or private elementary school program may attend (there is presently no waiting list for entrance).

One school administrator was keen to start the new Hebrew DLBE program at MPMS out of the belief that bilingualism was good for students' future educational and economic opportunities, that doing so would improve the school's reputation and boost enrollment, and that it would better serve the local community. As this administrator stated:

> We were not meeting the needs of the people of the community. So, the first language to be introduced was Mandarin, which we still have. Then we did Russian. And then we did Spanish. And the last is Hebrew. Again, it's serving the community in choices and the needs of the community. (School Administrator 1, interview transcript, September 30, 2016)

This quotation underscores that among its rationales for starting the Hebrew-English program was the belief that it would serve the community's needs.

The school designed the DLBE programs for all the languages it offered with the plan for Social Studies instruction to be conducted entirely in Modern Hebrew "because there's no exam for the students to take" (School Administrator 2, interview transcript, December 2, 2016); according to school administrators, the absence of high-stakes testing offered greater freedom in that subject area. Additionally, students took a "Language and Culture Class" where the Hebrew teacher taught students Modern Hebrew through topics including the history of Israel, life in modern Israel, Jewish holidays, and Hebrew literature. This DLBE structure—social studies in the non-English language and an additional language and culture class—was applied to all of the other languages offered in the school's DLBE programs.

The Hebrew DLBE program was comprised of Jewish children and African American children—two groups of students who typically have not participated in bilingual education programs in New York City schools. Further setting the Hebrew case apart from traditional DLBE programs, only one of the 44 students in the school's Hebrew DLBE program was designated an "English language learner"—while not in compliance with the city's DLBE guidelines, it is not uncommon by the

middle grades for students to have "tested out" of their English language learner designation. Most students in the Hebrew DLBE program came from bi/multilingual homes, where languages such as the following were spoken: Arabic, Bukharian, Carpathian, English, French, Georgian, Haitian Creole, Hebrew, Hungarian, Jamaican "Patois," Kavkazi, Persian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Ukrainian, and Yiddish. While most students were born in the United States, their families' countries of origin included: Azerbaijian, France, Georgia, Grenada, Israel, Jamaica, Morocco, Puerto Rico, Romania, Russia, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Venezuela. Jews in the program varied in their degrees of religious observance; while some students came from observantly religious homes, other students were more culturally Jewish, meaning that their Jewish identity was mainly defined through their sense of belonging to the Jewish community. Students in the Hebrew program came to MPMS from nearby elementary schools offering Hebrew instruction; these feeder schools included a K–5 Hebrew charter school and local yeshivas—private Jewish schools that combine secular and religious studies.

Accordingly, the students' Hebrew language practices varied widely. Although a handful of children of Israeli parents spoke Hebrew at home on a daily basis, most students mainly spoke English or other languages at home with Hebrew only used for religious purposes. Other students only interacted with Hebrew in the school context. The students who came to MPMS from yeshivas typically had a lot of experience reading Textual Hebrew (used in sacred texts) but had less exposure to Modern Hebrew (the vernacular in the state of Israel), while students who came from the Hebrew charter school, where the emphasis was on the acquisition of spoken language, had learned Modern Hebrew. Although the MPMS administration made clear that children in the DLBE programs were expected to arrive with requisite Modern Hebrew proficiency for grade-level Social Studies content without significant modification, the Hebrew teacher very quickly learned that this was impossible and replaced monolingual Hebrew instruction with translanguaging strategies, fluidly using Hebrew and English and allowing students to use both languages in their linguistic repertoire to learn course content (García, Ibarra Johnson, & Seltzer, 2017). As the Hebrew teacher describes:

> They [NYCDOE] require that the course be conducted entirely in Hebrew, without a word in English… That's what they told us, to avoid speaking English and focus on the Hebrew. This is difficult for the children. Most of them don't speak the language at home, as with the Russian, Chinese, or Spanish speakers. Most of them study Hebrew to learn for their Bat Mitzvahs[3] or because their parents want them to stay connected to Judaism. It is therefore difficult for the children to study entirely in Hebrew… . I will follow the program … but the [Social Studies] activities will be in English, with some Hebrew interspersed. Otherwise they will get lost. (Hebrew Teacher, interview transcript, November 2, 2017)

In this interview excerpt, the Hebrew teacher explains the difficulties she had in meeting the NYCDOE's guidelines to teach the students monolingually in Hebrew saying that she would mainly speak Hebrew during class instruction but would "intersperse" English and Hebrew in activities to enable students to participate. The teacher's comments also show how the case of Hebrew differs from that of Russian, Chinese, and Spanish—the languages of the school's other DLBE programs—because of the Hebrew students' diverse backgrounds in learning the different varieties of Hebrew, including Textual and Modern Hebrew. The quote perfectly captures the recognition that these varieties of Hebrew, which have been compared to the difference between Shakespearian and contemporary English (Gold, 1989), are learned for varying reasons, including prayer, the study of sacred texts, as well as daily communication. As one parent of a student who had previously attended yeshiva stated:

[3] A bat mitzvah is a Jewish initiation ceremony for girls when they turn 12 or 13; for boys, it is called a bar mitvah and typically done at age 13.

