

Beautiful Accents

Empowering and Supporting English Learners through School and Community Partnerships

Enriching English Learner Education
through School and Community
Partnerships

Ruth M. López

Meeting the Needs of Refugee and
Immigrant Students and Families in
a Culturally Responsive Way

*Dahvy Tran and
Barbara Roberts Hodgson*

Making Their Voices Heard: A
Partnership to Build Writing Skills
through Empowerment, Imagina-
tion, and Scaffolded Supports

Ashley Varady

Serving Refugee Students and
Unaccompanied Minors: More
Than Just Learning English

Nakachi Clark-Kasimu

Habits of Mind: Forging University-
School Partnerships to Bring
a High-Quality Enrichment
Curriculum to English Learners

*Amy Cournoyer Gooden and
Kelly Chase*

Empowering ELLs through
Strong Community–School District
Partnerships for Enrichment

*Jessica Rivera, Esperanza Donovan-
Pendzic, and Mary Jo Marion*

Academia Cuauhtli and the
Eagle: *Danza Mexica* and the
Epistemology of the Circle

*Angela Valenzuela, Emilio Zamora,
and Brenda Rubio*



ABOUT THE GATEWAY CITIES EDUCATION AGENDA

The theme of this issue of *VUE* is inspired by the Summer English Language Learners Enrichment Academies held across twenty Gateway Cities in Massachusetts – located in formerly thriving industrial centers that need resources to address economic declines. As part of the Gateway Cities Education Agenda, \$3 million in grants were awarded in 2013 and again in 2014 to address the English language development of immigrant and newcomer students in summer academies. The Massachusetts Executive Office of Education designed and managed this grant program. As the external evaluator of the enrichment academies program, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform observed how community partnerships were key to the successful implementation of these academic programs and how the enrichment programs contributed to youth development and empowerment in a number of ways. We asked a cross-sector group of authors: What role did community partnerships play in supporting the learning and development of English language learners in a culturally responsive way? We defined community partnerships broadly to include nonprofit community organizations, colleges and universities, and families.

For more information on the Gateway Cities, see <http://www.massinc.org/Programs/Gateway-Cities/About-the-Gateway-Cities.aspx>.

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VUE

Beautiful Accents: Empowering and Supporting English Learners through School and Community Partnerships

Enriching English Learner Education through School and Community Partnerships

2

RUTH M. LÓPEZ

Community partnerships allow schools and districts to empower and engage a broad range of English learners and their families in culturally responsive ways to support student learning and socio-emotional development.

Meeting the Needs of Refugee and Immigrant Students and Families in a Culturally Responsive Way

7

DAHVY TRAN AND BARBARA ROBERTS HODGSON

Through family engagement and expanded learning time, a partnership between the district and a community organization in Lowell, Massachusetts, serves the social and academic needs of refugee youth and other English learners and their families.

Making Their Voices Heard: A Partnership to Build Writing Skills through Empowerment, Imagination, and Scaffolded Supports

16

ASHLEY VARADY

In San Francisco, a partnership between a K–8 school and a nonprofit writing program helps students who are achieving below grade level find their voices and blossom into confident thinkers and writers.

Serving Refugee Students and Unaccompanied Minors: More Than Just Learning English

20

NAKACHI CLARK-KASIMU

A nonprofit in San Francisco partners with area high schools to serve immigrant and refugee students, including a growing number of undocumented, unaccompanied minors, who face not only learning English but also trauma and a host of other issues.

Habits of Mind: Forging University-School Partnerships to Bring a High-Quality Enrichment Curriculum to English Learners

26

AMY COURNOYER GOODEN AND KELLY CHASE

Boston University and the Malden, Massachusetts, school district worked with the community to support English learners and develop a curriculum around five “habits of mind.”

Empowering ELLs through Strong Community–School District Partnerships for Enrichment

36

JESSICA RIVERA, ESPERANZA DONOVAN-PENDZIC, AND MARY JO MARION

A collaboration in Worcester, Massachusetts, between the district, higher education institutions, and community organizations, including a Spanish-language television program, provided culturally responsive out-of-school enrichment programs for English learners.

Academia Cuauhtli and the Eagle: *Danza Mexica* and the Epistemology of the Circle

46

ANGELA VALENZUELA, EMILIO ZAMORA, AND BRENDA RUBIO

An out-of-school program for fourth-grade English learners in Austin, Texas – jointly developed by the school district, the City of Austin, and a local community group – has co-constructed a curriculum that incorporates the Aztec dance or ceremony *Danza Mexica* as a core component.

Enriching English Learner Education through School and Community Partnerships

RUTH M. LÓPEZ

Community partnerships allow schools and districts to empower and engage a broad range of English learners and their families in culturally responsive ways to support student learning and socio-emotional development.

I was once an English learner. I am the daughter of immigrants from El Salvador and México. When I was born, my parents were learning English, and they communicated with me in the most natural way they knew – in Spanish. This was not framed as a “problem” until I was enrolled in pre-school. The earliest and most vivid educational memory I have is of my young mother advocating on my behalf that my fluency in Spanish did not imply low intelligence and did not justify my being held back in school. Eventually, she found a school that would teach me English in the age-appropriate grade, but from a young age I was sent the message in school that my native language was one that needed to be kept in the home.

My cultural heritage was rarely reflected in the curriculum I was learning – so rarely that I easily recollect the experiences I most value in my K–12 education: the time in fifth grade when we created a booklet highlighting natural resources from different countries, and I glued coffee beans to construction paper, drew coconut trees to represent El Salvador, and proudly drew the map of my mother’s country; and the time in high school when I read *Bless Me, Ultima* by Rudolfo Anaya, the first book I read by a Mexican-American author, leading to my wanting to read any book by an author with a Spanish surname. Once I was exposed to these ways of learning that reflected my cultural heritage, I became passionate about learning more about Latino culture and history *and* pursuing my education beyond high school, eventually earning my Ph.D. in education.

Numerous local and national Latino organizations supported this process for me, but not until later in high school. I think now about how different my early educational experience would have been with more exposure to culturally responsive curriculum, including greater ties with community organizations.

I share this story to introduce the theme of this issue of *VUE*: the rich experiences that partnerships between districts and community institutions, such as nonprofits and universities, can provide for children of diverse backgrounds. The theme was

Ruth M. López is a senior research associate at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University.

inspired by the Summer English Language Enrichment Academies held across twenty school districts in Massachusetts. Three of the articles focus on programs that resulted from this grant, and we also include the perspective of programs serving similar populations of students in California and Texas.

This issue focuses on out-of-school programs that engage students who are newcomers, refugees, immigrants, and children of immigrants, often labeled as “English learners.” The phrase “beautiful accents” in the title refers to the many instances that are shared throughout this issue where students’ heritage languages and cultural backgrounds are seen as an asset rather than simply signaling a lack of English. As one of our contributors, Esperanza Donovan-Pendzic, stated to her summer program students who admitted feeling their accents held them back, “You cannot be afraid because of your accent. Think of being bilingual and multilingual as *additive*. English, Acholi, Swahili, it’s amazing. I admire you.”

THE GATEWAY CITIES INITIATIVE AND THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

The Summer Enrichment Academies were part of the Gateway Cities initiative, launched by the Massachusetts Executive Office of Education (EOE) in 2013 under former governor Deval Patrick. The Gateway Cities were once thriving industrial centers, but due to economic declines, face the need for more resources and capacity.¹ This lack of resources has an impact on the educational and career opportunities available to students in these cities. To address the growing needs of these communities, the EOE implemented the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Gateway Cities Education Agenda in 2013 with the goal:

to close the persistent achievement gaps that disproportionately affect children living in poverty, students of color, students who are English language learners and students with disabilities, many of whom are heavily concentrated in the Commonwealth’s twenty-six Gateway Cities.²

As part of this agenda, the EOE in 2013 and again in 2014 awarded twenty Gateway City school districts across Massachusetts a total of \$3 million in competitive grants to support intensive summer English language learning for middle and high school immigrant and newcomer students. During the summer of 2014, these academies served nearly 1,700 students. Originally, the summer academies were to be funded for 2015. However, the 2015 funding was cut as part of efforts to close a \$768 million state budget deficit.

Each summer academy was required to have an academic and enrichment component. The programs were allowed to create their own curriculum and choose formative and summative assessments, and they were encouraged to collaborate with nonprofit organizations and/or institutions of higher education.

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University (AISR) served as external evaluator of the Gateway Cities grant program. Through mixed-methods evaluation that included assessment analysis and qualitative findings from six case studies, we documented the program design, conditions, and outcomes of these six academies. We observed that community partnerships were key to the successful

1 See <http://www.massinc.org/Programs/Gateway-Cities/About-the-Gateway-Cities.aspx>.
2 <http://archives.lib.state.ma.us/bitstream/handle/2452/207474/ocn795183245-2014-02-14.pdf?sequence=1>.

implementation of the academic programs and to positive youth identity development and empowerment.

In four of the six sites we visited, we witnessed strong partnerships with community organizations to develop an engaging, well-rounded, and supportive summer academy. Although the focus of the Gateway Cities initiative was on English language development – and we documented increases in pre- and post-test assessments during the summer for all twenty academies – we also witnessed learning taking place through culturally responsive teaching, often provided in partnership with community organizations in the form of enrichment curriculum. Community organizations helped with curriculum development, served as enrichment curriculum partners for informal and formal learning, and offered parent and family engagement and supports. Although these relationships took place in the summer, many extended into the school year in the form of after-school programming. In all of these instances, partnerships increased the resources available – specifically for ELLs in the case of this grant program.

AN EQUITY-FOCUSED PERSPECTIVE

The partnerships we observed underscore that schools exist within larger communities. This understanding is an essential part of AISR’s framework of “smart education systems,” which we describe as a high-functioning district or other local education agency with a range of civic and community partners that provide a broad network of opportunities and supports to young people in and out of school.

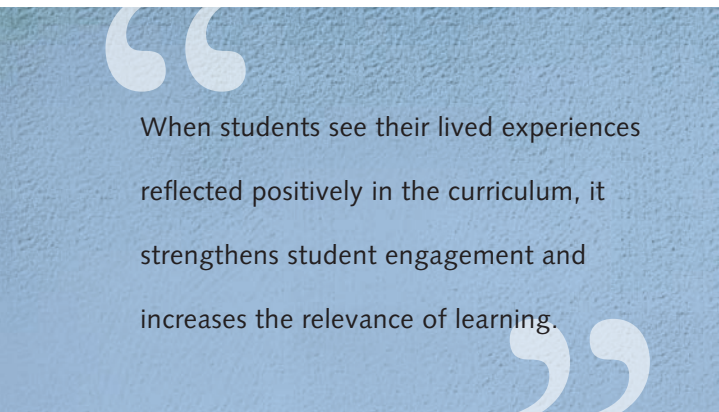
Over our years of work with districts and communities on educational improvement, we have seen that addressing persistent achievement gaps and developing sustainable education reform at scale requires the combined commitment, efforts, and investment of an entire community.³

Our evaluation of the Summer Academies was guided by AISR’s mission and core principles, along with research on best practices in educating traditionally underserved populations like English learners. A focus on equity and social justice are the foundation of all

our work.⁴ We take an asset-based view of bicultural English language learners (Tung 2013) and value culturally responsive pedagogy, which recognizes and builds on the knowledge and experiences students bring to school (Padron, Waxman & Rivera 2002; Tharp 2000). When students see their lived experiences and communities reflected positively in the curriculum, it strengthens student engagement and increases the relevance of academic learning (Cammarota & Romero 2014). This perspective views ELLs not as lacking language skills, but rather as having something to offer our schools and communities. The goals of the Gateway Cities grant included increasing the capacity of the Gateway communities, and ELLs have the potential to contribute to these cities for years to come.

3 See <http://annenberginstitute.org/?q=about/smart-education-systems>.

4 See <http://annenberginstitute.org/mission-and-core-principles>.



When students see their lived experiences reflected positively in the curriculum, it strengthens student engagement and increases the relevance of learning.

The ELL academies offered what Theoharis and O'Toole (2011) define as an *inclusive education experience*: “providing each student the right to an authentic sense of belonging to a school classroom community where difference is expected and valued” (p. 649). Due to the structure of the grant program, districts provided students with a safe space where their unique experiences as newcomers and/or immigrants were valued. The grant allowed program designers to “rethink school structures” and “instructional techniques” during the summer. These elements are key in school models that are not only inclusive, but that also wish to foreground equity in education.

IN THIS ISSUE

The issue opens with an article co-written by Barbara Roberts Hodgson, a lead ELL teacher and newcomer support teacher, and Dahvy Tran, a former refugee and now the youth program coordinator at the International Institute of Lowell, Massachusetts. Both women work daily with refugee and newcomer students and families in the Lowell community, and they share their most recent experience collaborating during the Gateway Cities Summer Academy and into the school year, especially their collaboration to increase family engagement. What stood out to me is how they challenged the kind of blame often aimed at newcomer parents: “Why didn’t the parents just jump in their cars and show up? Isn’t this what parents who are really interested in their children’s education would do? Why was it so difficult to foster parental involvement?” Hodgson and Tran show that to answer these questions requires knowledge of the difficult reality faced by new refugee families; they also highlight the importance of building trusting relationships with parents.

