



# learning english and beyond

## A Holistic Approach to Supporting English Learners in Afterschool

by Jhumpa Bhattacharya and Jimena Quiroga

Throughout the nation, afterschool programs are seeing increasing numbers of English learners (ELs) among their participants. Over 8 million school-age youth with limited English proficiency now live in the U.S., representing about one in six of the nation's 5 to 17-year-olds. Afterschool programs report that just one-quarter of them currently serve ELs (California Tomorrow, 2003);

reports suggest that the number of ELs will be increasing. By the year 2030, it is projected that 40 percent of the school-aged population in the nation will be language minorities (McNeir & Wambalaba, 2006).

In California the story is similar. The state has seen a rapid rise in the number of afterschool programs due to Proposition 49, a voter-approved initiative that dramatically increased funding for afterschool programs from \$50 million in 1999 to \$550 million in 2007. The California initiative especially targeted funds to programs in the most economically disadvantaged communities. In California, 54 percent of children of immi-

grants live in poverty (Urban Institute, 2006). ELs constitute 25 percent of all public school students (Goldsmith, Jucovy, & Arbretton, 2008)—the highest

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percentage of any state in the nation. It is thus no wonder that afterschool programs in California are seeing a significant and increasing population of immigrant students and ELs among their participants.

These numbers pose an exciting opportunity for afterschool programs to meet the needs of a diverse and largely at-risk population. ELs are often academically and economically vulnerable, yet they come from backgrounds rich in culture, language, and family values. As part of a field deeply rooted in youth development and centered around youth support, afterschool programs are poised to capitalize on their strong influence on participating youth in order to provide much-needed academic support to ELs while validating students' cultural identity and providing the social and emotional support they need.

Many afterschool program practitioners, recognizing the growth in the EL population in their programs, are hungry for professional development and research to understand how better to educate this population. However, reports indicate that, although practitioners recognize that this growing population has specific needs, they do not have the skills or training to work effectively with ELs. As a result, afterschool sites are not currently designing their programming to serve ELs effectively, and minimal resources and professional development opportunities are available to help them do so (Zarate & Alliance for a Better Community, 2009).

Most of the few professional development resources that are available focus on teaching English. Although these resources are valuable, this limited focus could lead the afterschool field to define EL success as attaining English fluency only. While learning English has to be a core goal for ELs, the field must not focus its attention solely on teaching English. EL students have a host of cultural, social, and emotional needs. Many are recuperating from war and other traumas; nearly all deal with culture shock and need support in order to develop healthy cultural identities, break their isolation from mainstream American culture, and build cross-cultural and leadership skills. Afterschool programs can play a unique role in attending to these needs, which must be addressed if ELs are to thrive and be successful as students and as adults. Relatively free of the mandates that

constrain schools, afterschool programs can offer creative and effective programming that builds on the strengths of ELs and redefines their success to incorporate not only acquiring English but also growing into well-rounded, active, and empowered members of society.

### English Learners in Context

As afterschool practitioners begin to look at working more effectively with EL and immigrant students, they need to understand the context from which most of these students are entering programs. Traditionally, ELs are disproportionately concentrated in overcrowded, under-resourced schools with the least trained teachers. Living in linguistically isolated communities, they face the double challenge of mastering English along with grade-level content. Their teachers have typically not been supported to learn strategies or skills to help students who aren't fluent in English. As a result, ELs have fared poorly in our public education system; they have alarmingly low graduation rates and test scores along with high dropout rates.

In addition, since most education policy is framed by politics rather than by educational research, there is a large gap between, on the one hand, what the research says about language development and effective practices to support ELs and, on the other, what is actually implemented in schools. For example, ELs are given little time in school for oral practice, an element most experts consider key in learning a new language (August & Shanahan, 2006). Many K–12 programs also fail to take into account the research indicating that second language learning is more effective when the home language is also nurtured and developed (Olsen & Romero, 2006). Learners with a strong home language can translate from it and draw on it for support in learning a new language. Research also indicates that children who are bilingual have higher brain function than their monolingual classmates (Lambert, Genesee, Holobow, & Chartrand, 1993). However, policymakers often discourage bilingualism. English-only policies and programming can eradicate any home language development that may have occurred in the early years. EL children are losing their home languages faster than they did decades ago, resulting in tremendous fragmentation in immigrant commu-

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nities as young people can no longer communicate with relatives and community members (Fillmore, 1991).

