

## Serving English Language Learners Afterschool

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Over the last several decades, the number of afterschool programs has grown considerably due to the growing employment rates of mothers and concerns regarding at-risk students (James-Burdumy, Dynarski, & Deke, 2007). Afterschool programs impact the lives of nearly 10.2 million children in Kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade, an overall increase from 2009 when 8.4 million children were estimated to attend afterschool programs (Afterschool Alliance, 2014). Not only do such programs keep children safe during the peak hours for juvenile crime and experimentation with drugs, alcohol, and sex (Newman, Fox, Flynn, & Christeson, 2000), but schools have turned to afterschool programs as a way to provide extra academic support to children who are struggling during the regular school day. With increased pressure for schools to perform and meet the needs of all students, the afterschool program setting became an additional opportunity for schools to teach students and improve achievement, especially for those students considered at risk.

As the amount of afterschool programs has increased, so has the number of school-aged children entering the U.S. school system from diverse backgrounds. Specifically considering bilingual youth, the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition (2011) estimates that from the 1994-1995 school year to the 2009-2010 school year, the number of English Language Learning (ELL) youth increased from 3.1 million to 5.2 million. Given the dramatic increase in the number of ELL children in the educational system, it is not surprising that such students are attending afterschool programs with great frequency. In fact, nationally, 16% of all afterschool participants are of ELL status (Afterschool Alliance, 2014).

The afterschool environment is a unique atmosphere that can benefit ELL youth in a number of ways. First, afterschool and summer learning programs have been found to improve both academic achievement and social development of ELL youth (Huang & Cho, 2009; Tellez & Waxman, 2010). Second, oral English language development can also be enhanced by attending a high quality afterschool program (Tellez & Waxman, 2010). With an informal environment and lower student-to-staff ratios, afterschool programming can offer rich language-learning opportunities that complement ELL teaching and learning during the school day (Weisburd, 2008). Third, an additional benefit of afterschool attendance for ELL youth is family involvement opportunities. Afterschool programs are in position to support ELL families in understanding the community (Pray, 2011) and providing educational offerings to parents/family members.

### **Strategies Afterschool Programs Use to Help ELL Youth Succeed**

A small body of research has identified characteristics of afterschool programs that appear to be related to maximizing the benefits for ELL youth who attend. When afterschool programs serving ELL youth implement these practices, positive youth outcomes have been documented.

### **Targeted Homework and Academic Assistance**

Providing ample time for homework completion afterschool can be very beneficial for ELL youth. Litke (2009) found that linguistically diverse students who attended afterschool programs placed great value on having extra time after school to complete homework assignments, receive individualized attention, and engage in a review of homework or review for tests. In fact, afterschool programs are most successful at improving academic achievement of ELL youth when time is structured to include skill-specific homework support (David, 2011; Huang & Cho, 2009; Pray, 2011; Rodrigues-Valls, 2011). In addition, high quality afterschool programs should provide other activities geared towards expanding and linking to the school-day curricula. Specifically, high-quality programs actively engage ELL children by generating opportunities to practice new skills through hands-on experiences, cooperative learning, peer leadership and structured reflection.

### **Multidisciplinary Activity Offerings**

High-quality programs provide opportunities not only for academic growth, but for ELL youth to learn social and behavioral skills. As such, the most successful programs offer a large variety of both academic and enrichment activities (Vandell et al., 2004). Afterschool programs can also provide numerous opportunities for students to learn about various cultures, languages, and global issues (Afterschool Alliance, 2014). These activities may be meaningful to ELL youth and may offer the chance for ELL youth to use their native language and support their culture (Pray, 2011).

### **Positive Staff-Child Relationships**

High quality programs offer students a welcoming, nurturing social environment (Vandell et al., 2004), where students are able to use their native language and work with other students (Bang, 2011). This environment is fostered by staff and activity leaders who work closely with ELL youth to engage them in each activity (Bang, 2011). In addition, afterschool programs should employ staff members with similar cultural backgrounds as the students enrolled in the program (Pray, 2011). In fact, programs are most successful at improving academic achievement of ELL youth when there are staff members who share the same linguistic and cultural backgrounds as the students (David, 2011; Huang & Cho, 2009; Rodrigues-Valls, 2011). Afterschool participants who have connections with staff members from similar backgrounds show increased attendance, academic achievement, and lower drop-out rates in high school (Pray, 2011).

### **Family Involvement**

Lastly, the most successful afterschool programs serving ELL youth have very intentional strategies to involve families (Pray, 2011). Typically, programs are most successful when there are constructive ways to include parents and extended family members in the program (David, 2011; Huang & Cho, 2009; Rodrigues-Valls, 2011). Programs can also help bolster parents' English skills, while providing time for parents and youth to work collaboratively together. Afterschool programs can deliberately connect children to their culture by having parents be a

contributor to activities or curriculum development to demonstrate ethnic values, identity, and traditions (Siegel, 2004).

### **Challenges to Serving ELL Youth Afterschool**

Although a number of benefits are documented for ELL youth who attend afterschool programs, many afterschool programs are somewhat ill-equipped to work with ELL youth or implement the aforementioned strategies that are documented in the research as “best practice.” First, and most importantly, procedures in place during the school day to ensure highly qualified teachers identify and address a range of language development issues that are not necessarily in place in the afterschool setting. Many schools and afterschool programs operate without formal or consistent working partnerships (Foundations, 2010). Because a major goal of most afterschool programs is to increase academic performance, collaboration with school personnel is essential (Beckett et al., 2009). However, in some schools, it can be challenging to build this collaborative relationship between the school and the afterschool program, even though such a relationship is essential to the success of the program and the ELL youth that it serves.