Ashley Varady, a program manager of the after-school writing program 826 Valencia in San Francisco, then shares the story of the partnership between her program and a K–8 school with a high number of students who are English learners. Her article shows the imagination and growth that can result when students are given creative freedom and the tools to write. Also in the Bay Area, Nakachi Clark-Kasimu, formerly the after-school coordinator at the San Francisco-based nonprofit Refugee Transitions, shares her experience working with unaccompanied youth from Central America. During the summer of 2014, this group in particular received much attention in the media, when their migration due to crime and poverty in their home countries was described as a “surge.” Clark-Kasimu shows that beyond learning English, these youth need a range of advocates and partners, including the school and community-based organizations, to help them through legal and social processes as they become part of American society.

Amy Cournoyer Gooden, a lecturer at Boston University, and Kelly Chase, the assistant superintendent of Malden Public Schools, write about their partnership, which began during the application process for the Gateway Cities grant. They co-designed and later implemented the Gateway English Learner Reach for the Stars Academy, with a curriculum that was connected to the lives of students. Next, Jessica Rivera and Mary Jo Marion of Worcester State University’s Latino Education Institute and Esperanza Donovan-Pendzic, the host of the Spanish-language television program *Esperanza y Su Éxito*, share their experience in a collaboration between the district and several community organizations that engaged families and provided students with a culturally responsive and empowering enrichment program.

We close the issue with an article about a culturally relevant Saturday school in Austin, Texas, called *Academia Cuauhtli*. This article was co-written by members of *Nuestro Grupo*, a community-based organization that led the effort to found the academy, including leading education scholar and University of Texas at Austin (UT-Austin) professor Angela Valenzuela; historian and UT-Austin professor Emilio Zamora, who initiated the Texas History Curriculum Project; and Brenda Rubio, doctoral student and member of *Nuestro Grupo*. Their piece offers a novel approach to educating Mexican-origin children and the children of immigrants by embedding ancient ways of learning into curriculum.

We hope that the perspectives gained from all the articles in this issue together help to inform districts and communities that have the goal of educating students often labeled as “English learners” in holistic ways that include, but extend beyond, English language instruction.

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Meeting the Needs of Refugee and Immigrant Students and Families in a Culturally Responsive Way

DAHVY TRAN AND BARBARA ROBERTS HODGSON

Through family engagement and expanded learning time, a partnership between the district and a community organization in Lowell, Massachusetts, serves the social and academic needs of refugee youth and other English learners and their families.

“Wow!” I remember looking at the crowd in the auditorium from my spot on stage. I was excited to see over one hundred people eagerly waiting to see our Celebration of Learning – the culminating event at the Gateway Summer Enrichment Academy, a four-week program of the Lowell (Massachusetts) Public School District, where I (Barbara Roberts Hodgson)

Dahvy Tran is the youth program coordinator at the International Institute of Lowell. Barbara Roberts Hodgson is a newcomer support teacher and lead ELL teacher in the Lowell Public Schools and program coordinator of Lowell’s Summer English Language Enrichment Academy.

Newcomer refugee students need resilience and integrity just to get through every school day.

teach newcomer and ELL students. I was touched by the expressions of pride on the adults' faces and by the sheer joy on my students' faces.

It was a moment I will always cherish – and it was months in the making. The year before, the number of parents attending our first Celebration of Learning was very low – only about twelve parents and family members. I met with summer school personnel to debrief and discuss the successes and areas of need, and we all felt we needed to get the parents involved early and often.

As program coordinator of the summer academy, I worked all year with Dahvy Tran, the youth program coordinator at the International Institute, a community-based organization in Lowell that helps immigrants and refugees build new lives in our community, and with our Lowell Public School District (LPSD) support staff to do all we could to enable the parents to attend the Celebration of Learning. This included strengthening school-home communication and creating a student-to-student mentoring program at the International Institute.

Who were the students? What was the program? Why didn't the parents just jump in their cars and show up? Isn't this what parents who are really interested in their children's education would do? Why was it so difficult to foster parental involvement?

If any of those questions seem unimportant to you, then stop reading right here, because it is the answers to those questions that make education – *all* education, working with *any* youth, not just young refugees and immigrants – meaningful, respectful, and genuine.

Why were these questions so important to us? After all, we fulfilled all of the requirements of the grant that funded our summer academy;¹ shouldn't we have just been happy it was the last day of our summer program? Actually, we were all sad that it was the last day. As the students got on their buses, a boy started to sing "Stand By Me," one of the songs the kids learned for their concert. One by one, the students started singing with him. Many of the teachers and students were crying. Why was this such a powerful moment? The students, like any youth, wanted to feel like they were part of something. The summer program gave them that. The feeling of community and connectedness was incredible.

The success of our Celebration of Learning underscored the success of our district-community partnership, which allowed us to serve the diverse needs of these students and their families beyond the summer academy itself. In addition to the academic and social support we provided to students over the summer, we made a concerted effort to reach out to parents to build trusting relationships and provide logistical help and training. We were able to continue our work with these families during the school year by developing an after-school program for refugee students.

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1 Through the Massachusetts Educational Opportunity Office's Gateway Cities Education Agenda, \$3 million in grants were awarded in 2013 and 2014 to address the English language development of immigrant and newcomer students in the Gateway Cities Summer English Language Enrichment Academies, held across twenty districts in Massachusetts.

LOWELL'S IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE STUDENTS

Lowell, Massachusetts, is a diverse urban center with a fascinating history. It was designed and built in the late 1800s to serve the water-powered mills along the Merrimack River – and grew quickly during the same period. Immigrants have always been part of Lowell's character, and the refugees who are arriving daily have some experiences in common with those who came before them. But today's refugees are arriving with an unprecedented number of factors working against them. Traditionally, immigrants settled in Lowell for economic opportunity. Many fled poverty or war-torn countries, but the overall immigrant experience was very different from the experiences confronting today's newest arrivals to Lowell.

The difference between immigrants and refugees is that immigrants voluntarily move to another country – sometimes due to political and economic reasons – but refugees are sent by the United Nations. Countries all around the world volunteer to accept refugees, and then individual cities agree to accept a specific number of refugee families. Sometimes, if a refugee has close family ties with a previously resettled relative, it might be possible to settle in the same location.

I once had an irate parent – a White, middle-class mother – say to me,

Why can't *my* kid go to your summer program? It's not fair that all these people who come to Lowell get all the fun programs for their kids. They choose to come here, they should have the same treatment *my* kid gets.

If more parents like this one understood the realities faced by immigrant and refugee youth, perhaps they would not be asking this question and would instead welcome and support their new community members.

Anxiety and Resilience: What It's Like to Be a Refugee Student / Dahvy Tran

As a former refugee youth, I understand the challenges that many of the newcomers face in making Lowell their new home. My family came with the wave of Cambodian refugees in the 1980s. I was fortunate to be young enough to complete my education through the school system here. My older siblings were less fortunate, in particular my eldest brother, who was enrolled in eighth grade upon our arrival halfway through the school year.

It was a struggle for him to keep up with the coursework while trying to learn the language, yet I could never recall him being frustrated or angry. He assumed the role of parent while my mother worked several jobs to support us; he acted as interpreter when she faced difficulty in communicating with others. When he was old enough to work, his wages helped relieve some of the burden from my mother. Resiliency and integrity are the words that come to mind when I think of my brother. Now, working with the newcomer students, I see the same resiliency and integrity in everything they tackle.

Newcomer refugee students need all that resilience and integrity just to get through every school day. Imagine your very first day of a new high school. New classrooms, new faces, new everything. You walk down the hall and the bell rings for your first class. You, along with everyone else, rush around looking for the correct classroom number. Then you scurry in and take a seat without making eye contact with anyone. As the teacher begins speaking you heave a big sigh of relief knowing that the worst is over. Now imagine learning all this in another language. All of the students I work with have similar stories, but for them there is no sigh of relief at the end, instead only mounting anxiety. It takes a few months for these newcomer students from Somalia, Congo, Burma, Iraq, and Nepal to be able to adjust to the school setting.

ABOUT THE SUMMER ACADEMY

The Summer Academy was held at the Stoklosa Middle School in Lowell. The program had an academic component and an enrichment component. All students participated in the core academic classes, and all students participated in two or more of the enrichment options. We partnered with the Tsongas Industrial History Center staff, who provided STEM-based science activities;² we offered Taekwondo and Zumba classes; and we had a music and drama program. We partnered with the International Institute of Lowell to help with outreach.

The participants in the Gateway Summer Enrichment Academy were all English language learners (ELLs). According to statistics from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education for 2014-2015, 36.3 percent of Lowell’s students have a first language that is not English, compared to 18.5 percent for the state; 26.6 percent of Lowell’s students are classified as English language learners, compared to 8.5 percent for the state. Within this English language learner category, there are several subgroups – the majority of the summer program’s participants were classified as “newcomers” or as “students with limited or interrupted formal education” (SLIFE). We had 125 students in grades 5 through 12 from countries in Africa, Central and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Central and South America, and the Caribbean.

Many of the summer program students worked with Dahvy on Fridays. Our program was Monday to Thursday,

2 The Tsongas Industrial History Center is a partnership between the University of Massachusetts Lowell Graduate School of Education and Lowell Natural Historical Park. See <http://www.uml.edu/tsongas>.

so the Fridays at the International Institute were an unofficial extension of the Gateway Summer Enrichment Academy program.

Friday Sessions and Youth Fellows: Community-District Partnerships to Support Newcomer Students / Dahvy Tran

Fridays at the International Institute of Lowell provided additional academic support for students who needed more help with English reading comprehension, among other needs, and also included social activities and leadership development. One Friday of each month, we would hold a Friday Fun Day, where the students got to vote on an activity they would like to do together that was not academically focused. Thus far, we have had Taboo board game competitions, movie afternoons, soccer games, and food celebrations.

We established a Youth Fellowship program during the school year prior to the Gateway Summer Academy for two reasons. First, there was a language barrier; many of the new students arriving could not communicate with the English-speaking tutors we recruited. The Youth Fellows (as we refer to the leaders from the Youth Fellowship) have the language capacity to interpret for the new students, are high achieving in their academics, and have been trained with basic tutoring skills.

Secondly, the Youth Fellows were already natural leaders in their communities by interpreting for new families and helping them navigate the city. The Fellowship program also assisted the students further with things they were struggling with, such as college preparation; offered one-on-one support; and gave guidance on life, relationships, and school. Although not formally written in my job description, I act as both mentor and case manager

for the youth. The investment that I place in the Fellows would be magnified ten-fold if they each help between ten and fifteen new youth. Even though I was the only staff for the youth department, through our twelve Youth Fellows, I could reach out to about 150 to 190 youth. (In total we have eighteen Fellows, but six are currently in college and return during the summer to assist.)

What is unique about my work is the strong collaboration I have with the public school system, as well as with our other community partners in the city. I come to the high school at least one day a week and have daily communication with Barbara Roberts Hodgson. I have the support of the school's administration and community partners to continually develop the youth programming to meet the needs of the families we serve. In Lowell, there is a Newcomer program for refugee youth through the schools. I work closely with administration and ELL teachers to connect classroom learning to our after-school program. I spend as much time in the school as I do after school. My consistent presence builds trust among the youth, teachers, and parents.

Building Trusting Relationships

The Celebration of Learning, on the last day of the Gateway Enrichment Academies program, was an exhibition of students' academic work and included a Taekwondo exhibition, a play, and a concert. How did we use community partnerships to make our Celebration – and our entire summer academy – a success?

First of all, we held a parent and community meeting early in May to present the program, and then Dahvy and four of our program tutors began spreading the word about the program to the different parent groups in the community. We worked with several

parents so they could go back to their communities and explain to other parents what we would be doing in the summer program, and why it was important for their child to attend. The tutors contacted many parents. Although this was a completely voluntary activity, several of them spent many hours meeting with parents, calling them, and helping to educate parents about this great opportunity for their children.

One parent in particular who attended that very first meeting and was there at the Celebration of Learning really stood out for us. This parent has a child with a visual impairment, and he was not sure he wanted his son to attend, but he came to the introductory meeting at the urging of Dahvy, who had been working with the student's older siblings in the International Institute's mentoring program. Dahvy was sure the student would have a positive experience.

I have the chills again right now as I remember this student's Taekwondo performance – he had practiced, practiced, and practiced. In front of his father and mother, he ran a measured number of steps across the stage to the instructor, jumped, kicked, and broke a board. When I tell you that this was an amazing moment for the student, his classmates, his teachers, and family, I want you to remember that this father wasn't sure his son should attend the program, and it was because of Dahvy's and the tutor's efforts that this student earned a standing ovation. He couldn't see the audience standing, but he could hear and feel the applause.

I had him in class this year at the high school, and every once in a while, he would ask me if I remembered the time he broke the board in front of his father. He says it was the best moment of his life. This is an amazing example of the power of communication and community partnerships. If we had

simply handed out registration forms, this student would never have attended the program. But because Dahvy had already developed a trusting, respectful relationship with his siblings through the Institute's after-school program, he had the opportunity to attend the summer program.

These trusting, respectful relationships are absolutely crucial to any kind of meaningful interaction with parents, but there are several obstacles and challenges that make it very difficult to even begin to cultivate such relationships. Refugee parents are subject to many stresses, and the family dynamics are often extremely different once a family resettles in Lowell. Parents from all ethnicities, religions, and socio-economic and educational backgrounds suffer from common fears, doubts, and suspicions. Many parents fear that they are going to lose, or have already lost, their authority as head of the family.