Schools also tend to isolate their ELs, giving them little time to interact with English-fluent classmates. Socially, this isolation often prevents ELs from feeling that they fully belong to their school or larger community. They often feel excluded as second-class citizens (Valdes, 2001). Frequently they disengage from school altogether.

Furthermore, teachers are generally not given training or support to understand that ELs are a diverse group; they often lump all ELs together as one group with the same needs. However, different ELs need different kinds of support, depending on their backgrounds. For example, ELs who are refugees and newcomers will have very different needs from those who were born in this country and are “long-term” ELs, defined as those who have been designated as ELs for more than four years.

All of these issues contribute to the difficulty ELs experience in succeeding in school and in society. Afterschool programs can play a part in changing this context.

### **A Holistic Approach to Understanding English Learners’ Needs**

So much attention is given in schools to teaching ELs English that little attention is paid to their social and emotional needs. By understanding and addressing these multiple needs, the afterschool field can empower ELs to achieve.

ELs come from all over the globe and from various socio-economic and political contexts. In one afterschool program, practitioners may see some ELs who are dealing with the trauma that caused their families to flee their home country, others who have left large parts of their family behind and feel guilty about being the “lucky ones” who emigrated, and yet others whose families are finding it difficult to put food on the table and need the children to go to work as soon as possible. All of these factors lead to different needs that practitioners must understand in order to successfully work with ELs.

ELs are attempting to learn not only a new language but also an entirely new culture. This frequently stressful experience can impede young ELs’ academic and social progress. Newcomers can experience another form of culture shock when their previous expectations of U.S.

culture are very different from the reality they are living. In addition to being in a new country, immigrant students are in new schools and an unfamiliar educational system. All this newness can make young people feel overwhelmed, isolated, and vulnerable.

Youth are also beginning to adapt and incorporate aspects of this new culture into their ways of being. Surrounded by images, books, and movies that do not include their cultural backgrounds, they often struggle to see how and where they belong in their new society. These young people need help to nurture their cultural identity and build their self-esteem. Unless they are given appropriate guidance and encouragement to retain their home cultures, the pressure to assimilate, along with the

negative attitudes they encounter toward their home cultures, can lead them to abandon their native heritages. This break from their home cultures can lead to destructive behavior such as gang involvement, drug and alcohol abuse, and a general discontentment with or anger toward society (Holcomb-McCoy, 2005). Afterschool programs can involve the families of ELs to avoid exacerbating the disconnect between home and school.

ELs who have been in the U.S. for a long time or were born here often are disengaged from school; they feel disempowered by schools’

low expectations of them and often stay socially isolated. These students need engaging learning opportunities that recognize their strengths and help them to build strong leadership and cross-cultural skills. Such strategies help ELs feel empowered and engaged in a learning environment, feelings that can combat their disengagement and help them achieve in school.

When they understand the various needs of different ELs, afterschool programs can adopt a holistic approach to nurturing EL students in their many dimensions. Afterschool practitioners must build on the strengths and assets that ELs bring into the program, such as their rich cultures and languages, while also addressing their varying needs.

### **Redefining Success for English Learners in Afterschool Programs**

More and more afterschool programs are implementing strategies to help ELs with English language develop-

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ment. While some of the strategies being offered are valuable, programs need to use the same intentionality to support ELs' social, emotional, and cultural needs. To guide them in doing so, California Tomorrow developed the following Quality English Learner Principles:

1. Know your English language learners
2. Be cultural brokers for families and communities
3. Build cross-cultural leadership skills
4. Support language development
5. Create a safe space and affirming environment
6. Promote home culture and language for healthy identity development
7. Customize programming

These principles incorporate California Tomorrow's comprehensive vision of what EL education can look like in afterschool programs, based on its 25 years of experience in reforming EL K–12 education and on 10 years of research, technical assistance, and coaching experience in the afterschool field (Bhattacharya, Jaramillo, Lopez, Olsen, Scharf, & Shah, 2004; California Tomorrow, 2003).

