Learning English & Beyond:

A Holistic Approach for Supporting English Learners in After School

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After School programs throughout the nation are seeing an increase in English Learners in their programs. There are now over eight million school-age youth with limited English proficiency living in the United States, representing about one out of six of the nation’s 5 – 17 year olds. Reports show that one out of four after school programs currently serve English Learners (ELs),¹ and that the number of ELs will continue to increase. By the year 2030, it is projected that 40% of the school-aged population in the nation will be language minorities.² In California the story is similar. The state has seen a rapid increase of after school programs due to a voter approved initiative (Proposition 49) that ushered in an additional $500 million of funding for after school programs – from $50 million in 1999 to $550 million in 2007. The California initiative especially targeted its funds to programs in the most economically disadvantaged communities. With 54% of children of immigrants living in poverty³ and 25% of public school students designated as English Learners⁴ in California – the highest percentage of any state in the nation – it is no wonder that after school programs in California specifically are seeing an increasing and significant population of immigrant students and English Learners in their programs.

These numbers pose an exciting opportunity for after school programs to effectively meet the needs of this diverse and largely at risk population. ELs are a population often academically and economically vulnerable, yet rich in culture, language, and family values. As a field deeply rooted in youth development and centered around youth support, programs are poised to capitalize on the strong influence they have on youth and provide much needed academic support to ELs, as well as validate their cultural identity and provide the socio-emotional support they need.

Many after school program practitioners are recognizing the growing EL population and are hungry for professional development and research to understand how to better educate this population and recognize their needs. However, reports indicate that although programs see that this is a unique and growing population, they do not have the skills or training to effectively work with them. As a result, sites are currently not designing programs to effectively serve English Learners.⁵ This is not surprising as currently there are minimal resources and professional development opportunities available to help the field understand and strategize around how best to support English Learners.⁶
Most of the limited professional development resources that are available focus on effectively teaching English. Although these resources are valuable, this limited focus could dangerously lead the field towards defining success for English Learners as exclusively reaching English fluency. While learning English is imperative and must remain a core goal in the path to success for an English Learner, it is crucial that the field does not focus their attention solely on teaching these students English. There are a host of cultural and socio-emotional needs that must be addressed in addition to learning English in order for English Learners to be thriving, successful students and adults. After school programs can play a unique role in attending to these needs as they are free of K-12 mandates and can offer more creative and effective programming to help build on the strengths of ELs and re-define success for English Learners to incorporate English acquisition in addition to becoming well-rounded, active and empowered members of society.

**English Learners: The Larger Context**

As the after school field begins to look at effectively working with English Learners and immigrant students, it is important to understand the context from which most of these students are entering after school programs. Traditionally, English Learners are in disproportionately overcrowded, less resourced schools with the least trained teachers. They are in linguistically isolated communities and face the double challenge of mastering English along with grade level standards. By and large, teachers still do not have the strategies or skills to help students who aren’t fluent in English. As a result, ELs have fared poorly in our public education system with alarmingly low graduation rates and test scores, disengagement from school, and high drop out rates. In addition, since most education policy is framed by politics rather than educational research, there is still a large gap between what the research says about language development and effective practices to support ELs, and what is actually implemented in schools.

For example, systematically, English Learners are given little time for oral practice in their school programs, an element that is considered key by most experts when learning a new language. Many K-12 programs also fail to incorporate the research that indicates second language learning is more effective when the home language is also nurtured and developed. It is much easier to learn a new language when the learner possesses a strong base language to translate from and draw on for support.

Research also indicates that children who are bilingual have higher brain functionality than their monolingual classmates. Yet on the whole, bilingualism is not seen as being of value and is often discouraged. English-Only policies and programming often eradicate any home language development that may have occurred in the early years at home. More and more ELs are losing their home languages faster than they did decades before, causing tremendous fragmentation in immigrant communities as young people can no longer communicate with relatives and community members.
Schools also tend to isolate their English Learners during the school day giving them little time to interact with English-fluent classmates. Socially, this often prevents English Learners from fully feeling like they belong to their school or larger community. They often feel excluded as second class citizens on campus.\textsuperscript{11} Frequently this leads to disengagement from school altogether.