Keeping in Touch

How do we help families with the difficult adjustment period they go through in the first months after their arrival? Dahvy and I have been calling families for the two years we have been working together. We call to tell the parents about important events, and sometimes just daily occurrences. We call to explain LPSD website information, we call to tell them about their child's progress. The theme here is: WE CALL. In the summer program, our student interns, part-time liaison, teachers, and tutors all had ten to fifteen minutes built into the staggered schedule to call parents. Each parent received a minimum of four calls during the four-week program. We called to say thank you for sending their child, we called to tell them about special moments, we called to tell them how great a student did on the Tsongas Egg Toss. We called, and called, and

called. Even if we weren't sure the parent understood everything we said, we called so that every parent had friendly calls about their children.

This calling system worked extremely well. Two weeks into the program, we had a parent focus group meeting in the middle of the day at the International Institute. We provided tea, coffee, some sweets, and interpreters. We had so many parents show up that we had to move into a larger space. The year before, we had only had four parents. I attribute the large turnout to the telephone calls and the outreach efforts of Dahvy, the interns, the part-time liaison, teachers, and tutors.

It turned out that the parents had a lot to say, and we wished we could have stayed and talked for another hour. Several parents talked about how pleased they were that their children were still in school during the summer. A couple of parents liked the fitness component of the program, especially since they thought the physical education classes their students participated in the school year were, "boring, crowded, and had no equipment." Many parents were concerned about what the children would do once the program ended, and several parents wanted an extension of the summer program. It was a very positive, eye-opening experience for all of us.

Another way we connected with parents is that we gave out Celebration of Learning flyers to all of the students three times. Dahvy had a stack at the International Institute. Our student interns, teachers, and tutors took extras home so if they happened to see a parent of a summer school student in any situation, they would give out another invitation. This was very successful; the auditorium was full!

Help with Transportation

The parents of our students can't just jump in a car and go to the summer school site. We realized that we needed to pass out bus tokens, explain directions, and make sure everyone could attend. The support we received from LPSD staff was great. We handed out about one hundred bus tokens, and we ended up with more than one hundred parents and family members at the celebration.

HELPING FAMILIES NAVIGATE LIFE IN AMERICA

In many cases, interpreters, or even the children themselves, have the task of navigating the convoluted demands of school registrations, MassHealth applications, and other forms of bureaucratic paperwork. Losing the power of being able to take care of everything can be depressing and make parents feel disoriented as they try to find their way in America. Can you imagine trying to reconcile your familiar expectations of education, culture, and family life in your home country with the realities of life in America?

Parent Training Sessions and Communication Building

Dahvy and I work together to help teach the parents how to access the district's Aspen Family Portal³ so that parents can see their student's attendance, grades, and important documents. Most of the information is in English, but tools in Google Docs are making translations easier. We at least feel we are giving some authority back to parents by showing them how to access this portal. We held parent trainings at Lowell High School and at the International Institute.

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3 For more information about the portal, see http://www.edline.net/pages/Lowell_High/Parents___Students/Aspen_Portal/Frequently_Asked_Questions.

During one session in February, a mother came in with a friend who explained that the mother wanted to know when the daughter would be getting a report card. I showed the mother the girl's grades, attendance, assessments such as MCAS and ACCESS, and conduct reports.

In many cultures, parents often feel that the teachers know best, and they have complete trust in the teachers and schools. It is important not to judge this as "detachment" and think a parent isn't interested.

The young lady in question was soon participating in the after-school tutoring program at the International Institute, but not before she complained that we showed her mom how to check up on her. This proved to us that our parent training sessions were working!

It also shows that teenagers are teenagers, regardless of where they are from, and that ALL parents want to know how their students are doing. We have to work together to make sure the parents understand the school's and the community's expectations for the student and the family. In many cultures, parental involvement in schooling is an unknown element; parents often feel that the teachers know best, and they have complete trust in the teachers and schools. It is important not to judge this as "detachment" and think a parent isn't interested. If we can strengthen any school-home communication link, we can potentially help a student succeed.

**KEEPING THE SUPPORT AND
RELATIONSHIPS GOING: THE
AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAM**

When school started up again a few weeks after the summer academy ended, Dahvy and I worked on several ideas as to how we could continue to foster the relationships we forged in the summer to continue to help our refugee families navigate the school system and find the help and support necessary to ensure that each refugee student in the LPSD had a plan for success. One idea was the after-school program.

**Creating a Safe and Consistent Space /
Dahvy Tran**

The after-school program focuses on creating a safe and consistent space for refugee youth from all backgrounds to interact and develop their English language skills. The main goal of the after-school program is to help youth with their homework, but it also serves as a bridge to widen their social networks and help them feel that Lowell, and the International Institute, is now their home.

Refugee and immigrant youth have taken advantage of our after-school program. My personal experience and research on best practices⁴ have shaped the development of the youth programming. The East African Community Services (EACS) After-School Program and the Involving Refugee Parents in the Manchester Public Schools program greatly influenced our youth programming in the beginning. The EACS After-School Program’s objective is to “provide a safe, consistent space for the students to get basic homework

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4 See, for example, Weine 2008.
5 See <http://www.brycs.org/promisingpractices/promising-practices-program.cfm?docnum=0087>.
6 See <http://www.brycs.org/promisingpractices/promising-practices-program.cfm?docnum=0049>.

assistance while honoring and preserving their diverse cultural heritage,”⁵ while the Manchester School district’s program objective is to “help refugee families integrate into the school and the larger community in a manner that includes food, fellowship, and fun. In addition, teachers, administrators, and other community members are provided with opportunities to get to know the newest families in town.”⁶

I started my work with the goal of integrating both models and piloting the result here in Lowell. Since the program’s inception, we now have eighteen graduates from our Youth Fellowship Program – the leadership track for refugee and immigrant youth who serve as tutors during the homework help after-school sessions and ambassadors to the community at large. We have also served 146 youth and parents, who are now comfortable in navigating the school system on their own but who know we are still a part of their support network. One parent that comes to mind has a physically disabled son and was fearful that his son would be neglected in the classroom; their previous host country had placed the son in an empty room all day until the parent came to get him. The process to enroll the student and have him in the appropriate classroom took longer, but through it the parent met several school staff and administrators who showed him what supports were available for his son. Now that same parent is showing new parents around the school system he once feared.

**WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO
DO THIS WORK?**

Districts and schools can learn a lot from our successes. Some of what we were able to achieve has a low cost. With the help of volunteer staff time, it does not cost anything to make a phone call, it costs very little to feed

a group of kids after school, and resulting connections made with parents and youth are priceless.

But sustaining great programming is hard when school districts constantly scramble for money. This is unfortunate, because I believe quality summer programming should simply be part of a school year budget. SLIFE students have tremendous gaps in education, and summer programs are crucial for them if we expect them to learn English and content at a proficient enough level to pass all of the state-mandated testing required for them to earn a high school diploma.

Changes to the Gateway Cities funding in an effort to balance the state budget resulted in districts not getting funded for the third year of the program, which would have been this year. In Lowell, this meant that the district funded a drastically reduced refugee summer program that served 40 refugee students from fifth through twelfth grades in the summer of 2015. We saw the impact our program had on more than 100 students in 2013 and 2014. We hope that the inclusion of this program in the yearly state budget in the future will allow us to continue to serve this population of students in the way they need and deserve. It would be shortsighted to spend less today on helping these students become more self-sufficient and successful, when the goal of this program was to strengthen and increase the capacity of Gateway Cities across the Commonwealth.

The Unseen Cost / Dahvy Tran

The work that Barbara and I do together is an example of a successful model, but it comes at a cost that's usually unseen. The other side of the work we do does not happen during work hours. I spend countless weekends and evenings working with both students and parents to help them overcome

barriers to understanding and educate them on navigating not only the school but the community at large.

My own refugee background with my family gives me the unique perspective to understand that parents want to be part of their children's lives, but their multiple jobs and responsibilities keep them outside of this realm and force them to rely on their children as the source for all this information. Every new parent I meet for the first time, every home visit I make, and every event I bring parents to, I tell them they are the best decision makers for their children's future, and that I'm only the messenger. Districts, schools, and organizations such as the International Institute are always looking for more funding so that we can have more messengers to act as the bridge for the parents and students.

For more information on the International Institute of Lowell, see <http://iine.us/>.

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Making Their Voices Heard: A Partnership to Build Writing Skills through Empowerment, Imagination, and Scaffolded Supports

ASHLEY VARADY

In San Francisco, a partnership between a K–8 school and a nonprofit writing program helps students who are achieving below grade level find their voices and blossom into confident thinkers and writers.

The sky is made with secret ingredients. It had to be made so everyone could breathe. After it was made, people threw blue glitter at it. Maybe it was a boy or a girl, or maybe a grown-up who was throwing blue glitter. A crocodile was selling blue glitter every night. He was selling glitter so everyone could have it. He wanted everyone to have some glitter to throw into the sky. The sky could be turquoise or blue or sometimes even purple, when people threw glitter at it.

This is the opening of a myth to explain why the sky is blue, written by a third-grade student who participates in one of 826 Valencia’s writing programs.¹ This student is classified as “beginning,”

1 See <http://826valencia.org/why-is-the-sky-blue/>. This story was also published in *Hot Sauce Planet* and the *826 Quarterly* Volume 21, available online at <http://826valencia.org/store/departments/books/>. For more information about 826 Valencia, see <http://826valencia.org/>.

Ashley Varady is program manager of 826 Valencia’s after-school writing program at Buena Vista Horace Mann K–8 Community School in San Francisco.

according to the California English Language Development Test (CELDT), a standardized state test that measures a student's English language proficiency. In addition, she is currently reading far below grade level. However, given targeted, small-group support and intervention, she is making tremendous growth towards achieving grade-level proficiency.

826 Valencia is a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting under-resourced students ages six to eighteen with their creative and expository writing skills, and to helping teachers inspire their students to write. Our work is based on the understanding that great leaps in learning can happen when trained tutors work with small groups of students to develop a strong foundation of writing skills. In our increasingly connected world, communicating clearly is a fundamental skill, and 826 Valencia seeks to help students develop writing skills to articulate their ideas and make their voices heard.

I was first drawn to 826 Valencia because of the way it helped students cultivate wonder, while at the same time providing support and intervention that would help students communicate in the real world. As a former classroom teacher, I was impressed with the way that students were engaging with the writing process in an authentic way and building skills that would help them in the future.

In addition to supporting teachers and students during the school day, 826 Valencia partners with neighborhood schools to help students develop the skills to write well. One example of these partnerships to support English language learners (ELLs) is the 826 Valencia Annex at Buena Vista Horace Mann (BVHM), a K–8 bilingual school in San Francisco's Mission neighborhood. This 826 Valencia program came

about initially as a result of the advocacy of parents in the school community who were seeking additional writing support for their students. This advocacy then developed into a partnership with school leaders from BVHM and staff at 826 Valencia, who co-designed a program to provide an intervention that supports the students' acquisition of English reading and writing skills. Through on-site programming, 826 Valencia was already supporting some BVHM students, and it was a natural fit to further expand that support in the school community. Now in its third year, the program continues to develop and evolve, growing from two grade levels to three, and now potentially expanding to support an additional grade level during the school day. Through regular evaluation, feedback, and reflection, the 826 Valencia program seeks to continually evolve to meet the needs of students and teachers in the school community.

As the program manager of 826 Valencia's program at BVHM, I support trained volunteers as they tutor a targeted group of third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade students to improve their writing skills. These students are performing below grade level and were identified by their teachers as being in need of additional reading and writing intervention. The students participate for the entire school year, which allows them to build relationships with tutors and to engage in writing more deeply.

The group consists of primarily English language learners with varying degrees of oral and written proficiency. The 826 Valencia program is delivered in English as a way to support the students' acquisition of English reading and writing skills. Although students write in English, the 826 Valencia program supports an asset-based view of language development, in which we recognize that the students are coming

to the table with knowledge and language skills in their primary language. The writing projects are scaffolded to help support students as they become more independent and gain confidence in their English writing skills. An example of this is the students’ “Where I’m From” poems, in which students explore their rich cultural heritages and how their knowledge of more than one language is a critical part of their whole identity.

Through 826 Valencia’s project-based approach, students are supported in their exploration of writing, and over the course of the year, build confidence in their growing academic skills. Because 826 Valencia is embedded into the structure of curriculum and planning at the school, the writing projects done after school can be designed to align with and support the literacy instruction during the school day. I regularly meet with teams of teachers and coaches during the school day to evaluate student writing, identify skills gaps, and develop projects that align with the writing being done during the school day.

For example, during a persuasive writing unit, the 826 Valencia students wrote imaginative stories about a day without any rules and then wrote a persuasive letter to their school principal, supported with clear reasons and strong examples, about a school rule they wanted changed. They then delivered these letters to the principal, confident in their arguments, and gratified that their voices would be heard.

This connection between creative prompts and scaffolded support helps students to develop key academic skills, as well as confidence in themselves as writers. As a result, the students are able to engage in the 826 Valencia writing projects in a supported, lower-stakes environment. As one fifth-grade ELL student reflected,

When I first started at 826 Valencia, I could barely write three sentences. Now I can write more paragraphs and full stories. Something that I learned from writing at 826 Valencia is that I can be more creative in what I think. It also helps me to write more. When I entered this program two years ago, I thought that I couldn’t do things. Now, when someone tells me we are going to write, I think, “This is going to be easy.”