> [At yeshiva] they have Hebrew but they don't have a true command of the language because it's more geared towards your biblical studies… . [A]t [name of the Hebrew charter], especially in the younger grades, when they were learning math they had a Hebrew-speaking teacher in the classroom. (Rachel,[4] Parent, interview transcript, December 6, 2017)

Rachel's reference to "true command" of Hebrew is normed on the Hebrew practices of Israelis, who speak the language for everyday purposes, whereas American Jews mainly speak English with elements of Aramaic, Modern Hebrew, and textual Hebrew added depending on the context and the audience. In the preceding interview excerpt, Rachel explained the differences in language practices of students entering MPMS from yeshivas versus those entering from the Hebrew charter school.

This multiplicity of codes and purposes is not present in the teaching of Mandarin, Russian, or Spanish; while each of these language communities has its own diversity that bilingual educators must navigate in the classroom, that navigation is different for the case of Hebrew. As DLBE programs extend their reach into new communities, it is important to recognize that each language has its own unique linguistic history, which in turn constitutes the community's language practices. However, MPMS followed NYCDOE guidelines and took an identical approach to the design of all of its DLBE programs, with the expectation that the same model for all languages taught at the school implemented in the same way would work for all students.

### Families' Aims for Hebrew Learning

Although the school administrator quoted previously the "needs of the community" as a main reason for offering Hebrew DLBE, interviews with students and their families revealed a wide range of needs that underlay the families' decisions to enroll their children in Hebrew DLBE at MPMS that do not necessarily fit into DLBE structures. As noted, only one of the students in the program was an "English language learner," and most students were not traditional heritage language learners in that they did not speak Modern Hebrew at home. In general, there was a lack of awareness about American Jews' motivations and rationale for learning Hebrew and what the language (in all of its varieties) represents to this diasporic community (Avni, 2012). When developing the school's DLBE program, the school simply followed the city's DLBE guidelines exactly as it had for the school's DLBE programs in other languages, without an understanding of the students' language practices or Hebrew learning needs.

For example, families explicitly recognized the possibility of transmitting culture through language learning. One Israeli mother's comment focusing on her desire for her son to speak Hebrew was directly connected to his identity as an Israeli:

> It's very important for me that he's going to continue to learn to read and write. To talk. He knows to talk because I speak at home Hebrew. This is why he's in a Hebrew program, too. To learn. Not to read and write in Hebrew. I don't want him to forget where he comes from. (Tamar, Parent, interview transcript, December 6, 2017)

In this excerpt, Tamar describes how Hebrew knowledge was important for her child's identity because he had Israeli parents, while making it clear that she did not expect or necessarily desire for her son to develop an Israeli's Hebrew literacy practices.

Jewish parents recognized that the Hebrew-English DLBE program could support their religious learning by developing the literacy skills needed for religious practices. This was particularly true for parents who had studied at or had sent their children to yeshivas: "Well, we wanted them to feel comfortable at temple… . It was important to my husband growing up, being in yeshiva… . We wanted them exposed to that" (Sara, Parent, interview transcript, December 8, 2017). Beyond language, Jewish parents sought out the Hebrew

[4] All names are pseudonyms.

program at MPMS because it provided an opportunity for their children to study with other Jewish children. As one mother stated: "Obviously the Hebrew program attracts a special group of kids, and I really wanted him to be with that environment" (Michelle, Parent, interview transcript, December 22, 2017). Here this mother makes clear that her child attending school with other members of the Jewish community was very important to her.

In short, these quotes reflect the multiple reasons that parents chose the Hebrew program, including being able to read Hebrew sacred texts for religious participation, being able to speak with Israelis and other Hebrew speakers, and being able to strengthen Jewish identity and ensure a sense of belongingness with other Jews. What is important to note is that these motivations reflect the uniqueness of Hebrew as both a heritage and religious language and do not neatly align with those of other languages taught in DLBE programs.