Lastly, teachers are largely not given the training or support to understand that ELs are a diverse group with differing needs and often lump all English Learners together as one group with the same needs. Depending upon their backgrounds however, different types of ELs will need different support. For example, an English Learner who is a refugee and a newcomer will have much different needs than one who was born in this country and is a long-term EL (designated as an EL for more than 4 years).

All of these issues contribute to large numbers of English Learners failing academically and not receiving the support they need to succeed in society. After school programs can play a part in changing this cycle.

A Holistic Approach to Understanding English Learner Needs

With so much attention given to teaching English Learners English in schools, little focus and attention is paid to their socio-emotional needs. The after school field can be more effective in helping ELs achieve by understanding their multiple needs which include learning English in addition to supporting their socio-emotional needs and engaging them to become healthy, positive members of society.

ELs come from different parts of the globe and are not only attempting to learn a new language, but are also learning what it means to navigate through a new culture. This can be extremely stressful for young people, and can often times impede their academic and social progress. For young people especially, it is critical to nurture their cultural identity and help build their self-esteem as they are constantly surrounded by images, books, and movies that do not include their cultural backgrounds and heritages, and they often struggle to see how and where they belong in this new society.

Youth are also beginning to adapt and incorporate aspects of this new culture into their ways of being. Unless these young people are given appropriate guidance and encouragement to retain their home cultures, they can often abandon their native cultures because of pressures to assimilate and negative attitudes toward their home cultures. In addition, it is important to involve the families of English Learners to avoid exacerbating the disconnect they may feel between their home lives and school. This kind of break from their home culture can lead to destructive behavior such as gang involvement, drug and alcohol abuse and a general discontentment and anger with society.\textsuperscript{12}
ELs also come from and are a part of varying socio-economic and political contexts. In one program there may be some ELs who were refugees and may be dealing with war trauma, others who have left large parts of their family behind and have guilt around being the “lucky ones” who migrated, and yet others who may be living in families that are finding it difficult to put food on the table every night and need the children to work as soon as possible to contribute to the family income. All of these factors lead to different needs that are imperative to understand in order to successfully work with English Learners.

It is by understanding the different kinds of needs that ELs have that programs can adopt a more holistic approach and focus on nurturing EL students and their many dimensions. It is critical that programs build on the strengths and assets that ELs are already bringing as well as address their varying needs when supporting success for English Learners.

What Can After School Programs Do? Re-defining Success for English Learners in After School

Today, more and more programs are beginning to implement strategies to help ELs with English language development. While some of the strategies being offered are valuable, there is still much room for improvement. In addition to supporting English language acquisition, programs need to use the same intentionality to acknowledge and utilize important strategies for supporting ELs’ socio-emotional and cultural needs. After school programs can affirm their roles as quality and inclusive programs if they continue to pursue and put into practice strategies for supporting ELs in English language development, use basic youth development principles and build on ELs’ strengths and assets, and incorporate the following types of strategies to nurture the cultural and socio-emotional needs of ELs:

Knowing 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”113 in after school programs. While some may be inclined to identify their English Learners as those who speak another language at home or by observing perceived oral fluency, this can lead to inaccurate conclusions about which program participants are actually English Learners. Programs should have access to and utilize student’s English Language Assessment scores to obtain a more accurate picture. Once a program has identified who the ELs are in their program, the next step is to explore more deeply and learn about the diversity within their EL population (i.e., nationality, immigration experience, etc.).

Cultural Brokers: After school programs can play a crucial role in being cultural brokers not just for the students in their programs, but also for their families. Often EL students and their families may need access to valuable information regarding basic needs or understanding how the U.S school system works.
Programs can direct families to local resources or they can even implement programming aspects that include holding informational meetings for parents in their home languages to provide tools and information.

Build Connections: As EL students try to establish their social and academic lives, after school programs can strategically help build connections between EL students and monolingual English speakers. This not only helps all students build cross-cultural skills, but it also helps EL students break the isolation they can sometimes experience during the school day. It also allows them to get much needed practice speaking in English in a relaxed and safe environment.