### **Know Your English Language Learners**

According to the Alliance for a Better Community's recent research report, "data on who is an English Learner

is generally not provided" by afterschool programs (Zarate & Alliance for a Better Community, 2009, p. 8). While some program staff may be inclined to identify ELs by whether they speak another language at home or by perceived oral fluency, such assumptions can lead to inaccurate conclusions about which program participants are actually ELs. Programs should have access to and use students' English language assessment scores to obtain a more accurate picture of students' language development needs.

Furthermore, the simple term "English learner" does not depict the richness and diversity of EL experience and needs. Once a program knows which students really are classified as ELs in school, it can take the next step—exploring the diversity of its EL population by looking at, for example, nationality, immigration experience, and other facets described above. This exploration can entail a deep analysis of the program's EL demographics. Programs may also create opportunities to learn more about their students' experiences through student surveys and focus groups and by providing creative and interactive activities in which students can share their experiences in a safe environment.

### **Be Cultural Brokers for Families and Communities**

Afterschool programs can play a crucial role as cultural brokers not only for the students in their programs, but also for their families. EL students' families often need information about how to meet their own basic needs or about how the U.S. school system works. Though afterschool programs rarely have the resources to provide all of the services ELs and their families need, they can point families toward services that already exist in their communities but that the families may not know how to access. Program staff can take inventory of the community, compile a list of resources for EL students and families, and translate it into the languages represented in the program and the neighborhood. Examples of relevant resources include free medical and legal clinics, food banks, translation services, citizenship classes, cultural centers, and more. Programs can also hold informational meetings for parents—in their home languages—explaining how the U.S. school system works, what tests students are expected to pass, and so on.

### **Build Cross-Cultural Leadership Skills**

EL students are often isolated during the school day, making it difficult for them to connect and build friendships with monolingual English speakers. Afterschool programs can strategically help build connections be-

## **CALIFORNIA TOMORROW and THRIVEPOINT GROUP**

At the end of 2010, California Tomorrow closed its doors after 25 years of existence. The two of us, Jhumpa Bhattacharya and Jimena Quiroga, are continuing the organization's work through a new consulting organization called ThrivePoint Group. ThrivePoint Group strives to improve the life and educational experiences and outcomes of children and youth who face inequities due to their race, class, or immigration experience. The group works with individuals, organizations, and schools that seek to gain understanding and skills to effectively engage with marginalized youth and communities.

For more information, visit [www.thrivepointgroup.org](http://www.thrivepointgroup.org)



tween EL students and monolingual English speakers, in the process enabling both groups to gain much-needed cross-cultural skills.

As our communities become more and more diverse, young people need to understand the concept of culture and to be sensitive to people from ethnic or cultural backgrounds different from their own, adapting to these difference in their interactions with others. As young people develop awareness of and respect for their own heritages and those of others, the next step is better communication to ease tense intergroup relations. Developing cross-cultural skills helps young people mediate conflicts when they arise so that diverse communities can co-exist harmoniously.

In an afterschool program called Bridging Multiple Worlds (Bhattacharya, Olsen, & Quiroga, 2007), EL students and monolingual English speakers were intentionally brought together to participate in interactive activities that explored the concept of culture. They learned about various cultural and ethnic forms of music and how these forms influenced one another, developed informative and fun bulletin boards around the school commemorating cultural and ethnic holidays, created collages about their cultures, and discussed their cultures with one another. For many students, this was the first time they had ever talked about the topic of culture. As students shared about their cultures, they began to better

understand the differences and identify the similarities amongst their cultures. Ultimately new friendships developed across cultures and languages. Other programs can incorporate similar approaches to cultivate cross-cultural leadership skills in young people.

### **Support Language Development**

Afterschool programs must support ELs' language development both in English and in their home languages. During the school day, much of the attention goes to oral fluency in English, leaving EL students with limited literacy skills in both languages. Research indicates that both languages need to be addressed and supported in order for language learners to attain true fluency and literacy (Goldenberg, 2008). The bottom line is that ELs need language development generally, not only in oral English, in order to succeed academically and socially.

Home language development can be incorporated into afterschool programming in various ways. In a program in Oakland, CA, students are placed in language-specific groups for the homework help segment of the program day. Parents of ELs in this program said that this format provided a comfortable way for students to connect with school (Bhattacharya, Jaramillo, Lopez, Olsen, Scharf, & Shah, 2004). Additionally, some programs allow ELs the option of writing in their home language or in English when they do "quick writes." In this

way, ELs not only can practice writing in their home language, but also can express deeper analysis and critical thinking skills in the language with which they are most comfortable. Even stocking the program's library with books written in students' home languages can be a valuable step.