Students practice writing in a variety of genres, taking each piece through the writing process, from brainstorming and drafting, all the way through to revising, editing, and publishing. Twice a year, students select a piece of their writing to be published in a collection of stories. The latest publication was called *The Hot Sauce Planet* and included myths, stories about new superheroes, and adventures in other worlds.² Because the book is professionally published, students take tremendous pride in their writing and gain additional confidence in themselves as writers who have original perspectives to share with the world.

The writing projects students complete in the 826 Valencia program are not graded, nor will their writing be used to determine their grade-level proficiency. Because of this, students are relieved from the pressure that is usually associated with writing and are able to write about what interests them. From designing unique characters, such as the “dofi,” a half-dog, half-fish who helps to save the world, to writing stories about journeys into

2 *The Hot Sauce Planet* is available for sale through 826 Valencia’s Pirate Supply Store at <http://826valencia.org/store/?p=3255>.

other worlds, where bubble gum is used to fix rocket ships, students are encouraged to think creatively and write about something that hasn't been written before.³

In addition, students are able to articulate their growth and their newfound understanding of themselves as published authors. As a fourth-grade student wrote at the end of her first year of the program,

My favorite, most fabulous piece was about a mermaid witch named Coral, who falls prey to a horrid curse. I think I have made this piece more interesting in one hundred ways. I can tell it definitely shows the progress I've made. I wouldn't change anything. Having been in 826 for one year, I know I have made progress. I used to only be able to write, like, three sentences, and now I can write stories that are four pages long! When I look back at the beginning of the year, it makes me think, "Wow, I can't believe that I've made so much progress!" It has made me proud.

In addition to reporting more positive attitudes about their academic success, students who participated in the 826 Valencia program at BVHM experienced accelerated reading level growth (as measured by Fountas and Pinnell reading assessments). In the program's first year, 74 percent of third- and fourth-grade students improved more than a year's reading level, in just five months. This accelerated reading growth is especially important for ELLs, who are often entering school below their grade level in reading and writing. With the targeted support and intervention that students receive through 826 Valencia programming, these students can continue to make

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3 For more examples of imaginative student writing, see the Student Writing Gallery at <http://826valencia.org/category/writers-gallery/>.

gains that will help them to reach grade-level proficiency in their reading and writing. I feel fortunate to be able to witness the journey of these students as they blossom into confident thinkers and writers and develop positive connections to their own learning.

After completing my first year in the program at 826 Valencia and working with the staff, teachers, and school community at BVHM, I have seen how much students flourish with structured support and intervention. With regular tutors to support them, both adults and students alike are invested in their progress and are able to celebrate student successes over the course of the school year. Whether it is a student who can now confidently put his pencil to the page and take off into a journey of his own imagining, or an ELL student who is able to practice spelling patterns and apply them independently to her writing, the students are hungry for continued growth and achievement. 826 Valencia seeks to cultivate wonder and help students develop positive associations with writing and their own academic success. When students can see evidence of their own imagination in print, they become invested in themselves and seek to write more.



Serving Refugee Students and Unaccompanied Minors: More Than Just Learning English

NAKACHI CLARK-KASIMU

A nonprofit in San Francisco partners with area high schools to serve immigrant and refugee students, including a growing number of undocumented, unaccompanied minors, who face not only learning English but also trauma and a host of other issues.

Unrest, crime, and poverty in Central America and other parts of the world have led to periodic migrations of unaccompanied children and young refugees into the United States. These children then enroll in U.S. schools – public education for all children, including undocumented children, is a right guaranteed by the 1982 *Plyler v. Doe* decision. Many of these young people have experienced intensive trauma and have legal, socio-economic, and other

needs far beyond learning English, which must be met for them to advance academically.

To help meet those needs, many schools have been reaching out to community partners who specialize in working with this population of unaccompanied minors. *VUE* guest editor Ruth López spoke with Nakachi Clark-Kasimu, former after-school coordinator at the San Francisco-based nonprofit Refugee Transitions, about the lessons and challenges of this work.

Nakachi Clark-Kasimu is the former after-school coordinator at Refugee Transitions.

Q Tell us a little about Refugee Transitions and its work.

A Refugee Transitions is a non-profit organization whose main service population are adults and youths described as “newly arrived” immigrants. This is a general term that incorporates documented and undocumented new Americans, as well as those who may have been in the country for a number of years but still need support to learn English, find jobs, or navigate academic systems – getting through high school and going on to college. Many of the folks we serve are family units.

How we got started, and what is still a big component of what we do, is providing home-based tutoring. We call it “tutoring,” but it’s not just academic – it also incorporates functional and life skills. We also work at schools, providing after-school programming at San Francisco International High School and Oakland International High School, and provide summer camps and work with other enrichment and functional curriculum service providers throughout the San Francisco Bay Area.

Our work at schools is funded by grants through the school district. The program I led at San Francisco International came primarily from a grant from ExCEL, one of the after-school providers to the San Francisco Unified School District. We are – for schools, at least – the go-to agency to provide the life skills and non-academic services that students need. But in our school-based after-school programs, the main focus is to first support students academically, with social skills as more of an extension of that.

The home-based and school-based programs are run very differently. Home-based volunteers have more agency and provide support that is client-directed and depends on the client’s needs: for example, for an adult

looking for a job, it might consist of going through job postings, talking about developing job skills, or building vocabulary. Home-based volunteers are asked to stay with their tutee for a minimum of nine months to a year. These are long-term, indefinite relationships that tend to expand to other folks who live with the tutee and who also need support.

For example, often tutors find themselves assigned to one student and end up tutoring a household made up of aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, parents, and siblings. Often there are multiple family members and extended family who have been here in the country for a while, and maybe there has been a reunification of family members, or maybe they’re the first ones here and others come into the home later. So these are very dynamic situations, but that sometimes translates into uncertainty and strain. Tutors can become a crucial support for the whole household. They are, for many families, the sole expert on what it takes to live in the U.S.

There’s a lot of overlap in the populations we serve between Refugee Transitions’ home-based work and the after-school work. We try to expand our wraparound model, where we’re serving the students both in the after-school program and the home-based model. One of my job responsibilities at San Francisco International was to identify students at the schools who could be referred to our home-based program. We encourage after-school tutors to also volunteer as home-based tutors.

In our home-based program we receive referrals from many agencies and individuals – we can get names from anywhere. So we do have students who are at elementary or middle schools or other schools where we don’t have programs, so they’re not getting that ELL support at school. In the schools

where we do have programs, we definitely want to foster that overlap with the home-based program.

Q What kinds of partnerships are needed to serve the “newly arrived” population?

A Partnerships between schools and communities are vital because the population is so diverse and the work is so dynamic. Every year or two some new dispatch will come from the government letting us know that there is unrest in a particular country, and we’ll begin to see that translate into an influx of people who will need services. As a small organization, we have limited capacity, so we work with other organizations, and each one has its specialties. We work with International Rescue Committee¹ and local community-based organizations such as Instituto Familiar de la Raza,² which provides medical and family services. We work with Catholic Charities,³ which is one of the national organizations that is recognized as a sponsor and can work with the government to relocate folks who have received refugee status.

The relationship we have with these organizations is two-way. They refer clients to us and also help with case management and provide services that we can’t provide, such as psychological services and medical treatment. Our volunteers are not credentialed teachers – if there are academic requirements, we would look to the school district to provide that kind of support.

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1 See <http://www.rescue.org>.
2 See <http://ifrsf.org>.
3 See <http://catholiccharitiesusa.org>.
4 For more about the Internationals Network, see <http://internationalsnps.org> and the article “Newcomer High School Students as an Asset: The Internationals Approach,” by Claire Sylvan in *VUE* no. 37, *English Language Learners: Shifting to an Asset-Based Paradigm*, <http://vue.annenberginstitute.org/issues/37/newcomer-high-school>.

Partnering with other organizations and collaboration around funding and service provision is critical to the sustainability of the work. Schools write grants for the after-school programs. Like all nonprofits, we are constantly looking for funders and need that influx of funding, so partnerships become more critical. As funds become more or less available, depending on who’s in the White House and the budgeting choices that trickle down to us, what we are able to provide can be very different. We are housed at San Francisco International High School now, but we had a gap in the past because we didn’t receive a grant.

Q Tell us more about the partnership between Refugee Transitions and Bay Area schools.

A A few years ago, both Oakland and San Francisco Unified partnered with the Internationals Network, based in New York, which comprises a number of public charter high schools for newly arrived immigrant youth.⁴ All students are within three to four years of entry. Our populations were very much aligned. At the negotiation of the Internationals expansion to the Bay Area, Refugee Transitions was at the table to talk about the work that we do. That’s how our relationship began – it started with Oakland International High School, and two years later when San Francisco International High School opened, we were there from day one.

Whether the students eventually transfer to a mainstream school or complete their education at the international school depends on student need. The students aren’t required to stay for a particular time. The main requirement is that the students need to be within the first three years of entry.

Q You mentioned that many of the students you serve are unaccompanied minors. What do education stakeholders across the country need to know about this population?

A There are some misconceptions about who these young people are. Identified unaccompanied minors have been intercepted at the border, typically coming through Mexico from Central America. These youths are involved immediately in the immigration court process. That looks different from the traditional view of the undocumented person who has been able to remain under the radar and not be identified by a government agency.

Unaccompanied minors are going through a court process to determine if they will be allowed to stay. If they have a sponsor they can stay – if not, they will be deported. It is a messy, crazy process with inconsistent support. Some youths have lawyers, some are defending themselves. We look at it as a “spoke” model, with the student at the center, and then there’s the immigration court, whatever family they may or may not have and be reunified with, the foster care system, the school district – all these different organizations that are very much aware of these students.

The work we are doing at the school sites is happening in tandem with a lot of other organizations that are becoming more aware of these students as their entry has increased. A research team from a local university interviewed all the ninth- and tenth-grade students at one of the high schools and determined who does and does not have legal services, which relatives they’re staying with here, if they’re going through a unification process, how old they are, if there’s interrupted education – that kind of information. Our organization is not equipped to handle the legal part. Where we come in at the school is to provide English language and academic support. Many

of those students are in the ninth and tenth grades – we push into some of those classes and try to link the students with home-based tutors and after-school programming.

Q What is unique about these students?

A There are certainly socio-emotional needs that drive a lot of the outcomes that we come in to address. Many of the students have had interrupted education, or have insufficient or no education in their countries. Many of them, if they are able, are working, so after-school programming may or may not be accessible. Their living arrangements can be challenging, so home-based tutoring may not be an option. There is a lot of case management and problem solving that I, as the coordinator, participated in – more so than the tutors. I would sit with school administration and teachers and learn what some of the causal factors were for their academic support, and I would then contribute what our organization could provide for those students, like a home-based tutor who could come to the school, or push-in support.

These students have been through some deeply challenging experiences. They all have been through detention centers – essentially incarcerated for crossing the border, for wanting to pursue a better life, for wanting to flee threats in their home country. Many have been to multiple centers. They may have been to a center in Texas and then been transferred to one in Virginia – each with their own bureaucratic pieces that the students have to navigate while being farther and farther away from any support network, and not being able to access services for a long time because they get moved to a new place. Then when they do land in a new school, there’s all of that time to make up, and also all that trauma to work through.

There's a lot we don't know about their experiences. We know they're here, we know they're undocumented, but what's less known is how long these children have been on their own or living with an extended family member or friend of the family, before they even begin the journey to the U.S. I knew of one student whose mother had to raise him over the telephone for about three years because she had come to the U.S. and he was still in El Salvador. She would call him every night and make sure he had done his homework and eaten. Eventually she was able to send him the money to get from El Salvador to California. He had to do that by himself – he walked through Mexico barefoot, since he lost his shoes on the way. These stories are difficult to tease out: there's the fear that once the students get here and want to be reunified with their families, child welfare authorities might label the parents as unfit.

Q Why do schools need to pay attention to this issue and recruit community partners like Refugee Transitions?

A Whether schools know it or not, our traditional model of how we expect kids and families to access schooling – coming in on the first day or before school starts, registering their students, filling out paperwork, reading the manual, knowing how school works – is very rarely the case for these students. They need creative and individualized support. They can come to the school at any time, any day of the school year. Depending on how districts place their students, they may or may not be achieving at grade level – usually not. The language barrier adds another layer, and these students have considerable socio-emotional needs that make their performance in the classroom look very different from other students. The students will also still possibly have special needs and academic learning issues that are much

more difficult to access when there is not a common language, when there's a fear of deportation, and when there's a court system to navigate, say, at fifteen years old, possibly by themselves without parental support. So there are a lot of layers and a lot of issues that schools simply can't provide – no single organization can – so a network of collaboration is key.

Q What advice do you have for readers in other communities who are interested in doing this work?

A Teacher training and curriculum development throughout the grade levels based on the idea of differentiated learning is key. Individualized instruction, assessment, and curriculum should be guided not by the curriculum or the objectives, but by student needs. That is *good* practice for all students, and it is *essential, critical* practice for ELLs – but it is *non-negotiable* practice for unaccompanied and refugee youth. Individualizing these supports creates more work and more layers of difficulty, so collaboration is key. It's important for supports to address students' specific needs as we learn more and more about what these needs are.

The needs also change as youth are in the country longer, experiencing this court system, which can go on ad nauseam, and as they age and become acclimated to U.S. systems. We want them to be infused with self-determination. We don't want them to remain dependent forever, but we do want them to be supported continually, many would say “from cradle to career” – I say “from cradle to self-sufficiency,” to being able to support themselves and others.