## New Language Education Programming and Policy

Soon after our data collection began, the school leaders were informed by the NYCDOE that they would need to change the title of their program from a "dual language program" to a "heritage language program" because the school was not offering sufficient Hebrew instruction to meet the NYCDOE's requirements for DLBE and because the student population was not "50% ELLs" and "50% English proficient students," as city policy would dictate (NYCDOE, 2015). At that time, of an eight-period school day, students in all the DLBE programs received up to three periods of Hebrew per day, falling short of the NYCDOE's 50% guidelines.

> So, officially on paper … we are not considered an official dual language program. Instead, we are currently called a heritage language program instead… . It was changed about a month and a half ago… . I do know that when you have less than 50% exposure during the day, it's not considered dual language… . It didn't align with the official DOE policy. (School Administrator 3, interview transcript, November 9, 2016)

In this passage, the DLBE administrator at the school explains how the program was renamed by the NYCDOE a "heritage language program" because it did not fit into the prescribed DLBE model.

According to this school leader, prior to their change to a heritage language program, school administrators had been planning to expand Hebrew instruction. In the end-of-year interview (June 7, 2017), this administrator lamented the lack of support from the NYCDOE to do so and expressed concerns that the heritage language program designation could actually deter the school from offering more daily Hebrew instruction. This sense of trepidation can be attributed to the fact that NYC schools with heritage language programs typically offer daily instruction in the language other than English for one period per day, which is less than what MPMS had been offering. With time, this school administrator's concerns proved prescient. In the 2017–2018 academic year, Hebrew instruction was reduced to just two periods per week (whereby students received no Hebrew instruction three days of the week).

## Parents' Needs

In light of this programming change and given that MPMS administrators developed the Hebrew DLBE program to meet the needs of the community, we asked families about their goals for their children's Hebrew learning and their views on how much Hebrew instruction they wanted their children to receive. As the following quotes from different parents show, families had pragmatic expectations for their children's Hebrew learning, without setting "fluency" as a necessary aim.

> I want him [my son] to be comfortable enough to be able to listen to the radio in Hebrew. Israeli radio. That is in terms of listening. That would get him to that point that he could understand even quick speaking Hebrew. And reading … again,

> I don't expect him to put a paragraph in Hebrew, perfect paragraph, but I want him to express himself in Hebrew. Be able to write sentences. Like if I need to answer a question from, I don't know, a story, he's able to do it. Not perfect, not like a paragraph or like a paper. No, just enough to show they understand. (Aviva, Parent, interview transcript, December 5, 2017)

> Well, it would be great if [my daughter] was fluent in Hebrew, but you know, she's not at this time… . I just think that, you know, an hour or two is enough Hebrew for the day, 'cause there's other things that's more, you know, important for them and they need. Not that they don't need Hebrew, but you know, math and reading, you know, English. Those are more priorities to me than Hebrew. (Katrina, Parent, interview transcript, December 4, 2017)

In the first of these interview excerpts, Aviva —an Israeli parent—made clear that she did not expect her son to speak and write in Hebrew like an Israeli would but would have liked more instruction in Hebrew than one period per day. Katrina, an African American non-Jewish mother from the Caribbean, wanted her daughter to be "fluent" in Hebrew but noted this was unlikely; she felt that a period or two of Hebrew per day was enough for middle school, as more time would detract from learning other subjects, but she would want at least daily Hebrew instruction.

Moreover, while Hebrew learning was extremely important to the parents we interviewed, we typically found that the traditional structure and goals of a dual language bilingual education program were not aligned with what parents wanted. This point is reinforced by an Israeli mother:

> Math and science has to be explained in the first language [English]. My children's first language is English, so I don't think fractions and decimals … can be understood in Hebrew. This [Hebrew] is very helpful if they are doing a little history and social studies in Hebrew … but other than that, I don't think algebra and geometry have to be explained in Hebrew… . I'm against this. (Kari, parent, interview transcript, November 6, 2017)

In this interview excerpt, Kari challenges the dual language program model, noting that her main interests were for her children to get some Hebrew at school but that for content like math, she wanted her child to learn in English.

In short, the parents made it clear they did not expect their children's Hebrew language practices to emulate those of a Hebrew monolingual living in Israel. In stressing the importance of a strong and rigorous academic program in general, parents' disinclination to have more Hebrew in the classroom reflects the ways in which their aims diverged from the discourses of dual language bilingual education with regard to bilingualism and biliteracy development. By contrast, for many Jewish families, it was not expected that their children would use Modern Hebrew in their daily lives, but their hope was that their children would have some communicative capacity when interacting with Israelis, as well as have the ability to apply their literacy skills to religious purposes. Even so, the new approach of providing only two periods of Hebrew per week was also not well suited to the families' aims, as MPMS was offering less than what parents wanted.

