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## UCLA's New School of Thought

*A collaboration between UCLA and the Los Angeles school district aims for the kind of bilingual excellence that's common in Europe.*

By Angilee Shah

In many ways, Io McNaughton's classroom is a lot like others in the Los Angeles Unified School District. Most students in the school — located in the center of the city, between Pico Union and Koreatown — are Latino and from low-income households; half are English-language learners.

McNaughton has the same challenges as any elementary school teacher. She motions across the room to a group huddled on a plush rug, talking in their "outside voices." "Turn down the volume," she says with her hands, twisting an imaginary television dial. One girl in the middle of the room looks like she might burst into tears; a teaching assistant feels her forehead and decides to send her home.

But in many ways, McNaughton's class differs sharply from others in Los Angeles. Hers is part of a pilot school — created in a partnership between the University of California, Los Angeles, and the district — that is attempting a new strategy in urban schooling. Students learn in English and Spanish, stay in multi-age dens for two years at a time and receive individualized instruction that differs from the standardized curriculum of rigid grade levels. The UCLA Community School opened with 350 students in kindergarten through fifth grade in September and will grow to 800 students as it expands up to 11th grade next fall.

Karen Quartz holds a joint position as the director of research at both the UCLA Community School and UCLA's Center X, an effort to transform public education housed in the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies. She explains the community school this way: A 6-year-old might traditionally be in first grade but read at a second-grade level. Individualized instruction and interaction with older and younger students allow for that student to progress at his own pace. "Each student's learning is scaffolded by the teacher and their peers. It's not just about age-gradedness," Quartz says.

While many schools combine grades, most do so for structural reasons, because their student populations do not divide evenly into existing classrooms. Here, the concept of rigid grade levels is broken down by design. And while it is not new for universities to provide primary education, the UCLA Community School is embedded in the district; it receives the same funding as any other school in the area and could be a model for other small public schools serving the specific needs of their communities.

Language learning in McNaughton's class is also an individualized experience. The den is made up of kindergartners and first-graders. Four children wearing oversized headphones listen to and read poems about springtime and groundhogs in English. Four others, with big, toothy grins, recite different phrases beginning with *yo soy* ("I am" in Spanish) in unison. Other children sit in small groups reading books and coloring.

The new program pushes the boundaries of a long-running debate in education policy. In 1998, Californians overwhelmingly passed Proposition 227, which required English-language instruction in the classroom unless parents opt for special waivers. Data on and studies of the effects of the policy are complex and easily manipulated. Proponents, including the proposition's sponsor, entrepreneur Ron Unz, say that within two years, English immersion helped to double English learners' standardized test scores. But other data suggest that English-immersion programs have not significantly lessened the gap between native English-language speakers and English-language learners. A five-year evaluation commissioned by the California Department of Education found that English learners' standardized test scores did go up in line with gains in scores across all student populations. The gap between English learners and English-only students in subject areas, however, remained mostly constant, and there was little evidence that English-immersion programs served students any better than bilingual classrooms.

UCLA education professor Patricia Gándara and doctoral candidate Gabriel Baca took a harder line in a 2008 *Language Policy* article. They argued that English learners are "provided inadequate and incomprehensible academic instruction" in English-immersion programs. Their data show that in 2007, 57 and 54 percent of sixth-grade English learners scored "below basic" in English language arts and math respectively, compared to the 20 and 24 percent of English speakers who scored below basic.

"We wanted to do the opposite of what we saw going on," says Ramón Antonio Martínez, who helped design the school's curriculum while a doctoral student at the UCLA School of Education and Information Studies. Now an assistant professor of language and literacy studies in the College of Education at the University of Texas at Austin, he envisioned the UCLA Community School as taking an "additive approach," building on students' existing language abilities rather than treating their native languages as a handicap.

McNaughton's classroom operates on a 90-10 model — 90 percent Spanish instruction and 10 percent English. By the time students reach the third den, as fourth- and fifth-graders, they will learn in 70-percent-English classrooms. And by the time they reach high school, they are expected to be bilingual and biliterate.

Research conclusions on this kind of dual-language education vary, largely because what is considered a good outcome varies. A 2009 study on bilingual education by Christine Rossell at the conservative think tank Texas Public Policy Foundation contends that bilingual education in Texas, which is required by law, has been more expensive and less effective than immersion programs, provided that the goal is high scores on English-language standardized tests. But when the goal is narrowing the achievement gap in subject areas, studies show that instruction in two languages can be beneficial. Kathryn Lindholm-Leary's 2001 book *Dual Language Education* outlines her study of 7,120 students in 20 schools, mostly in California, since 1989. She found that students in dual-language programs scored at or close to grade level in mathematics, even though California students on the whole were performing poorly compared to students in the rest of the country.

Martínez, who was an elementary school teacher in the Los Angeles school district before studying at UCLA, says that it just makes sense to take advantage of a diverse population's language and cultural skills. "Anywhere you go outside the U.S., there is an acceptance of the norm of bilingualism," he explains. "And in places like Los Angeles, the global world is here."

Edmundo Rodriguez, the LAUSD Pilot School director, says that he sees the dual-language program as one that is both sensitive to the community's needs and a model for other schools. "What is a language barrier?" he asks. "To me, a language barrier is when an American travels to a foreign country and can't speak anything but English."

The L.A. Unified School District is facing a \$1.3 billion deficit in the next two years; 2,519 teachers were laid off in June, and most schools' class sizes are increasing. The UCLA Community School faces the same financial hardships but enjoys support and resources from the university's faculty and students. Most of the teachers are UCLA graduates, and the three lead teachers have deep commitments to multi-age learning. The School of the Arts and Architecture is providing creative programs while undergraduate volunteers are tutoring. UCLA's Teacher Education Program is providing support to faculty as well.

Aimée Dorr, dean of the UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, says that urban schools face great challenges but often are staffed with inexperienced and less qualified teachers. While there is no simple solution to underperforming inner-city schools, giving teachers greater control of curriculum and allowing them to use the autonomy enjoyed by pilot schools is a good start, Dorr says.

The UCLA Community School is on the Ambassador Schools Complex, formerly the Ambassador Hotel where Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1968. The L.A. school district plans to run six independent schools on the site; they will share common areas, athletic resources and library spaces.

Each of the schools will have its own curriculum, but they will be united by the theme of social justice. For Principal Georgia Ann Lazo, social justice means equity and access. The UCLA Community School was designed specifically for the community nearby, and like other public schools, students need to live in the neighborhood to attend. In one of the most historically underserved parts of the city, "children can walk to school and get a good education," Lazo says.

McNaughton rings a bell several times and the children pack up their activities and move to the checkered rug at the front of the room. She begins a lesson about what to do in an earthquake, repeating "drop, take cover, hold" in English and Spanish. She shows them how to sit under a table — a student table that is a bit small for a tall adult — eliciting peals of laughter. The kids line up at the door and practice exiting.

Today, these students are doing simple safety drills, but by the time they graduate, UCLA researchers will have collected 12 years of data on the outcomes and costs of their education — data the school's designers hope will help convince more people that the country's flailing urban schools can be improved with a bilingual approach.



*Students at UCLA Community School learn in English and Spanish, stay in multi-age dens for two years at a time and receive individualized instruction. (David Lauridsen)*