when the divide isn't just digital

How Technology-Enriched Afterschool Programs Help Immigrant Youth Find a Voice, a Place, and a Future

by Rebecca A. London, Manuel Pastor, Jr., and Rachel Rosner

"Success is helping students to carry on skills… [and] feel they have a place in the community, and that it is within their power to change issues in their lives and community." —**Staff member, Bresee Foundation**

The so-called "digital divide"—unequal access to information technology—is one of many social inequalities faced by individuals who are low-income, ethnic minorities, or immigrants. Surprisingly, the digital divide is even larger for young people than it is for adults, with African-American and Latino young people, as well as immigrants of almost any non-Asian ethnicity, having considerably less access to computers and the Internet in the home than do their white, Asian, or native counterparts (Fairlie, 2006). Because information technology (IT) is increasingly necessary to participate in critical aspects of society, such as education, the labor market, and government, limited access to IT can further disadvantage those who are already on the margin.

Fifty-four percent of immigrant youth, for example, have a computer at home, compared to 75 per-

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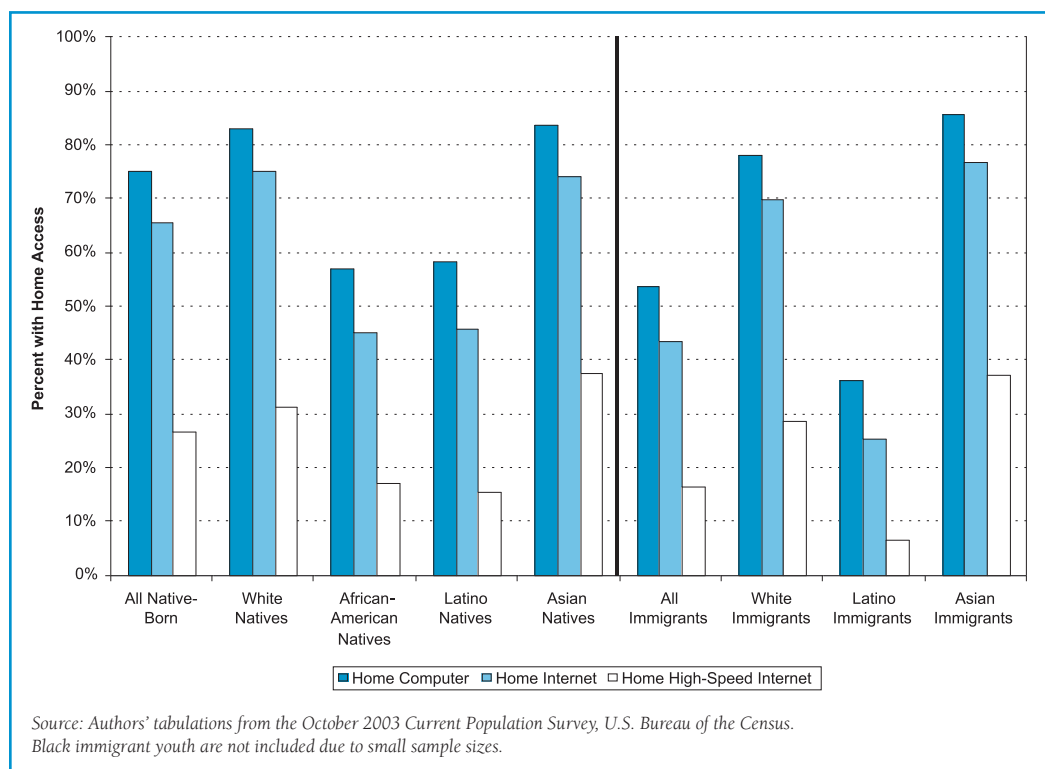
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cent of native youth (Figure 1). Similar disparities exist for home Internet access generally and for high-speed access specifically. Latino immigrants are especially disadvantaged relative to other immigrant and native groups, with just 36 percent having a computer at home. Even these statistics do not tell the whole story, as they mask important disparities within ethnic groups. For instance, Mexicans have even less access at home than do Latinos as a whole. Similarly, Cambodian and Laotian immigrants have lower home access rates than do other Asian groups. Though such disparities may be partly due to differences in education and income levels, research has found that digital inequality among immigrants persists even after controlling for income and education (Fairlie, London, Rosner, & Pastor, 2006).

