



Culturally responsive schooling can and does help immigrant English learners succeed in school while learning the language.

Students from immigrant families, including foreign-born children and those born in the United States to immigrant parents, are a large and growing segment of the student population. In 2005, the U.S. had about 11 million school-aged children of immigrants, making them about one-fifth of the school-aged population (Rong & Preissle, 2008). Students from immigrant families are diverse in terms of ethnicity, race, reli-

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## New talk about ELL students

gion, language background, English proficiency, immigration status, and social class. These differences in background make a profound difference in how they negotiate schooling.

Immigrant youth who enter the U.S. as adolescents, in particular, face significant challenges. Research suggests that immigrant English learners score lower on standardized tests, graduate from high school at lower rates and drop out at higher rates than their native English-speaking peers.

Students who arrive in the U.S. as adolescents often develop the social English necessary to chat with friends and consume popular culture quickly. But students need four to seven years to develop academic English (Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000), which may make it challenging to have the academic English necessary to graduate from high school in four years. Late-entry ELLs face particular difficulties in states with high school exit exams because of these language issues.

Immigrant students' prior educational experiences play a central role in their educational achievement in the U.S. About 6% of newcomer immigrant students have experienced interrupted formal education in their home countries; in places like New York City, about 10% of all ELLs are students with interrupted formal education (Bartlett & Garcia, 2011; Ad-

vocates for Children, 2010). These youth are typically two or more years behind their same-age peers in school, and many aren't literate in their native languages.

Immigrant English learners are typically tracked into ELL classes that focus almost exclusively on acquiring English, often to the exclusion of academic content (Callahan, 2005; Callahan, Wilkinson, Muller, & Frisco, 2009). Too often, educators assume English learners can't do academic work until they're fully proficient in English (Callahan, 2005). Instead of offering students access to academic subjects and the opportunity to develop critical and independent thinking, schools too often subject ELLs to vocabulary drills.

When they do exit ELL programs, they're often unprepared to handle the academic content in mainstream classes because they haven't been prepared to do so. When ELL placement limits access to academic subject matter, there are long-term negative effects on students' achievement and future educational opportunities.

Educators often view immigrant cultures and languages as barriers to academic success. Instead of building on students' backgrounds, the assimilationist perspective encourages educators to disregard native languages and cultures (Lee, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999),

which alienates both the immigrant youth and their families from schools.

### Lessons from the Internationals

The issue for educators is what schools can do to improve educational opportunities for these youth. What are the elements of a successful educational program for newcomer immigrant English learners? How can schools provide these students with an academically enriching, culturally responsive, and socially supportive education?

In the last few years, my colleagues and I have been studying high schools in the Internationals Network for Public Schools in New York City, which points to the possibilities and challenges of providing newcomer immigrant English learners with a high-quality education.

Schools in the Internationals Network have a reputation for successfully educating immigrant students from diverse backgrounds. One study of the three oldest International High Schools in New York City reveals that the final graduation rate for students who entered in 1998 was 88.7%, compared to a graduation rate of 49.6% for a similar population citywide during this period (Fine, Stoudt, & Futch, 2005). Students in these schools come from over 70 countries, speak over 60 languages, and 80% of the



students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Students arrive at the Internationals with diverse educational backgrounds, including many who have experienced interrupted formal educations. Students' English literacy ranges from early elementary to approaching grade level.

The 15 schools in the Internationals Network are designed to serve the unique academic, social, and emotional needs of recently arrived immigrant youth who are English learners. Teachers work in interdisciplinary teams, which foster teacher collaboration. Most teams include an ESL-certified teacher, and all teachers receive professional development on language acquisition. These schools build on students' cultural and linguistic identities through an interdisciplinary course of study that fosters learning English through content.

### Cultural and linguistic identities

Scholars who embrace

sociocultural perspectives have argued that the educational challenges experienced by students from culturally and linguistically different backgrounds, including immigrant ELLs, are the result of unrecognized and unappreciated cultural differences not cultural deficits (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Moll et al., 1992). These scholars have highlighted the importance of drawing on students' cultures, native languages, identities, and communities in promoting high academic engagement and achievement. Teachers in the Internationals regularly draw on student experiences and cultures to involve students in academic discussions. Teachers collaborate across disciplinary boundaries to create interdisciplinary curricula that often center on themes relevant to students' lives.

In one recent study at a network high school, we focused on teachers' efforts to create an interdisciplinary American studies curriculum that was relevant to students'

identities, including units on immigration and globalization (Lee & Walsh, in press). During the unit on immigration, the English teacher posted the following questions on the walls: "How is identity related to inclusion and exclusion, belonging and not belonging? How are you, personally, becoming a part or not becoming a part of the United States? How are immigrants included and excluded from life in the United States?"

As the teacher's questions suggest, students were constantly asked to think about their own immigration experiences. In English and history classes, students were encouraged to reflect on their family's immigration experiences as a way of making sense of the history of immigration in the U.S. and current immigration policies (Lee & Walsh, in press). Research on the Internationals Network of Public Schools reveals that students are eager to share aspects of their cultural backgrounds with

peers from other countries, and they regularly draw on experiences in their native countries to make sense of classroom material (Fine, Stoudt, & Futch, 2005; Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2011; Lee & Walsh, in press).