Funding is key, and I believe that it is only sustainable when it has been in partnership, when organizations that have specialties that can support these communities are not competing for these funds, but can be more specific

about their work and connect with other organizations that can do specific aspects of the work well.

It's important for us to choose and foster from *within the community* the people who will lead and advocate for the community. What I hope to see is organizations taking a two-way approach where they give support, but also train clients to take over the support work and become partners. Parents and family members are often silent, both because they feel like they have nothing to contribute and because they are ignored by institutions with the bias that we who are here in the U.S. and who are in these organizations know best how to serve the clients. But actually, the clients and the folks in the communities can do it better. We at the nonprofits and schools can read the data sheets, view the statistics, and use data-based practices to address student needs, but we can never know as well as the people who have lived these experiences – these youth and their families – what it is truly like, and what is most effective.

For more information on Refugee Transitions, see <http://www.reftrans.org>.



Habits of Mind: Forging University-School Partnerships to Bring a High-Quality Enrichment Curriculum to English Learners

AMY COURNOYER GOODEN AND KELLY CHASE

Boston University and the Malden, Massachusetts, school district worked with the community to support English learners and develop a curriculum around five “habits of mind.”

Take two kids from working-class families in Boston – and the granddaughter of immigrants from Portugal and Canada – and fast forward twenty plus years, when those kids with urban roots have grown into urban educators – a professor, a superintendent, and assistant superintendent. Bring them together on a phone call where they find they have a common dream,

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a willingness to learn from one another, and a commitment to and love of their students. The result is a successful proposal for the Massachusetts Gateway Cities English Language Learner Academies,¹ leading to the successful partnership between a university and an urban school district in Malden, Massachusetts, about six miles north of Boston.

A RELATIONSHIP FORGED, A PARTNERSHIP BORN

Educational partnerships between urban school districts and institutions of higher education provide a powerful means for enhancing student achievement and cultivating college-going cultures (Sandy & Holland 2006; Woloshyn, Chalmers & Bosacki 2005). Malden Public Schools (MPS) – where more than 45 percent of students have a first language other than English, and where approximately 60 percent of the student population is considered low-income – proved to be the perfect place to put a partnership to the test. The Boston University (BU) / Malden Public Schools partnership began with a conversation between Amy Cournoyer Gooden, lecturer at BU’s School of Education; MPS Superintendent Dave DeRuosi; and MPS Assistant Superintendent Kelly Chase.

All three of us shared humble beginnings that in some ways reflected a journey toward the American dream. Gooden’s immigrant grandparents made their way to Central Falls, Rhode Island – a city that recently received national attention for falling into bankruptcy – and made their living

1 Through the Massachusetts Educational Opportunity Office’s Gateway Cities Education Agenda, \$3 million in grants were awarded in 2013 and 2014 to address the English language development of immigrant and newcomer students in the Gateway Cities Summer English Language Enrichment Academies, held across twenty districts in Massachusetts.

by working in local mills and factories. DeRuosi and Chase were also products of working-class families, and through high school, college, and graduate programs, each worked multiple jobs while pursuing the education that would provide them with opportunities. Both ended up in the field of education, working closely with students in urban school districts. As educational leaders of one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse cities in the nation, both are advocates for enrichment learning experiences that benefit immigrant students.

Strongly identifying with the back-grounds of immigrant learners in Gateway Cities and deeply immersed in the field of language-teacher education, Gooden wanted to develop a program that would benefit English learners. She applied for funding from Governor Deval Patrick’s Gateway Cities Agenda, which would allow her to establish a partnership between BU’s School of Education and a school district, with a mission as outlined in the state’s request for proposals: to equip ELLs with essential knowledge and skills that will help them to navigate their way to success.

Gooden received the support of BU’s School of Education dean, Hardin Coleman, an advocate of urban education and champion of public school reforms, and guidance from BU’s dean of research, Scott Solberg, but she needed to find a school district administrator to embrace the plan. When she recognized the rich diversity of Malden’s schools and made that phone call to the Malden superintendent’s office, the dream began to feel like a reality. By the end of their first conversation, Gooden, DeRuosi, and Chase knew that they had stumbled upon something special, and it was this personal connection that convinced each of them that their partnership could mean a great opportunity for students currently challenged by

learning a new language, adjusting to a new culture, and attending to the academic demands of middle school.

The three of us recognized from the beginning that the stakes are high for Malden ELL students – especially for those living in poverty and otherwise deemed “at-risk” – to achieve academically in school. We were disturbed by the evidence regarding the persistent achievement gap in K–12 schools and how ELLs represent a vulnerable segment of the student population that struggles to achieve academically compared to their native speaking peers due to their unique linguistic, socioeconomic, and educational circumstances. But we were also invigorated by the challenge to create a specialized enrichment program that could tap into and align with their unique backgrounds while mitigating some of the issues they faced.

DEVELOPING A MODEL

Appreciating one another’s backgrounds and planting the seeds for a positive relationship created a promising foundation, but was only one ingredient in a bigger context. This partnership had to grow while the team also tended to the practical task of planning a model for the Gateway English Learner Reach for the Stars Academy.

We recognized that ELLs lag behind in academic achievement and have dropout rates twice those of native speakers (Ross et al. 2012). Yet we candidly discussed that instead of looking at ELL learner failure, we needed to focus on how schools’ programming could be re-structured to promote ELL success. We agreed that a successful program would move far beyond double periods for literacy and math. It would instead mean creating meaningful, rich, varied, and transformative experiences that honor and acknowledge the backgrounds and gifts

of each learner; creating a safe learning environment where everyone feels welcome and challenged; and exposing students to critical thinking, creative thinking, character education, socio-emotional development, and intercultural competence – essential components of preparing future global leaders.

We also understood that this project was bigger than any individual component or person. We envisioned creating a community of learners where each participant, whether teacher or student or university representative, could not only teach but also learn from others in the program. Content experts from BU helped create lesson plans, but they also learned from Malden’s classroom teachers about the practical elements that needed to be in place to ensure those plans translated from theory into practice. Mentor students working in the program initially thought that they were teaching their ELL counterparts the ropes of succeeding in school, yet quickly learned that those same ELL students who struggled with language had a lot to teach about perseverance, resilience, and global issues. And teachers in the program, who were already strong in content, not only taught participants but also learned new ways to bring rigorous curriculum to students who had complex, profound thoughts but lacked the language and confidence to articulate those thoughts. In this way, a constant circle of teaching and learning allowed for growth on multiple levels.

Finally, we believed that the larger community was essential to the success of the program. The outreach to and welcoming of parents, the lectures of celebrity guest speakers who had overcome adversity, and the participation of the larger community all contributed to a well-rounded education for students. The importance of this belief was validated regularly. In

one instance, the program’s bus driver took an interest in the students’ field trip adventures, learning about their backgrounds each week as he drove them throughout the Boston area. In turn, students considered him part of their group and made sure to include him in their lives, thinking of him when they made their lunch run and bringing back *cannolis* or snacks to the person who cheerfully brought them to their adventures in the city.

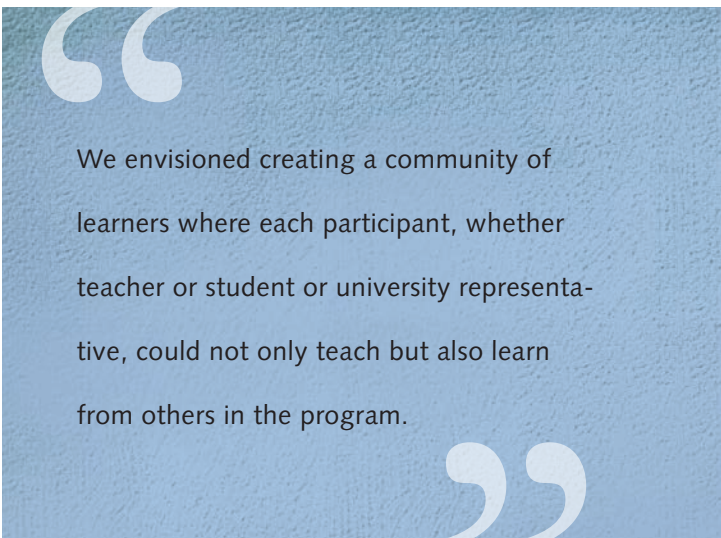
PROGRAM DESIGN
AND CURRICULUM

Leveraging the social, cultural, and educational capital of the partnership, we were able to include the expertise and input of university scholar-practitioners, university students, and Malden teachers, administrators, parents, and community members in all aspects of program planning. The design included innovative, research-based curriculum and instruction informed by Understanding by Design principles,² WIDA, and Common Core; an embedded professional development/coaching model that encouraged critical reflection of theory and practice and was comprised of blended learning opportunities as well as a co-teaching instructional model; and multilingual parent orientation and events aimed at increasing ELL parental involvement, student advocacy, awareness, and support.

The “Habits of Mind”

Rather than presenting our learners with watered-down curricula disconnected from their lives, Gooden built a curriculum that aimed to inspire higher order and critical thinking skills; linguistic development; academic learning; intercultural competence; and *habits of mind*, dispositions used

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2 See <http://www.ascd.org/research-a-topic/understanding-by-design-resources.aspx>.



We envisioned creating a community of learners where each participant, whether teacher or student or university representative, could not only teach but also learn from others in the program.

by highly successful individual and effective thinkers when confronted with a problem, especially one without an obvious solution (Costa & Kallick 2008).

Given the myriad learning and life challenges faced by middle school ELLs in Malden, coupled with the rigorous demands of schooling in a second language and new culture, Gooden infused the habits of mind into the curriculum as the overarching weekly objectives. Each of the academy’s five-week units of study featured a habit of mind (perseverance, empathy and listening to others, imagination, precision, or learning continuously) as the central, organizing theme. From there, all of the weekly readings, guest speakers, learning activities and experiences, and field trips built on that theme, and students were asked to draw connections between the materials as well as to their personal lives in order to increase their understanding of these dispositions. For example, students were able to read about perseverance; hear from Ishmael Beah, a former child soldier turned author, about how that habit of mind brought him from war-torn Sierra Leone to the United States, where he perseveres every day; and eventually demonstrate their own perseverance by telling their unique stories and performing on stage.

Integrated Curriculum

An integrated curriculum purposefully draws together knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values from within or across subject areas to develop a more powerful understanding of key ideas. In one integrated unit, for example, students were asked to examine and compare the examples of perseverance they learned about during the week which included a guest lecture by Ishmael Beah, United Nations Ambassador and author of *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*; readings from the works of Maya Angelou and Sandra Cisneros; and a field trip to the aquarium to explore this habit of mind in sea life. In one lesson plan within this unit, for example, students read the poem “Still I Rise” by Maya Angelou. In addition to learning the English language arts content objectives of similes, metaphors, and figurative language and the social studies objectives of civil rights history, they simultaneously reached language objectives such as learning Tier 2 academic vocabulary (adversity, challenge, perseverance, success) as well as the rhythms and word stress patterns in spoken English.

The socio-emotional objectives for this lesson were self-awareness and self-expression. Weaving creative thinking and the arts into this lesson, students were asked to write and recite their own poems about resilience or identity, and they were invited to then work with internationally acclaimed hip hop/reggae artist Delie Red X on the refinement, recitation, and rehearsal of their poems, which they presented at a poetry slam in the final performance for teachers, parents, and community members.

In terms of intercultural objectives, students were able to practice their critical thinking skills while examining issues of racism and sexism in the U.S. and in their own countries, discussing

all of the cross-cultural norms and values represented in the room – Vietnamese, Ethiopian, Haitian, Brazilian, and Syrian. In the afternoon dance class, the arts teacher helped students put together a step-dance choreography to the poem, which they also would perform at the final celebration of learning. Although challenging to create, we believe that an integrated curriculum leads to more profound and effective learning outcomes.

Socio-emotional Learning: Building Successful Character

Social-emotional learning is the process through which we learn to recognize and manage emotions, care about others, make good decisions, behave ethically and responsibly, develop positive relationships, and avoid negative behaviors (Zins et al. 2004). It doesn’t matter how excellent language and content instruction is – if the social and emotional needs of learners are not met, success in the classroom is difficult to achieve.

To equip students for challenges of cultural transitions and prejudice, self-awareness was taught through opportunities to learn about examples of strong and courageous peer models with great ethnic pride. They were given opportunities to celebrate and appreciate their own and each other’s differences. Some ELLs face tremendous extracurricular stress, including adjustment, missing family members, and financial concerns. The curriculum provided them with opportunities to learn about how to deal with anger and problem solving skills. Given these extracurricular demands and the added cognitive and linguistic demands faced by the learners in this academy, self-management – such as setting and achieving goals – was included as an objective in this area.

Malden is a highly diverse setting. Learning how to solve problems and work with others, especially those from vastly different backgrounds, is paramount to learning success – and was included in the curricular weave. Some of the life obstacles faced by Malden middle school ELLs are overwhelming – losing family members due to manmade or natural disaster, or not seeing parents or loved ones because of transnational migration of some family members and not others. The power of positive thinking was included as an additional socio-emotional learning objective. Participants were able to focus on the development of these social-emotional skills with role models – guest speakers and teachers with whom they could identify as sources of inspiration and tangible examples of personal success.