Figure 1: Access to Information Technology Among Youth (Ages 5–25)

Source: Authors' tabulations from the October 2003 Current Population Survey, U.S. Bureau of the Census. Black immigrant youth are not included due to small sample sizes.

Because of these disparities, public places such as schools, libraries, and community centers have become important links to the cyberworld for disadvantaged young people. This public access—which many young people reported in our interviews that they needed and wanted—provides organizations that serve young people with an opportunity not only to address the digital divide, but also to embed a youth development focus in an IT framework. Our research indicates that pairing youth development activities with information technology can be tremendously effective in providing disadvantaged young people with skills that are valuable both in the labor market and in their overall development.

Community technology centers (CTCs) and other community centers not only offer computer and Internet access but also can provide a supportive environment in which young people can learn about different kinds of technology. CTCs also tend to place fewer restrictions on access than do school and library computer labs, which often place time limits on usage, require users to be enrolled in specific courses, restrict use to particular hardware and software configurations, or have limited hours of operation (London, Pastor, Servon, Rosner, & Wallace, 2006). Equally important, community centers play a vital role in helping youth during the afterschool hours, a period researchers have found to be critical to the development of youth (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; McLaughlin, 2000). Because afterschool programs address the social, emotional, creative, and cognitive needs of youth, they are uniquely positioned to promote not only the acquisition of IT skills, but also other important proficiencies, including civic engagement and leadership (Goodman, 2003). Indeed, a recent synthesis by the Mott Foundation stated this goal for afterschool programs: "improved literacy and communication for all participants, including English language learners, in: reading, writing, speaking, listening, technology, foreign language" (C. S. Mott Foundation, 2005, p. 10). Creating opportunities for positive youth development through the lens of IT is a vital way to help youth, particularly immigrant youth, develop and express their voices.

For this article, we studied how six CTCs that work predominantly with immigrant populations serve immigrant youth in California. We focused on immigrant youth because they are increasing in number in California as well as throughout the entire U.S., because they are among the most disadvantaged youth in terms of financial resources and parents' levels of formal education, and because they

have the lowest levels of access to IT in the home and, therefore, the longest journey toward digital inclusion. We also focused on immigrant youth because the successful incorporation of such youth is one of the major challenges American institutions face in coming years. Therefore, institutions such as CTCs, which can provide support and mentoring in a holistic youth development framework, may be critical to our nation's future.

Data and Methods

We conducted case studies of six CTCs from fall 2004 to winter 2006. For each case study, a team of two or more researchers spent one to two days visiting the center. During the visits, we interviewed CTC staff and instructors, youth participants, and community partners. We observed CTC activities, reviewed key program documents, and surveyed the projects created by the participants using the technology they learned at the CTC. We conducted in-person interviews, individually or in groups of two or three, with youth participants, specifically seeking out those involved in technology-driven projects.

Though we know that understanding immigrant youth requires an examination of the entire family, for brevity's sake we focus in this article specifically on youth-centered programming and outcomes. For information regarding parental involvement, youth recruitment and retention, and statistics on immigrant youth and the digital divide, see *Crossing the Divide: Immigrant Youth and Digital Disparity in California* (Fairlie et al., 2006).

Selection Criteria

We used five main criteria to select the CTCs we studied:
- All of the CTCs had established youth programs or served youth in a meaningful way.
- All served a predominantly immigrant population, either first or second generation. Although not necessarily by design, all of the CTCs we visited were located in disadvantaged neighborhoods.
- The sites represented different immigrant groups, including Korean, Latino (primarily Mexican, but also South American), and Southeast Asian (primarily Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian). Some CTCs served mainly one of these groups and others served a mix.
- The sites were located in various regions of California: two in San Francisco, two in Los Angeles, one in the Central Valley, and one on the Mexican border.