Support English Language Development: In order for programs to adequately support their EL participants in their English language development, it is important they recognize the difference between social and academic English language skills. While many young people may have sufficient English skills to engage socially, it is not an indication of the level of English they have attained to succeed in academic work. Young people attain "playground" English much faster than academic English. In order to help develop the academic vocabulary of EL participants, after school program staff can be explicit during tutoring sessions about teaching academic vocabulary related to the content of the lessons students are learning, as well as vocabulary related to the content of the program activities. Furthermore, program staff can use visual cues and graphics to help young people understand concepts and expand their vocabulary.

Benefit from Home Language: For homework help, students can be tutored in their home language (when possible) so that they can work on understanding the content of the work before moving on to learning the relevant English vocabulary. Often, students may have much more knowledge in the content of their academic work than can be perceived because of their limited English proficiency.

Create a Safe Space: Linguist Stephen Krashen talks about the “affective filter,”[14] which indicates that people must feel emotionally safe in order to acquire a new language. Programs can create intentional environments where ELs feel safe and know that they will not be ridiculed if they pronounce something incorrectly. Programs can also ensure that anti-immigrant and anti-bilingual comments are not tolerated. Creating this type of environment can help build the confidence of EL participants to practice oral English, as well as support their emotional safety and development.

Promote Culture & Language: As young people begin to settle into a new culture, they can often be surrounded by negative sentiments about their cultures and languages, making it easier for them to feel ashamed and ultimately abandon
their cultures and forget their home languages. Programs can provide structured opportunities where students can talk openly about their cultures and learn about other people’s cultures as well. This allows opportunities for young people to feel proud about their cultural identities. In a similar manner, ELs need to be given explicit permission and encouragement to speak their own language.

**Customize Programming:** Once programs can identify their EL population and assess the diversity within the EL population they can design program content incorporated for very limited English speakers, and/or more discussion groups that incorporate critical thinking and deeper analysis can be integrated into program activities for students who are more fluent. Additionally, if a program finds that they have a number of students who have migrated to the U.S from war-torn countries or who have difficult immigration experiences, staff can be trained to better understand and support youth from these types of experiences.

**Professional Development Needs**

Currently, efforts to provide professional development for supporting English language development in after school programs are quickly emerging. Unfortunately, professional development to train staff in strategies for addressing the cultural and socio-emotional needs of ELs remains scarce. In order for staff to deepen their understanding of the various dimensions of EL needs, professional development must become a priority for after school programs and incorporate these aspects. As many programs struggle to provide deeper and longer training with limited funding and part-time staff availability, professional development to address the needs of ELs still must be given the kind of time it truly requires so that staff can become equipped with the skills and strategies to properly support ELs.

Because of the complex nature of many of the needs of ELs, adequate professional development must have sufficient depth and intensity, beyond merely picking up a few strategies in order for staff to really understand the context of English Learners’ experiences so that they can better relate to, respond to, and support this population. Specifically, after school staff should be able to:

- understand the diversity within the EL population in terms of nationality, educational background in their home country, immigration experience, etc.;
- work closely with the school day staff to understand what kind of English-acquisition academic program participants are in (e.g., bilingual, English immersion, or two-way immersion) during the school day so that they can determine the type of support that is adequate for the after school hours;
- know where to find important data, such as English Language Assessment scores and have the skills or training to interpret and use such data;
- know about research regarding brain development, language development, and the relationship to home language literacy and second language development;
understand the importance of cultural identity development and have the skills to implement programmatic supports; and
know specific strategies for supporting English language development in after school that are appropriate for the after school context.

The after school field is poised and ready to thoughtfully and successfully engage English Learners and help them succeed both academically and socially. We can make a significant impact and difference in the lives of these youth, helping to break their isolation and become empowered, successful adults. We can hold a commitment to helping build well-rounded individuals who are thriving academically and emotionally, grounded in their cultures and languages, and who see themselves as active civic participants – ready to join in the movement to create the kind of equitable society we all desire.

Endnotes


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California Tomorrow

California Tomorrow is a non-profit organization that has been working on educational equity issues since 1984. The organization has held a strong focus on improving education for immigrants, English Learners and youth of color. Currently, among other programs, the organization is offering English Learner professional development for after school practitioners. In the Spring of 2010, California Tomorrow will release an EL toolkit for the After School field.

For more information, visit www.californiatomorrow.org.

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