### Learning English through content

Teaching academic English is central to the mission of schools in the Internationals Network. Because of the vast number of languages spoken by students, English is the language of instruction in all but two Network schools. The approach to language instruction at the Internationals reflects what some scholars call a "plurilingual" perspective, which centers on individual students' linguistic, cultural, and schooling experiences. A dynamic plurilingual perspective responds to the complex language practices of individual students, recognizes that language practices are occurring in an increasingly multilingual global society (Garcia, Sylvan, & Witt, 2011). Students are encouraged to use their native languages to build their English skills and classrooms are often filled with the sounds of languages from around the world.

Teachers work in teams to develop methodologies that help students simultaneously develop content knowledge and the academic English associated with a particular



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subject. The central strategies used by teachers include systematic scaffolding of content along with language. Scaffolding often includes giving students opportunities to make visual representations of their ideas or acting out a critical scene in a book before beginning writing. The immigration unit, for example, included a visual arts component in which students posed

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for self-portraits with three artifacts that were meaningful to them. The artifacts (e.g., family photos in their native countries and in their apartments in New York City, religious items, or music) were then used as prompts to get students to talk about and later write about their immigration experiences. Teachers accommodate the range of English proficiency levels in any given class by differentiating instruction. In English classes, for example, students read about the same theme (e.g., immigration, African-American experiences) through different books matched to their individual reading levels (Lee & Walsh, in press).

### Social capital

In another study, my colleague and I found that teachers and other staff at the Internationals recognize the many obstacles facing students, and they work together to create nurturing school cultures that support academic success, including helping students make post-

secondary plans (Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2011).

At some Network schools, discussions about post-secondary options occur in weekly advisory periods; in others, students take career development classes in which students research different colleges and careers and complete college applications. Teachers and staff in both models emphasize going on to higher education and help students at every step of the college application and financial aid process. Network schools also provide internships, which expose students to a variety of career choices.

### Challenges

Schools in the Internationals Network have created educational opportunities for newcomer ELLs that build on student strengths and respond to student needs. The schools also enable teachers to collaborate in responding

to students' academic, social, and emotional needs. The reality of students' previous education and current lives means that not all students graduate from high school in four years, but Network schools work with students to give them extra time to fulfill requirements when necessary. However, high-stakes testing has presented additional obstacles for teachers and students in these schools.

In New York, all students, including newcomer ELLs, must pass five Regents exams to earn a high school diploma. Since this new mandate began, ELLs have consistently struggled to pass the exams, and dropout rates among this group have increased. In 2005, for example, only 33.2% of ELLs in New York City passed the English part of the Regents exam (Menken, 2008). Indeed, our research suggests that ELL students face substantial hurdles in passing these exams,

and many must retake the exams again and again before earning passing scores (Lee & Walsh, in press).

Internationals Network teachers are trying to prepare students for these high-stakes tests while maintaining a commitment to curriculum that is culturally responsive. Significantly, the professional communities and the culture of collaboration allow teachers to negotiate challenges created by accountability policies while maintaining a commitment to providing an academically rich and cultural and linguistically relevant pedagogy (Jaffe-Walter, 2008).

### What does it take?

What are the lessons from the Internationals Network of Public Schools? What does it take to provide newcomer immigrant English learners with a culturally responsive and academically challeng-



ing education? Too often, the work of educating English learners is seen as the sole responsibility of the ELL or bilingual staff in a school. This model leaves the ELL staff and their students marginal-

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ized and isolated in schools. Given the complexity of working with late-entry immigrant English learners, the lone teacher who is isolated in his or her classroom would be easily overwhelmed.

Research in Internationals Network schools and other schools known for successfully educating newcomer ELLs points to the importance of having schoolwide investment in working with immigrant English learners. At schools in the Internationals Network, instructional teams allow teachers to collaborate across disciplinary boundaries and across specializations to serve student needs. Significantly, ESL-certified teachers work as coequals with subject-area teachers to address language issues across subject areas.

Similarly, in their research at a bilingual high school for Dominican immigrant youth in New York City, Lesley Bartlett and Ofelia Garcia highlight the centrality of the school's "collective effort oriented toward the edification of an entire community" (2011, p. 232). Furthermore, staff members have positive attitudes towards students' cultural and linguistic differences and seek to build on the students' backgrounds. Once again, the instructional

teams play a central role in helping teachers negotiate their work as team members share responsibility for working together to learn about students and to construct learning opportunities that reflect students' cultural and linguistic differences.

Can other schools recreate the Internationals' model? Most successful schools for newcomer ELLs are in large urban areas where many teachers have experience dealing with diversity. While most immigrant students do attend schools in urban centers, increasing numbers of immigrant ELLs are settling in small towns, suburbs, and rural communities in the Midwest and South with little experience dealing with cultural, racial, or linguistic diversity.

Schools in many of these smaller communities lack the resources and expertise to address the educational needs of immigrant ELLs. Furthermore, these districts and their teachers are generally isolated from institutions that could provide support. Research is needed on how to create successful models of education for immigrant ELLs in smaller districts. The research on Internationals suggests that smaller districts may want to start by offering professional development on cultural and linguistic diversity, which emphasizes collaboration and schoolwide commitment to serving immigrant ELLs. 

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