- The programs were recommended to us as being unique or outstanding in some way. We looked for exemplary programs in order to best identify how CTCs can improve the lives of immigrant youth.

Because the CTCs were selected in this fashion, results from this study cannot necessarily be used to form conclusions about CTCs generally or even about all CTCs serving immigrant communities. However, in this article we draw out consistent messages indicated by our analysis that can be relevant for other youth-serving CTCs or community centers.

Context: The CTC Sites

The six CTCs we visited had much in common, but each also offered a unique set of supports for the immigrant community it served.

The Bresee Foundation, located in Los Angeles, was a faith-based community center that offered a variety of technology, educational, health, and other supportive services. The center's main target group was young people, particularly during the afterschool hours when Bresee offered homework assistance and tutoring. The center had a computer lab designated specifically for youth, where young people took classes or learned by experimenting on their own, with assistance as necessary. Bresee also offered an Arts and Multimedia Production program, where high school students learned filmmaking and editing skills by creating their own social documentaries.

Casa Familiar, a non-profit community-based organization, was located in San Ysidro, just across the U.S.-Mexico border from Tijuana. Casa Familiar offered more than 50 programs in the areas of human services, community development, recreation, technology, arts and culture, and education. Options for youth included the C3 Café computer lab, where students received homework help or explored computer technology, and the Young Leaders Program, which taught leadership skills and the value of community involvement to youth ages 12–21. Casa Familiar also offered a fitness center, game room, and youth basketball league.

Firebaugh Computer Learning Center (FCLC) was located in California's Central Valley about 40 miles north of Fresno, in a housing project where many Mexican families lived who were employed in the area's agricultural industry. FCLC offered computer access and basic skills courses for adults and youth, as well as

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opportunities to become involved in community activities and advocacy efforts. It did not operate a separate youth program, though many young people used the computers for schoolwork.

The Koreatown Youth and Community Center (KYCC) was a non-profit community-based organization in Los Angeles. KYCC provided programs and services to improve academic performance and increase community engagement among youth in Koreatown and surrounding communities. Its SEEK-LA Drop-In Center provided afterschool tutoring, college preparation, computer access, and employment training for students. KYCC also provided opportunities for youth leadership development and community service through programs such as the Korean Coalition of Students in California, Youth Employment Service, and Youth Drug Abuse Prevention. The center integrated technology by offering computer access and training. KYCC served students from diverse ethnic backgrounds, not only Korean students.

The Richmond Village Beacon Center (RVBC), one of eight Beacon centers in the San Francisco Bay area, was the only Beacon located in a high school. RVBC provided a safe, accessible, and supportive youth and community center in the Richmond District, a culturally and socioeconomically diverse community. Youth services included afterschool tutoring, homework help, performing arts, multimedia arts and technology (animation, digital photography, video-making, website design), cartooning, 'zine-making, cooking, recreation, martial arts, and leadership programming. Staff members supported collaboration among agencies, schools, and other neighborhood organizations. Most of the students were of Asian background; however, the center also served a significant number of Latino and African-American youth.

The Vietnamese Youth Development Center (VYDC) was a non-profit agency in San Francisco's Tenderloin District. VYDC provided neighborhood youth—mainly Southeast Asian young people ages 10–21—with urgently needed support and practical assistance as they adjusted to their new lives in the U.S. VYDC offered a variety of programming, including delinquency prevention, academic support, substance abuse counseling, computer technology, and digital arts and media. VYDC also offered an arts and technology program, in which students worked collaboratively with center staff to create project-based films. A goal of VYDC was to bring neighborhood youth together in the spirit of personal responsibility and commitment to the community.

Each site offered an array of experiences for youth, as shown in Figure 2. Providing access to computers and the Internet was a critical aspect of programming for Bresee, Casa Familiar, FCLC, and RVBC; however, all of the centers had open-access computer labs that participating youth were allowed to use. Each site also offered a variety of other services and programs geared toward youth with various needs.