Intercultural Awareness and Competence Development

Researchers in the fields of second-language teacher education and multicultural education recognize the critical role that intercultural learning plays in facilitating language development and academic success for linguistically and culturally diverse students (Banks & Banks 2010; Kramsch 2004; Nieto 2002). Intercultural learning objectives were woven into the curriculum and explicitly taught to help equip our learners with the awareness and competence they will need for current and future cross-cultural success. The content and activities were designed to provide students with an understanding of identity and how it shapes us all; an awareness of how stereotyping, prejudice, and ethnocentrism stifles us all; and a critical review of diverse learning and communication styles and implications for learning.

The curriculum offered an opening to discussions aimed at developing students’ understanding of norms and expectations for participation in U.S. classrooms while validating their prior learning experiences. The uniquely diverse learner context allowed students to learn from each other’s rich cultural histories and perspectives.

Integration of the Arts

ELLs can benefit from a rich arts education experience, presenting opportunities to develop their language, literacy, and writing skills by interacting with different forms of art and media such as drama, film, visual and graphic arts, music, and dance (Latta & Chan 2010). We purposefully attended to enhancing learning through the arts both in language and literacy classes as well as by including after-noon theater, dance, and music classes that were also content-based and tied to the overarching weekly themes. The academy began with a kickoff performance by teaching artists from the Center for Arts in Education in Boston³ that helped students to start to interpret the academy theme and habits of mind and served as a model of the type of artistic performance that students would do for their final capstone performance of learning.

By integrating the arts into daily instructional activities, we believed students would be able to focus on building confidence, content understanding, and expressive skills in English while learning more deeply about related content. We believed that the integration of the arts would empower participants to fluently and confidently express who they were, what their goals were, and what they learned. Activities included theatrical and dance performances of short stories, making visual collages of

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3 See <http://www.bostonartsacademy.org/center>.

learning, and other opportunities to demonstrate their learning through the arts (e.g., role plays, visual interpretation of readings, and creating short movies). Students were welcome to include cultural artistic knowledge; one young student who immigrated to the U.S. from the Dominican Republic taught the entire class the history and art of the music genre *bachata* and helped the teacher co-choreograph students' final performance. For one of our field trips, the students went to Boston Improv Asylum to receive professional performance training from real actors.

Role Models

We believed that role models help ELLs stay motivated. Given the adversity that many of the learners face, we wanted to include inspirational guest speakers, teachers, and authors with whom they could identify to share their stories about overcoming the odds and navigating their way to success. In Malden, the majority of teachers who work with the ELL population are White females. To ensure that students had a variety of cultural role models, we also hired BU international graduate students from China and Brazil, as well as arts teachers of Haitian, Barbadian, and Jamaican descent so that students felt they had individuals with whom they could identify.

The academy also featured an inspirational line-up of guest speakers with immigrant backgrounds who could connect to the habits of mind themes. The guests included Moise Fokou, a Cameroonian-born National Football League linebacker; Mayor James Diossa, Central Falls, Rhode Island's youngest and first Latino mayor; and Pras Michel of The Fugees, a Haitian American hip hop icon, activist, and entrepreneur.

CHALLENGES: WHEN DREAMS AND REALITY COLLIDE

There was much success in the program, but there were a number of reality checks along the way.

Although both content experts and teachers were highly knowledgeable and committed to the program, that alone did not ensure that everything would go smoothly. Unlike Gooden, DeRuosi, and Chase, who shared an immediate connection, other staff members in the program needed more time to cultivate a relationship. BU content experts, wanting to be helpful, immediately went to work providing lessons that looked great on paper. Teachers, wanting to be polite, held back on informing the content experts that lesson plans as they were written might need tweaking to fit the needs of the learners in front of them. And as each group was sensing a disconnect, students were filtering into the classrooms, leaving the adults with feelings that needed to be aired and no time to do so. Clearly these researchers and practitioners had a lot to offer each other, but as we communicated with staff in the program, it became evident that the group needed time to work through this partnership.

We gathered the group early on to hear concerns, validate feelings, and point out that despite the differences and struggles among staff, students in the program were extraordinarily happy coming to the program each day. This made a significant difference and helped staff focus on the shared vision – helping ELL students thrive. Students never felt the “growing pains” of the program – a true testament to the dedication and professionalism of the staff. Lesson learned: Adults in the program were learners, too, and needed dedicated time to work through their learning. Building in adequate time and opportunities to establish strong relationships well in advance of

students walking through the doors would have aided the process.

At times, joining practitioners with theoretical experts presented challenges. With any new program, there are bound to be logistical glitches, and this program was no different. The program's classroom teachers experienced such challenges as scheduling issues or not knowing whom to contact for a discipline issue. The challenge of delivering a unique experience never attempted before was daunting, and they were bold enough to take it on; however, to tackle a new program *and* face logistical glitches had the potential to be overwhelming. It is important to dream and create a quality program, but it is also important to create a strong structure and establish stability within a new environment. When the down-to-earth details are taken care of, teachers are better able to focus on delivering quality instruction.

Throughout the program, we were constantly reminded of the importance of open communication among the administrators of the program that would flow to the district and university level. We expected that Malden staff would share their concerns and issues with Malden administrators, and that BU employees would feel a level of comfort with sharing their thoughts and exasperations with BU coordinators. But leaving the communication at that level had the potential to divide, rather than unite, the two groups, thereby eliminating the opportunity of creating real synergy.

To counter this threat to the university-district partnership took considerable time on the part of program administrators. Each had to resist the urge to take sides or assign blame. Instead, as occasional issues arose, administrators needed to work together to address the issue. Observing the administrators work together to resolve issues reminded staff that we were committed to the partnership. What could not be seen

was the often daily communication that occurred among the program's creators. While the time devoted to keeping the lines of communication open was considerable, it was essential for the survival of the partnership.

JOURNEY'S END AND LOOKING FORWARD

In the end, building a strong collaborative relationship between higher education and the K–12 level was but one highlight of the partnership. Data collected from students, staff, and parents provided validation that a strong partnership paved the way for success at multiple levels:

Students

Of the students who participated in the academy, 92 percent had perfect attendance for the five-week program. Academy students showed overall improvement in English language and literacy gains. Of the 46 students who had pre- and post-test scores on the W-APT – an assessment that uses a scale of six proficiency levels to measure learners' overall reading, writing, and speaking skills – 34 improved one point and 11 earned the same score. For a student to improve one whole proficiency level in such a short period reflects the intensive learning that took place in the program. In addition, student data from the portfolios and grading rubrics from in-class assignments revealed considerable gains in vocabulary and fluency for 89 percent of participating students. These results suggest that the twenty-five-day Academy did promote language and literacy gains for most participants.

- 99 percent of students said the Academy was “very important” in helping them learn English language speaking and listening skills.

- 97 percent of students said the Academy was “very important” in making them more motivated to attend college.
- 90 percent of students said the Academy was “very effective” in preparing them academically for the new school year (with the balance saying “somewhat effective”).
- 89 percent of students reported increased confidence in their ability to succeed.

Teachers

Data from interviews, observations, and focus groups with teachers showed positive outcomes for teachers.

- 90 percent of the teachers reported that they increased their curricular knowledge.
- 95 percent of the teachers said the experience helped to develop their pedagogical knowledge.
- 95 percent of the teachers reported gains in their intercultural awareness and competence

Several themes regarding teacher learning emerged from the data. Teachers felt they had gained: a sense of the importance of creating culturally responsive curricula; a stronger awareness of differentiating instruction; a greater knowledge of integrating standards and technology; and an understanding of the need to promote critical thinking. One teacher, for example, commented that students did not usually get a chance to discuss the habits of mind in class and felt that addressing these skills during the summer program would give students more confidence going into the regular school year. Another reported that her interest had grown in working with learners from different cultural backgrounds. Teachers generally felt that working with high school student

volunteers and English language learners in their classrooms helped them increase their leadership skills, hone their ability to establish routines, and build their capacity for grouping students for instruction. Finally, teachers stated that they had increased their skill at having professional conversations – a skill that they would carry with them going forward.

Parents

Efforts were made throughout the program’s duration to include parents in the educational process. We developed a parent breakfast program that provided information to help caretakers identify ways to become partners with the school; these events were all well attended, and we heard the following learning outcomes from parent focus groups:

- 93 percent of attendees revealed that they learned more ideas about supporting their child’s language development.
- 89 percent reported gaining confidence and ability to help their children navigate the educational system in the U.S.
- 95 percent increased their knowledge about and planning for college and career readiness.

THE VALUE OF PARTNERSHIPS

Creating a successful partnership was never easy, yet the rewards have kept these partners connected even though the grant funding was not available for 2015. For example, since the summer 2014 program ended, Gooden, DeRuosi, and Chase have collaborated on a number of professional development projects in the district. Though significantly smaller in scale and targeting teachers rather than direct instruction for students, these professional development projects are an

important step to keeping the collaborative relationship alive so that we are in a strong position when other, larger-scale opportunities to work together arise.

In the end, the habits of mind transcended the student curriculum and became part of the learning for the adults in the program: imagination to conjure up a program with promise and few limitations; perseverance to keep going when things weren't moving along perfectly; empathy when working hard to understand not only the students' experience, but also the point of view of other adults in the program; precision when developing

lessons that would inspire students; and learning continuously when reflecting each day on how to make the following day better.

In implementing a program that focused on teaching students, the adults in the partnership experienced the struggles, tension, challenges, and, ultimately, the profound joy of learning and growing professionally. And the ability to recognize and feel that joy in the work has made us see the value in partnerships for students and adults alike, ultimately leading us to a willingness to take a leap of faith into additional partnerships in the future.

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Empowering ELLs through Strong Community–School District Partnerships for Enrichment

JESSICA RIVERA, ESPERANZA DONOVAN-PENDZIC,
AND MARY JO MARION

A collaboration in Worcester, Massachusetts, between the district, higher education institutions, and community organizations, including a Spanish-language television program, provided culturally responsive out-of-school enrichment programs for English learners.

The English Language Learner (ELL) Summer Camp in Worcester, Massachusetts – an intensive six-week program that served middle school and high school students from Worcester Public Schools (WPS) – was the product of a five-way partnership that included the school district, higher education institutions (Latino Education Institute [LEI] at Worcester State University and Quinsigamond Community College), and

Jessica Rivera is the former monitoring and evaluation specialist and program coordinator at the Latino Education Institute at Worcester State University. Esperanza Donovan-Pendzic is the creator and host of the Spanish language television show Esperanza Y Su Éxito. Mary Jo Marion is executive director of the Latino Education Institute.

community organizations (African Community Education [ACE] and the Spanish-language television program *Esperanza y Su Éxito*). The ELL Summer Camp aimed to promote literacy skills, linguistic competence, and self-efficacy by integrating academics and community-based enrichment and, ultimately, to maximize students' potential for high school graduation and their preparedness for college and career pathways.

**KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL
PARTNERSHIP: VISION,
PLANNING, PROCESS**

The partnership was formed through the leadership and vision of key stakeholders: WPS Manager of English Language Learners and Supplemental Support Services Bertha-Elena Rojas, LEI Executive Director Mary Jo Marion, and LEI Assistant Executive Director Hilda Ramirez. Rojas invited key community partners to the table to discuss the framework for this program: CEO of *Esperanza y Su Éxito*, Esperanza Donovan-Pendzic; Quinsigamond Community College faculty member Deborah Gonzalez; and ACE Executive Director Kaska Yawo. Through these discussions, we agreed that the best and most comprehensive approach was to bring together community-based organizations serving immigrants and refugees, higher education institutions with proven extension programs designed for immigrant communities, and the units of the WPS charged with serving ELL students. After five months of collaborative planning, WPS applied for and received a competitive state

1 Through the Massachusetts Educational Opportunity Office's Gateway Cities Education Agenda, \$3 million in grants were awarded in 2013 and 2014 to address the English language development of immigrant and newcomer students in the Gateway Cities Summer English Language Enrichment Academies, held across twenty districts in Massachusetts.

grant as part of the Gateway Cities Education Agenda to fund the partnership for one year.¹

**WHAT MADE THE
PARTNERSHIP WORK?**

**Mary Jo Marion, Executive Director,
Latino Education Institute**

The process really matters. To be able to implement something of this scale and quality meant that the partners and the schools had to have a relationship and the time to plan and to think together. For me, here at our Institute, where we're part of Worcester State University and our work is centered around K–12 partnerships, this experience is a rare opportunity to think deeply with the district about how to improve academic and social-emotional outcomes for ELL students and families. This singular focus is something unique and valuable to this experience.

It became pretty clear that there are a lot of partners in Worcester that can contribute greatly to the outcomes for ELL students, but it's really hard for the schools to harness those partnerships in a coherent way. They really don't have the staffing or resources. So one of the early roles I took on was to organize the community partners so that there was an umbrella for the Worcester schools to deal with. That makes it a lot easier for everybody.

In large districts, it's messy work to organize and take advantage of the strengths of the external partners, but it really helps the quality of the work. Not only were we able to unite under a single community umbrella for the delivery of services, but the collaboration went deeper, and we were able to develop a framework and curriculum that leverages the strengths of each partner and engages students and families. This framework is still used by the partners.

For more information on the Latino Education Institute, see <http://www.worcester.edu/Latino-Education-Institute/>.

As the LEI program coordinator, I (Jessica Rivera) joined the team in the conceptualization stages of the program. In these initial meetings, all the community partners and WPS leadership discussed outreach and recruitment strategy, program structure, data-sharing protocol, and accountability. As the lead LEI program coordinator for the ELL Summer Camp program, I worked closely with all community partners in identifying strengths and areas best suited for each to contribute towards creating a quality program. During this planning stage, the ELL Summer Camp program greatly benefited from the honest and frank insights of each partner.