Second, afterschool staff need professional development and ongoing skill-building in research-based methodology towards the particular needs of ELL youth (Foundations, 2010). While many afterschool staff are skilled and educated in the field of child development, a significant proportion need further education and training in the field, with just 41% of staff in one study having an associate’s degree or higher (Dennehy & Noam, 2005). Because two-thirds of afterschool staff work part time (fewer than 30 hours per week), are paid on an hourly basis, and relatively few (only one-quarter) receive health care benefits from their employer (Dennehy & Noam, 2005), turnover rates are quite high. In fact, many afterschool workers see a position with afterschool programming as supplemental or temporary, with yearly turnover rates as high as 40% (Yohalem, Pitman, & Edwards, 2010). This makes orienting new staff and providing training/professional development opportunities quite costly and time intensive.

### **Case Example of a Program in Action**

To better illustrate both the benefits and challenges of providing afterschool programming for ELL youth, one Midwestern afterschool program is highlighted in the section that follows. This program offered afterschool services during the 2014-2015 school year. Information about this program was obtained through interviews with program staff and observations of the program.

#### **“Program A”**

Kindergarten through fifth grade students were served by a community-based program at an elementary school in a Midwestern state that served predominantly minority students (96% minority enrollment). On average, 120 students attended the program every day, and there was a waitlist of 50 additional students. Of the 120 students who attended, 81% were ELL, with the vast majority being Spanish-speaking, along with a few Somali-speaking students. The majority (89%) of the youth also received free/reduced lunch.

In total, 13 afterschool staff worked at the program and staff consisted of a diverse range of linguistic backgrounds. Some staff were fluent in multiple languages (mostly English and Spanish); however, other staff knew little English. Staff backgrounds ranged from high school students, to community members, to parents of afterschool participants. The site coordinator had recruited linguistically diverse staff by asking staff for referrals of friends, family, or neighbors who were fluent in the predominant languages spoken by participants. The program also actively recruited past participants, by keeping in touch with families of regular attendees and re-contacting these students when they entered high school. The site coordinator reported,

The easiest way I have found to get staff who know the languages is to recruit family members of the participants. I tell them that they can get paid while being with their child(ren). Sometimes I get aunts or uncles, or other extended family members, too. They love it; they get a whole new perspective on what education is like for their kids!

As the school had a large population of ELL youth, resources in the school (and available to the afterschool program) were in multiple languages. In addition, all resources purchased and used by the afterschool program were in English and Spanish, such as an English and Spanish library which was available to students. Moreover, a bilingual teacher liaison worked with the program to develop activities that would benefit ELL youth. These activities included structured components for youth to practice English skills. In addition, this bilingual liaison provided training to afterschool staff regarding ELL issues and attended programming to observe program staff interactions with children. During these observations, the liaison provided coaching to staff, and modeled ways to help ELL youth and encourage language development.

Family engagement at this site was also high. With a linguistically diverse staff, communication during parent pick-up time was much more easily accomplished. English-language classes were also provided to families and extended relatives of program participants. In addition, a local immigration advocacy group regularly provided families with information and resources. Program staff also sought information from parents regarding their needs, and as a result of this open communication, program staff had acquired winter coats, holiday presents, movie tickets, and sporting event tickets for program participants and families to use. On one occasion, the program helped to pay an attendee's soccer registration fees. Because the program sought out information regarding the needs of families and provided resources, the afterschool program was viewed by parents as a community center and parents were thankful to be welcomed afterschool. The site coordinator reported, "Our goal is to focus on the needs of the entire family and connect the family to resources that might be available to them, that they might not know about otherwise."

### **Conclusions**

The extent to which afterschool programs implement promising practices for ELL youth varies greatly. Some programs may implement promising practices for ELL youth quite well, as shown in the case example of Program A. At this site, program staff intentionally incorporated parents and family members into programming, by asking parents to work at the program and identifying the needs of each family and acquiring services or supplies for them, as well as providing family events in which ELL parents would be interested. In addition, this program had a linguistically

and culturally diverse staff, directly impacting the extent to which other promising practices could be implemented.

Yet a range likely exists regarding the quality of afterschool programming provided to ELL youth. In fact, Program A, a strong ELL program, did not purposefully infuse the students' culture or linguistics into programming. At other programs, few research-based best practices may be implemented, especially if the program serves a relatively small number of ELL students. Therefore, training and professional development opportunities which provide information on evidence-based practices for ELL youth should be administered to all programs, even those programs serving relatively few ELL youth.

Although there is a continuum of quality regarding ELL youths' experiences afterschool and professional development is certainly needed, it is important to remember that the informal environment provided by afterschool settings does lend itself well to linguistic development. ELL students are still likely to benefit from participation in the afterschool program because of exposure to English-speaking staff and peers in an informal atmosphere. This is not to say that programs should ignore the research-proven strategies for ELL youth. Instead, programs should implement those strategies that they can and remember that afterschool programs can still help ELL youth even if there are limited resources or bilingual staff. Afterschool programs are in a prime position to serve many ELL youth and help schools, families, and students achieve academic success. When afterschool programming implements researched-based practices, ELL youth can more readily achieve academically and build language acquisition skills.

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