CTC Benefits to Immigrant Youth

"It is the people that drive the technology." —*Executive Director, Firebaugh Computer Learning Center*

While the immigrant-based CTCs we visited offered a variety of programs for youth, technology was often the "hook"

Figure 2 (part 1): Characteristics of Case Study CTCs

GOALS	Bresee Foundation	Casa Familiar	Firebaugh Computer Learning Center	Richmond District Beacon	Koreatown Youth and Community Center	Vietnamese Youth Development Center
	Los Angeles	San Ysidro	Central Valley	San Francisco	Los Angeles	San Francisco
	Provided access to technological resources often out of reach to low-income community members, taught marketable skills, and enhanced job placement opportunities.	Holistic approach focused on unique challenges faced by border communities. Included a range of services for immigrant youth, including technology, human services, leadership, recreation, education, and arts.	Provided social, economic, and educational advancement opportunities through technology training and programs.	Provided a safe, fun, and supportive environment for youth to explore and reach their full potential in a school-based setting. Focused on self-determination, cultural and economic diversity, and community building.	Provided immigrant youth and families with tools and skills that lead to academic success; developed youth leaders by building character and encouraging community engagement.	Supported immigrant youth as they adjusted to American life; encouraged and empowered youth to participate actively in the development of their community.

	Bresee Foundation	Casa Familiar	Firebaugh Computer Learning Center	Richmond District Beacon	Koreatown Youth and Community Center	Vietnamese Youth Development Center
	Los Angeles	San Ysidro	Central Valley	San Francisco	Los Angeles	San Francisco
Open computer access for youth	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Open computer access for adults	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
Multimedia program	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
Homework help	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Basic computer skills classes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
Technical skills classes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
Internships/ employment	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Leadership program	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
College prep	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Adult mentors	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Figure 2 (part 2): Characteristics of Case Study CTCs

that brought the young people into the centers. As one participant reported, "The schools have slow computers…. [Here] I practice and play with the computer." However, the main goal of many of the programs was not to teach technology but to promote leadership and civic engagement and to provide youth with the skills needed to survive their challenging circumstances. Indeed, as fascinated as the young people were by technology, they frequently said it was the staff, who they often saw as mentors and friends, who kept them coming back. As one young person stated, "The kind of people here…you can talk to them." Another put it more strongly: "If these organizations weren't here, we'd be lost." CTC staff members echoed this priority, with one executive director stating, "When you work with these youth, you have to prove to them that you care for real." In short, helping youth to view and experience their communities through a digital framework facilitated discussions and an understanding of the many issues immigrant youth face in their everyday lives, such as racism, stress, peer pressure, and school demands. Four broad themes regarding the benefits of CTC participation for immigrant youth surfaced from our research:
- Using technology as a means for self-expression
- Creating a safe, supportive, and culturally comfortable environment

- Providing support and mentoring for learning and academic achievement
- Offering leadership training and opportunities for civic engagement

Using Technology as a Means for Self-Expression

"[The goal is to] get people to tell stories, teach them how to tell a story, and help them tell their own stories from their own neighborhoods."—*Staff member, Casa Familiar*

The opportunity to express their identity was another reason the young people commonly reported that they continued to attend most of the centers. Youth are drawn to the instant and ongoing communication information technology offers; many are also enticed by arts and media programs. Immigrant youth face many pressures, especially balancing parental and peer expectations. By providing young people with an environment that offers tools and supports to express themselves, CTCs are meeting a real and important need.

At the centers we visited, a primary way in which youth used technology to express themselves was through digital stories. Digital storytelling, like traditional narrative, links the author to others in his or her cultural context. Yet digital storytelling differs from written narrative in that it is visual (Davis, 2005); its similarity to television and movies and its connection with computers can make it appealing to youth. Digital storytelling has only recently become available to young people—especially low-income young people—as a way to tell their own stories in their own voices. This novelty is part of the attraction: Digital storytelling is not the medium their parents used, and the portrayal of themselves is not what they have seen in traditional media. As a fresh and contemporary way to tell their stories, digital storytelling was immensely appealing to the youth we interviewed.