Afterschool practitioners need to recognize the difference between social and academic English language skills. Young people attain "playground" English much more quickly than they learn the language necessary to succeed academically. In order to develop the academic vocabulary of EL participants, afterschool program staff can explicitly teach academic vocabulary related to the content of school lessons, as well as vocabulary related to program activities, during tutoring sessions. Furthermore, program staff can use visual cues and graphics to help young people understand concepts and expand their vocabulary.

### **Create a Safe Space and Affirming Environment**

ELs need affirming environments where they feel emotionally and physically safe. Linguist Stephen Krashen (1981) talks about the "affective filter," which requires that people feel emotionally safe in order to acquire a new language. Programs can intentionally create environments where ELs feel safe by creating group agreements among participants and staff that no one will be ridiculed if they say something incorrectly. Such agreements can also specify that anti-immigrant and anti-bilingual comments are not tolerated. If any participant or staff member makes such comments, they should be addressed immediately in order to deal with hurt feelings. Creating a safe environment can help to build EL participants' confidence as they practice oral English as well as support their emotional and social development.

### **Promote Home Culture & Language for Healthy Identity Development**

As young people begin to settle into a new culture, they are often surrounded by negative sentiments about their home cultures that make it easy for them to feel ashamed of and ultimately abandon their cultures and their home languages. Programs can provide structured opportunities for students to talk openly about their cultures and learn about other participants' cultures. Providing materials such as books, videos, and posters in partici-

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pants' home languages is a good way to begin to promote diverse cultures, helping to normalize students' communities and allowing them to feel proud of their cultural identities.

One activity that afterschool programs could adopt is to have participants research artists, activists, poets, scientists, journalists, and musicians from their cultural communities and then present their findings. Having staff members talk about their own cultures is a great way to model having pride in one's heritage. Similarly, ELs need to be given explicit permission and encouragement to speak their own languages. True bilingualism is a much-needed skill in today's global society.

### **Customize Programming**

Once afterschool programs can identify their EL populations and assess the diversity of their ELs, administrators and teachers can design program content that addresses these ELs' specific needs. For example, program staff can incorporate visual cues into instruction for very limited English speakers while facilitating discussion groups that incorporate critical thinking and analysis for students who are more fluent. If a program finds that it has a number of students who have emigrated from war-torn countries or have other difficult immigration experiences, staff can be trained to better understand and support these youth.

### **Professional Development Needs**

Professional development in supporting English language development in afterschool programs is quickly emerging. Unfortunately, professional development in addressing ELs' cultural, social, and emotional needs remains scarce. Professional development that enables staff to deepen their understanding of the varied dimensions of EL needs must become a priority. Though afterschool programs struggle to provide deeper and longer training despite limited funding and the part-time availability of staff, professional development to address the needs of ELs nevertheless must be given the time it truly requires to equip staff with skills and strategies to properly support this vulnerable population.

Because of the complex nature of the many needs of ELs, this professional development must be deep and intense, going beyond merely "picking up a few strategies."

Afterschool program staff need to fully understand ELs' experiences so that they can relate to and support this population. Specifically, professional development should enable afterschool staff to:

- Understand the diversity of the EL population in terms of nationality, educational background in their home country, immigration experience, and so on
- Work closely with the school staff to understand what kind of English-acquisition programs are being given their participants—for example, bilingual, English immersion, or two-way immersion—so that they can determine what types of support to offer
- Know where to find important data such as English language assessment scores and how to interpret and use these data
- Be familiar with research regarding brain development, language development, and the relationship between home language literacy and second language development
- Understand the importance of developing participants' cultural identities and have the skills to implement programmatic supports
- Know specific strategies for supporting English language development in the afterschool context

The afterschool field is poised to engage ELs and to enable them to succeed both academically and socially. We can make a significant impact on the lives of these youth, breaking their isolation and helping them develop into empowered, successful adults—as long as we are committed to building well-rounded individuals who are thriving academically and emotionally, who are grounded in their cultures and languages, and who see themselves as active civic participants ready to join in creating the equitable society we all desire.

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