As the partnership grew, it became evident how to best cultivate these strengths to recruit families, students, and community support. At LEI we believe our strength is in working with English language learners and connecting with Latino families, which is why we took the lead supporting the organizing of Family Academy recruitment sessions. ACE has expertise in working with the refugee community and youth of African descent. They did a great job of connecting with families in the community with whom they had a year-round relationship. *Esperanza y Su Éxito* has the technical skills needed to create a dynamic, enriching offering for ELL camp participants. During the recruitment stage, *Esperanza y Su Éxito* presented various social justice videos they had produced with youth to show families some of the opportunities their child was going to have in the summer camp.

RESOURCES AND EXPERTISE

Since LEI and ACE both have more than ten years of experience in community building and support in Latino and African communities in Worcester, both organizations had culturally competent staff to work with the

diverse population of ELL students. LEI also has a successful track record in implementing relevant enrichment programs in Worcester Public Schools. This expertise in curriculum development aided the collaboration with Quinsigamond Community College and ACE in the creation of the ELL Summer Camp enrichment curriculum. Furthermore, LEI's incorporation in the Worcester State University campus provided collaborative partners access to world-class facilities ideal for instructional learning, equipped with projectors, round sound systems, smart boards, and other technology.

Our partnership with the district brought about additional resources and expertise that we normally do not have in other areas of our programs, such as a full-time nurse, an adjustment counselor, and teaching expertise in the areas of language acquisition. These elements were all essential to the program's success. Throughout the duration of the summer program, it became evident that the adjustment counselor was an invaluable asset in supporting our families and providing the emotional and psychological support for many of our students. The adjustment counselor aided students by conducting daily, scheduled, one-on-one check-in meetings with numerous students and by reaching out to parents to inform them of their child's progress. This additional support proved effective in helping to establish a safe and positive environment for both our students and parents to succeed in the program.

CURRICULUM

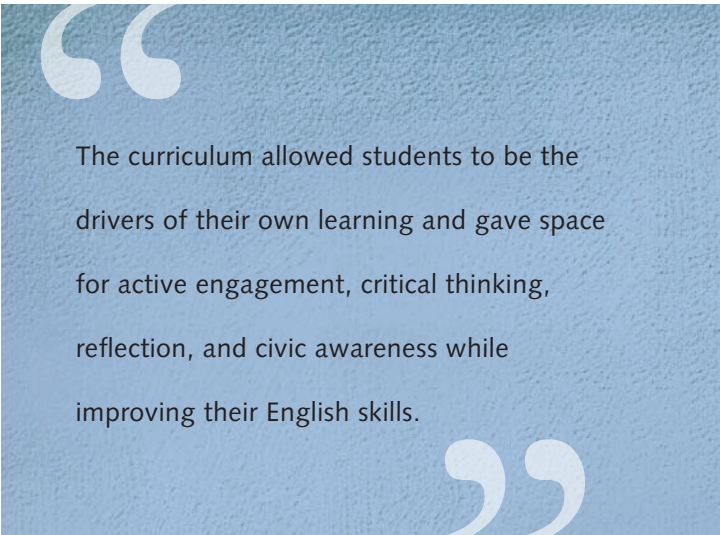
One of my favorite parts of the ELL Summer Camp program process was assisting in the development of the enrichment curriculum – My Voice, My Community, Our World. This three-module curriculum, each module running for two weeks, was designed

to empower youth as they work together in applying academic knowledge and skills to address real community issues. The curriculum allowed for students to be the drivers of their own learning process and gave space for active engagement, critical thinking, reflection, and civic awareness while using key literacy elements to improve their English skills.

Another key aspect of the curriculum focused on encouraging student interactions. During the beginning days of the program, many of the young people were shy; they were hesitant to participate in activities and unwilling to push their comfort zones to try new things. By the third week, students were more vocal and were able to fully express opinions and identify as a collective community issues they wanted to address. Students in the program began to learn to view themselves as assets in their community and agents of change. This process in turn increased students' self-esteem, self-perception, and levels of civic engagement.

This student empowerment was achievable by the safe space that staff was able to create throughout the six weeks; a nurturing approach was emphasized throughout the program. Staff made it a point to show youth they cared for them and respected youth voices, addressing any of their questions and concerns and encouraging them to share their life experience and points of view on sensitive issues. Staff demonstrated patience when young people were having a hard time grasping activity goals, created a judgment-free zone where bullying and teasing of any kind was not allowed, and celebrated each student's efforts through words of encouragement and praise at the end of every workshop. Relationship building between staff and students was essential to the success of the program.

By the end of the program students identified poverty, homelessness, and cultural diversity as the community issues they cared most about addressing. Their final community projects consisted of a food and clothes drive donated to local Worcester community organizations that serve homeless youth; educational posters placed in various community spaces; a student's wall-sized mural representing the various cultures that made up the summer camp community; and three documentary videos screened at the end of the program during a Community Expo event.



The curriculum allowed students to be the drivers of their own learning and gave space for active engagement, critical thinking, reflection, and civic awareness while improving their English skills.

Student responses to the community project:

To me, community means everybody works together to help each other. This is why one day I would like to work as a doctor so I can give back to my community and help sick people get better.

I try to help people by volunteering in the community in places people need help. And when people ask me why I do it even though I don't get paid, I tell them that I do it because I like to help people.

I have helped my community by working with my class on a homelessness project. We collected extra food and extra clothes to give to the poor. It feels good to help others.

Youth homelessness is a problem. My friend goes to school and in the afternoon she is staying in a friend's home. This is a problem in Worcester. We need to work together to help others in this situation and lend them a hand.

These outcomes represent the power of youth. When youth are given a nurturing, supportive, and engaging environment, they can learn the value of self and be better equipped to contribute to the greater society.

LEADERSHIP AND STAFF COHESION

As the LEI program coordinator, my many responsibilities included ensuring clear and constant communication, coordinating students' lunch, briefing everyone on emergency protocol for field trips, and other day-to-day logistics. I also provided a supportive structure for all staff who were new to our organizational culture.

My leadership style with enrichment staff focused on mentoring and coaching. Our enrichment staff was composed of ten individuals from three different community organizations and was reflective of the ethnic and racial composition of our students. Each staff member had an array of experiences and expertise needed for the success of the program. One way of cultivating these strengths was through implementing a series of trainings with community partners prior to the start of camp that introduced staff to the program goals, objectives, curriculum design, and expected teaching culture of positive youth development.

Furthermore, staff received training on cultural competencies, emergency protocol, stages of group development, facilitation skills, and classroom management. Throughout these sessions, staff were able to share areas they felt more comfortable in and areas in which they would need more support from the team. Once the program started, one strategy that was very effective and made the intensity of the summer program manageable was meeting with instructional enrichment staff once a week to review successes, challenges, weekly plans, and progress. These meetings were essential in maintaining leadership cohesion, uniformity of program goals, and a positive working culture.

One very important outcome from staff trainings and ongoing check-ins was learning the value of staff autonomy. Though staff were highly encouraged to follow the curriculum design, they were also encouraged to implement activities they felt were more relevant and would better serve their specific group of students. Some staff chose to exercise their creative freedom and implement different sessions while still maintaining the focus and goals for the modules. This level of flexibility in respect to program sessions enabled staff to have more buy-in in the program process and created more passionate instructors.

Some enrichment staff used poetry, music, video, painting, or photography as the medium to engage students in community projects and the exploration process. For example, one of our enrichment staff has a B.A. in English and really enjoyed poetry as the medium to introduce the daily goal. For the first fifteen minutes of workshop sessions, students read various poems and/or watched slam poetry videos. Students would have group discussion on deciphering the meaning of the poems and shared personal connections to the stories.

During the planning stages of their community action project, students identified cultural awareness as the community issues they wanted to address. Some students decided to write “self-poems” on their identity to share with others. In addition, the group also put together an all-inclusive holiday calendar representative of all ELL Summer Camp participants’ family holidays and traditions. See the sidebar on pages 43–45 for a description of one workshop, run by Esperanza Donovan-Pendzic.

These kinds of activities in turn allowed students to gain exposure to different art mediums as well as develop technical skills for self-expression that were not originally incorporated into the enrichment curriculum. I attribute much of the enrichment success to the passionate staff and the level of commitment in the curriculum design.

PROGRAM SUCCESSES

The strength of our partnerships led to a successful ELL Summer Camp program that served more than fifty ELL students. Students were able to attend five field trips to educational and culturally relevant institutions such as the Worcester Historical Museum, Ellis Island, and the Statue of Liberty. These trips were made possible because all community partners agreed it was important to provide an opportunity for students to learn and experience different places that have greatly shaped the communities to which we all belong.

These decisions were also influenced by the consciousness of our community partners. The majority of the students in the program come from low-income households and do not ordinarily have the opportunity to visit such places, so providing these opportunities was a very important goal for the leadership group.

At the end of the program we had an ELL Summer Camp Expo Celebration, with approximately 175 people in attendance, including Worcester State University staff, community members, media representatives, and, most importantly, family and friends of our students. Students planned and organized the end of the Expo and Celebration program, where several students welcomed parents and explained their artwork to guests. Students shared their experiences and built community awareness on the issues they identified throughout the program cycle and introduced community projects during the celebratory dinner.

This event truly marked and magnified the success of the program. The culminating speeches and presentations given by the students in front of such a large audience demonstrated the shift in confidence, both in language and self, that will help propel these students through high school and beyond.

At the end of the program, students and parents commented on how important this summer program was for them. The top four changes that students noticed in themselves since they joined the program were: improved English skills, improved social life, increased self-confidence, and improved writing skills. As students reported:

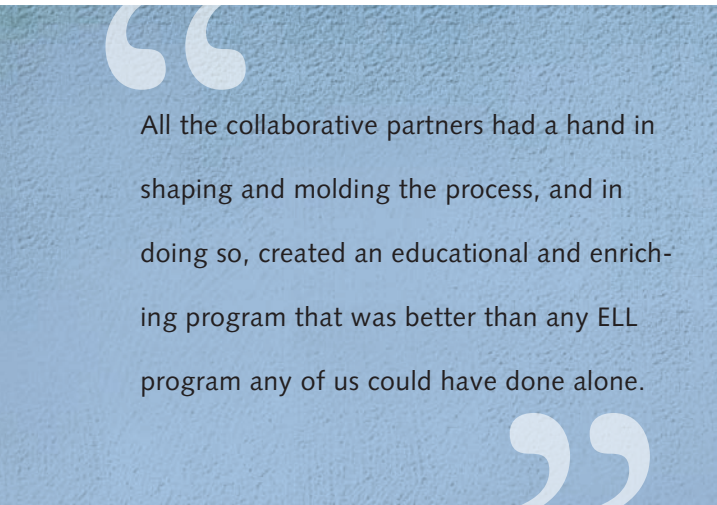
The changes I have noticed about me since the day I came here is that I am less shy with people and it is easier for me to spell things.

I am proud of myself.

I have made new friends and learn cool things about art.

I have more friends and I have learned more English.

The top four changes that parents identified in their child were: improved English, more communicative, happier, and more responsible. Parents commented that what they liked most



All the collaborative partners had a hand in shaping and molding the process, and in doing so, created an educational and enriching program that was better than any ELL program any of us could have done alone.

about the ELL Summer Camp program were their child's exposure to new places, child's improved English, and the supportive staff who were always available if they had questions. This feedback is a testimony to the great work of this partnership and the positive relationship that program staff built with families, integral to increasing family engagement.

LESSONS LEARNED

Having a clear outline of partnership roles and responsibilities is essential in maintaining positive relationships and effective collaborations. Throughout the ELL Summer Camp program cycle, power dynamics and responsibilities between program coordinators began to shift, and roles became unclear. This made team dynamics difficult moving forward because some coordinators were taking on more responsibilities outside of their scope. Fortunately, this did not affect the students' experience or classroom instruction.

Strong leadership is necessary when working in this level of collaboration. As coordinators, it is our role to bring people together, create frameworks that highlight each other's strengths, and provide supports in areas of improvement. Just as important, leaders should allow opportunities for partners to

incorporate their passion and add value to the program. This requires a leader to be flexible to changes. It is also important to take time throughout the program to celebrate the process and the small successes. This ensures that student and staff morale stays high and commitment does not falter.

The ELL Summer Camp program was a great success because of the passion and commitment of all the collaborative partners. All individuals were able to have a hand in shaping and molding the process, and in doing so, created an educational and enriching program that was better than any ELL program any of us could have done alone. The high level of success is attributable to the team's ability to bring complementary levels of expertise and competencies that aided in providing a comprehensive program.

When designing a program for ELL students, I recommend a program that creates platforms for students to exercise their creativity, civic awareness, critical thinking, reflection, and active engagement in the planning and implementation of the process. This type of framework builds students' sense of self-efficacy and resiliency, which are soft skills needed for ELL students living and learning in a new country.

“MY VOICE, MY COMMUNITY, MY WORLD”:
A YOUTH EMPOWERMENT PROJECT

Esperanza Donovan-Pendzic

From Ms. Esperanza’s class I learned how to use the camera and not be shy in front of the camera. I learned many good things in the classroom.