Three of the six CTCs we visited had explicit arts and media programs that trained young people to use filmmaking equipment and software to create their own films and documentaries. Youth came to these programs for a

variety of reasons, but mostly for the opportunity to learn something "cool" that they would not have been able to access. However, the process of creating films became an excellent and entertaining tool for probing and expressing cultural diversity. The goals of these programs were to encourage creative expression and critical thinking, build self-esteem and skills, and encourage career exploration. Many of the participating youth said they were interested in pursuing careers in technology-related fields.

More than exposing participants to high-tech equipment and cutting-edge software, the multimedia programming was about self-expression. As one CTC staff member stated, "The hard part is the storytelling, not necessarily the technology." Youth who participated in multimedia programs brought their heritage to their projects. In Bresee's Arts and Media Program (AMP), young people, with assistance from adult staff members, learned to make social documentaries that reflected their own views and experiences. Youth had complete creative control and used their films to portray images of themselves and their communities that they felt were more representative than what is often shown in the media. One youth participant created a documentary about free speech; another documented his journey to his home country to deliver shoes to poor children there. A former AMP student stated, "Bresee has given me a way to show my story to other people, give them knowledge of a different way of thinking, viewing the world, viewing indigenous people."

At the Richmond Village Beacon Center, youth engaged in community filmmaking, working together on projects that they designed. Students began by writing their own short film scripts. As a group, they decided how to integrate their work and then collectively produced a film. One video, "Life as We Know It," touched on issues of racism and peer pressure: In their own voices, the students shared with the audience their role models, the importance of relationships, and their likes and dislikes.

At the Vietnamese Youth Development Center (VYDC), participants worked in small groups with award-winning filmmakers to create films and documentaries. At the time of our visit, students were making a documentary on a Cambodian rapper from Long Beach. VYCD students committed to working on the project for a specified period of time; staff expectations of this commitment were high. In the summer, youth worked together to produce shorter films on topics they selected.

Through these individual and shared processes, youth at the CTCs we visited not only explored their own iden-

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tities but also learned about and related to the experiences of others, who may have been different in terms of ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic class. The whole experience built a sense of team, a sense of identity, and a sense of responsibility.

Staff members spoke specifically of the historical inequality, prejudice, and discrimination that their students faced, issues that were very much present in the content and themes of the multimedia projects. One CTC arts and media staff member reported that historical inequalities can lead to a lack of self-esteem, and that a "lack of confidence leads to hopelessness… We try to make them feel empowered." While the youth themselves did not articulate this issue, staff perceptions were that many immigrants come to this country feeling like disadvantaged minorities. According to Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (1995), many immigrants were more advantaged or more connected to the mainstream in their countries of origin. The change in status brought about by their immigration affected their identity and their views of the world. One program director emphasized that, given some of the negative depictions of immigrant youth in the media, providing young people with the opportunity for self-expression is especially important. He believed that the only way for these young people to be represented truthfully is for them to document their lives themselves. A staff member at another CTC reported, "Success is helping students to…feel they have a place in the community, and that it is within their power to change issues in their lives and community." When youth, especially those straddling multiple cultures, become more confident about their identity, they can express themselves more freely.

In addition, tackling complex, multi-step projects, and staying with them from start to finish, keeps youth challenged and engaged while preparing them for the future. They learn important life skills, such as working cooperatively in groups, following through on assignments, thinking through long-term projects, and pushing themselves to reach higher expectations. CTC staff noted that these skills are vital for college-bound youth and that they cultivate the self-esteem needed to stay in school and sustain a quality education. Students at RVBC talked specifically about learning teamwork skills, with one capturing the sentiment: "We are learning teamwork, and a lot of other people don't know how to work in teams." Another said, "It's not a one-man team; you need to work together."