## Discussion

The Hebrew-English dual language bilingual program opened at MPMS, a traditional New York City public middle school, has challenged dual language dogma with important lessons for consideration as DLBE programs gain popularity. As this case shows, because the students entering MPMS had different educational and cultural backgrounds, their exposure to and mastery of Hebrew varieties greatly varied, thereby challenging the school's efforts at DLBE implementation. The school, for its part, offered fewer instructional periods per day in

Hebrew than what the NYCDOE mandated for DLBE programs. At the same time, the heritage language model, which the NYCDOE required the school to adopt, was also mismatched to the students and their dynamic language practices. While this program designation holds the potential to offer greater flexibility, given its absence of the stringent guidelines for implementation currently controlling DLBE in city schools, it failed to offer enough support to build on and develop students' language skills. This issue was compounded by how the school interpreted a heritage language program designation. Specifically, this interpretation by MPMS leadership and the Hebrew teacher resulted in even less instructional time in Hebrew than at other schools with heritage language programs, where the "heritage language" is at least offered to students daily.

This case study also points to the importance of school administrations being better attuned to a community's language practices and the motivations that underlie language learning. While the school administration spoke about community needs in choosing to provide Hebrew instruction, those needs were not well understood, and cookie cutter approaches from local policies were applied. As shown, the students' language practices were widely diverse and complex. While a few speak Modern Hebrew with their families on a daily basis, to varying degrees, others only engage with Textual Hebrew and only in prayer, while still others are only exposed to Hebrew at school. In most homes, language practices are fluid and flexible, with family members speaking to children in a wide range of languages. As such, we found that the traditional structure and goals of dual language bilingual education programs were not well matched to the families' language practices or their interests and needs, and families did not expect their children's Hebrew language practices to mirror those of a Hebrew monolingual living in Israel.

At the same time, MPMS did provide an important space within the public school system for immigrant and minoritized communities. As noted, the students enrolled in the Hebrew program traditionally would not have participated in bilingual education were it not for the establishment of the Hebrew-English program; hence, MPMS's decision to offer Hebrew instruction disrupted which communities and which languages bilingual education has traditionally served. The Jewish families also spoke in great detail about the importance of instruction in Hebrew for their children's Jewish identity to be acknowledged and celebrated. Bringing less commonly taught language communities, like Hebrew, into the bilingual fold, though, requires schools' recognizing the different forms of identity that come with different religious or diasporic languages.

Moreover, what this study highlights is the importance of designing and implementing language programs with students' actual language practices and their families' language learning goals. Whatever program model a school ultimately adopts, whether it is called dual language or heritage language (or anything else), this study points to the need for greater flexibility in implementation to meet community needs. In her research about successful dual language bilingual education programs that have been sustained for many years, Hunt (2011) identified "flexibility" as central in the ongoing success of the schools she studied; in these schools, structures were not fixed but rather able to conform to the needs of the students and the program as a whole, especially with regard to implementing language policy and decision making. However, given the prestige that dual language bilingual education has acquired in the city in recent years, when the NYCDOE mandated that MPMS change its program model to a heritage language program, the program was effectively downgraded. At the same time, parents' willingness to accept Hebrew learning outcomes other than "fluency" and their ambivalence about and even rejection of disciplinary content being taught in Hebrew also means that the price of DLBE expansion requires an acceptance among bilingual educators that not all communities—for a variety of social, cultural, and religious reasons—define language learning success in the same way.

For policy makers and other stakeholders, this study brings into stark relief the question of whether schools are willing to accept this level of flexibility to bring new communities into the bilingual fold.

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## Additional Resources

**1. García, O., Johnson, S. & Seltzer, K. (2017). *The Translanguaging classroom: Leveraging student bilingualism for learning*. Philadelphia, PA: Caslon.**

This book is for educators who would like to incorporate students' fluid and dynamic language practices flexibly in their classrooms through translanguaging pedagogy. The authors offer many examples of translanguaging pedagogy in action from different classrooms and contexts.

**2. Menken, K. (2017). Leadership in dual language bilingual education: A National Dual Language Forum white paper. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics**. **http://www.cal.org/ndlf/pdfs/publications/NDLF-White-Paper-October-2017.pdf**

This online white paper from the National Dual Language Forum focuses on leadership in DLBE and offers important considerations and useful information for school leaders who are seeking to open new DLBE programs.

**3. Avni, S. (2012). Hebrew as heritage: The work of language in religious and communal continuity. *Linguistics and Education, 23*(3), 323–333.**

This article offers background on Hebrew education in the United States in Jewish educational settings. Examining the multiple meanings that students and faculty infused into their use of Hebrew through their ideologies, words, and actions, this article highlights the connections between Hebrew and identity.