–ELL Student

As program creator and host of the Spanish language television show, *Esperanza Y Su Éxito* (EYSE), I have spent the last nine years developing a news magazine format that serves the Latino community in the city of Worcester, Massachusetts. EYSE is used as a vehicle for disseminating important information to this underserved community.

The 2010 U.S. Census showed that about 21 percent of the population in the city of Worcester is Latino, compared to 9.6 percent in the state of Massachusetts.² The Latino community is substantially growing. However, Latinos keep struggling for the use of resources and information to improve their lives in the city of Worcester. There is a lack of programming that focuses on local and regional issues affecting the Latino community. EYSE uses the medium of television to empower the Latino community.

EYSE’s staff consists of the following community professionals: Anthony Ortiz, Program Director; Elis Ortiz, Assistant Director/Video Technician; Lydia Fortune, Advising Consultant; and me. We served as coordinators and as trainers last summer for a special academic training workshop for WPS’s ELL students. EYSE’s training team also functioned as technical directors and editors, using video cameras to enhance the learning environment.

The EYSE television program has always maintained the objective of identifying the most effective way to communicate important information to minority – and specifically, Latino – communities. Relying on written literature was not effective due

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2 See <http://censusviewer.com/city/MA/Worcester>.

to cultural communication styles and language barriers.

Although EYSE was unable to find or collect hard data on the value of the Latino community viewing information rather than reading it, my professional experience has led me to several conclusions. First, while collecting data for my doctoral dissertation on EYSE’s impact on Worcester’s Latino community, it was clear that a level of frustration exists between Latinos and members of the dominant community in trying to communicate with each other. My having spent years explaining school notices and materials to families informed me that Latinos and other minority and ethnic groups prefer face-to-face or visual information, rather than written.

Although many legal documents and other booklets are published in the Spanish language, the information is not getting to the Latino community in Worcester in a usable way. This is not a problem of intelligence, competence, or ability to comprehend. The problem is identifying the most effective way to connect with Latino people and using media to create a face-to-face, verbal interaction instead of reading alone in silence (Davila 2001; Gudykunst 2004).

The main purpose of EYSE is to empower the Latino and other minority communities in the city of Worcester. EYSE provides segments ranging from those based on a culturally sensitive approach to information with attention paid to cultural values and appropriate presentation style.

Using my brainchild, EYSE, Bertha-Elena Rojas from WPS visualized and recognized the unique opportunity to use the video concept as a learning tool for our ELL students. Rojas, as well as LEI Assistant Director Hilda Ramirez, envisioned a concrete way in which our ELL students could overcome their hurdles by seeing themselves conquering their fears and also as successful transformational leaders in

the community. Most of our ELL students are affected by language barriers and poverty. Empowering and televising them was a remarkable way to teach the students that their voices mattered. EYSE's training team used the cameras, lights, and different processes of listening, interviewing, writing, and role-playing to help the ELL students to be involved in their own learning practices.

EYSE programming was structured to become a catalyst for change. The entire project was founded on the basic belief that communities need to be informed and educated in order to expect social justice and exhort social change. With this knowledge in mind, WPS and LEI approached EYSE in the summer of 2014, with a vision and profound idea of empowering WPS's ELL students. WPS professionals and LEI staff members teamed up with EYSE to create a six-week summer academic workshop that would help ELL students visualize their success.

The video cameras were instrumental in helping to promote a way in which the students could critically process information for and about themselves. This process helped the students visualize themselves as successful, empowered beings. The students' voices were finally being heard and televised to cultivate a sense of leadership. This practice assisted the students in improving their language skills and their perceptions about themselves.

EYSE's purpose was to link the academic program with the classroom curriculum. In this way the teachers, as well as community partners, worked together to create a synergy for the ELL students in the summer program. The training team first introduced the students to the skill of interviewing one another and learning to write down questions that they wanted to ask. Each student had five to seven minutes to take turns interviewing one another. Next, the students were encouraged to decide what group topics they would focus on for the rest of the summer sessions.

Once the students had chosen two topics

and had broken into two respective groups, each day was spent with the students working on their interviewing skills. Additionally, the students learned to write questions and research their topics at home. EYSE's training team modeled and helped the students learn to use techniques such as: (a) respectful listening; (b) how to skillfully set a collective agenda that sharpened the student perceptions of what a leader should be like within his or her environment; and (c) how to use education for civic and social justice, and social change. The students decided to focus on two main social issues as topics: global warming and world littering, and bullying in school.

One of the most exciting parts of the workshop was when EYSE trainers presented basic demonstrations to the students on how to operate the video cameras and also a brief overview about recording and capturing important events. Next, the students were able to individually experience handling the cameras and filming each other. Another highlight of the workshop involved the activities and games that they got to participate in often.

The ELL summer program provided a way for the community to build cultural and social capital. WPS, LEI, WSU, and EYSE cultivated, created, and empowered a cohort of ELL students, opening up the possibility for them to become strong leaders who could impact their community in the future.

At the end of the summer, EYSE's advising consultant, Lydia Fortune, edited and produced a DVD for each student, as well as the community partners. This step was crucial because the ELL students had a chance to see their abilities and skills improving while also sharing this particular process with their family members. Once all the video files were completed, EYSE presented the DVDs to WCCA Channel 13 Community Television for community viewing. The ELL students were thrilled and committed to developing their skills further. They felt that the

city of Worcester – and their parents – were going to be watching and supporting them in their endeavor. These students felt a great sense of pride. The summer experience gave the students a glimpse of how they can learn to take themselves more seriously and make better decisions about themselves and their future.

ELL students can capture the message of becoming leaders and can act on the message of empowerment because they can understand the visualization more easily without feeling discouraged by the language barrier. Television is a unique conveyer of visual information, since it combines the two senses of vision and hearing. While teaching this class, the crew of EYSE was focused on the message that becoming bilingual or multilingual is a strength, not a hurdle. As a facilitator, I observed how the students labeled as ELL moved slowly from detached boredom to full and active participation, growing more comfortable with speaking into the camera. They began to see the possibility of being catalysts for social change. This, in my opinion, will impact the future in the way teachers conduct the art of education. I have been so fortunate to see how one student improved his behavior and completed the course as a model student. I saw how this young man conveyed his feelings without acting out, with the possibility of being a catalyst for social change. I could see that he was able to communicate in an easier way, as well as develop an interest in cameras.

EYSE believes that empowering our ELL students is another way to create strong leaders and a stronger community. Educating our underprivileged students on civic and human rights is the essential tool in changing a whole structural system (Horton & Freire 1991). The concept of this youth empowerment project goes beyond educating young minds in the classroom to developing culturally sensitive leaders.

One of our students said, "I thought that my African accent sounds well in the

camera," as he smiled and realized that what mattered in this class were his ideas about saving the earth from being trashed by human beings. He took pride in becoming a part of the solution, not a part of the problem. Another young Latino student said, "I hope that other Latinos like me understand the importance of going to college. They can help their family and our community too." An Iraqi student shared, "I want other girls like me to go to college so we can help stop wars from killing and hurting our family members at home." These students were given the opportunity to overcome the negative perception about themselves and strive toward becoming leaders in their own communities.

This sense of leadership was made possible by offering ELL students an opportunity to participate in a civic process within an interesting classroom curriculum that fostered a sense of empowerment and commitment for the betterment of our diverse community.

For more information on Esperanza y Su Éxito, see <http://esperanzaysuexito.webs.com>.

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Academia Cuauhtli and the Eagle: *Danza Mexica* and the Epistemology of the Circle

ANGELA VALENZUELA, EMILIO ZAMORA, AND BRENDA RUBIO

An out-of-school program for fourth-grade English learners in Austin, Texas – jointly developed by the school district, the City of Austin and a local community group – has co-constructed a curriculum that incorporates the Aztec dance or ceremony Danza Mexica as a core component.

English learners are best supported when they receive culturally relevant content-area instruction in their first language. Numerous studies (e.g., Lindholm-Leary 2001) support this approach, and bilingual

and dual language teachers in our community of Austin, Texas, have called for curricular resources. In response, a group of researchers, community advocates, and former public school teachers established

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the community-based organization *Nuestro Grupo* (“Our Group”) in September 2013 to lead the effort.

Through a series of partnerships that included *Nuestro Grupo*, the school district, the City of Austin, university faculty and students, Mexican American scholars, civic and cultural organizations, indigenous leaders, and many others, we co-constructed a Mexican American history curriculum for fourth-grade Austin Independent School District (AISD) students who attend a Saturday morning school that we created and named *Academia Cuauhtli* (“Eagle Academy”). In the process, we – the researchers and community leaders – were transformed, and the curriculum we developed evolved into a deeper learning experience than we ever imagined. This article explains how this happened.

HONORING THE CULTURAL WEALTH OF OUR STUDENTS

Rather than treating the symptoms and purporting to “fix” our children to make them higher achievers and more engaged in school, we sought to advance learning in our schools and district through an academy and curriculum project that values and honors the cultural wealth of our participating students, parents, teachers, and local arts institutions in Austin (Yosso 2005).

Our evolving curriculum includes lessons on migration, civil rights, indigenous heritage, cultural arts, and local history within the broad context of U.S., Mexican, and transnational history, but with a focus on Mexican-origin people and other Latinas/os from the Austin area. This article is informed by the more recent lesson plans on indigenous heritage, cultural arts, and the Aztec dance or ceremony *Danza Mexica*, which we also sometimes simply refer to as *danza*.

THE DANZA CURRICULUM EMERGES: DEEP LEARNING AND CONNECTION TO FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

We found that valuable learning often takes place while learners are doing things that might not have initially occurred to us as we prepared the curriculum on topics like *danza*. *Danza* is not a relic of a distant past nor simply a source for teaching a dance and musical repertoire; it is a form of cultural maintenance and survival with a lineage that survived the genocide of native people throughout what is known today as modern Mexico (Aguilar 2009; Colín 2014).

These learnings have gradually come into greater focus as we contemplate the meaning of the circle as a fundamental aspect of *danza* (Stone 1975; Colín 2014). Rather than simply a geometric symbol, the circle as conveyed through the *danza* performance is powerful as an epistemology, or way of knowing, that simultaneously expresses a host of communitarian values and speaks to a potentially deeply felt history among the mostly Mexican children who are historically connected to the Mesoamerican peoples that originated *danza*.

While introducing children to ancient ways of knowing and experiencing life, family, and community – some are already familiar with *danza* through community and school events – the dancing in circle form also reenacts a sense of unity that pulls the concentric lines of formation into a sacred center of spiritual oneness. This contrasts with more typical individualistic experiences and feelings of isolation and estrangement from schools and society – and perhaps especially so in a city that is deeply stratified by race and class (Weldon 2015).

Guided by the idea of revitalizing the Spanish language and Mexican American culture in our school district and city, Nuestro Grupo entered into a legal partnership in December 2014 with AISD and the City of Austin to house Academia Cuauhtli on the beautiful grounds of the city's Emma S. Barrientos Mexican American Cultural Center (ESB-MACC). The ESB-MACC is a community-based cultural arts institution located along the Colorado River in the heart of downtown Austin and directly across the highway from historic East Austin, where a low-income, segregated, Mexican American community has resided for decades, but which is currently undergoing a contentious process of gentrification (Ward 2015). Academia Cuauhtli opened its doors on January 17, 2015 to predominantly Mexican-origin, fourth-grade children and their parents from three nearby elementary schools.

“THEY FAIL TO ACKNOWLEDGE THAT WE HAVE A HISTORY”: NUESTRO GRUPO IS BORN

The decision to establish Academia Cuauhtli occurred when a group of seasoned community leaders convened at the ESB-MACC on September 20, 2013. The University of Texas at Austin's Texas Center for Education Policy (TCEP), headed by co-author Angela Valenzuela, organized the meeting to discuss the issues of literacy, curriculum, and Austin's Mexican-origin community. The event took place against the backdrop of a growing statewide, grassroots movement to develop Mexican American studies in Texas (Diaz 2014, 2015), as well as major critiques leveled at the Texas State Board of Education, legendary for its conservative defense of a statewide curricula that systematically excludes historical content related to Mexican American, African American, and indigenous heritage (Erekson 2012; Zamora 2012a, 2012b).

TCEP invited two speakers to the September 20 meeting: Armando Rendón, a Latino children's book author; and Oralia Garza de Cortés, a renowned children's book advocate, founder of the national Pura Belpré Children's Book Award, and now a Nuestro Grupo member. Before an audience of Mexican American historians, archivists, librarians, scholars, local leaders, elders, and teachers within the district's dual language program, Garza de Cortés offered the following critical commentary with respect to children's book publishers located in the Northeast:

They do not seek to publish our work because they see [Mexican Americans] as a regional minority, and whenever they do publish us, they either portray us in ways that reinforce negative stereotypes or narrowly – always as immigrants embarking on citizenship. They fail to acknowledge that we have a history.

In reference to books in English and Spanish, Garza de Cortés added that these publishers overwhelmingly

get the language and, frequently, the aesthetics wrong, too. . . . They will contract out with a translator from Argentina, and their Spanish is different from ours, making the readings of these texts stilted. Yet the problem overall, literally for more than thirty years, is a sheer lack of books for our children.

The dual language teachers in the audience supported Garza de Cortés' commentary, saying that despite the district's claim to be a “dual language school district,” there are a lack of books and other curricula available to them. In this vein, another teacher offered, “We may as well be in the 1940s. All we have is what we develop for our children in our classrooms.” The teachers added that in instances where such materials are present, they

still do not feel confident using them. Lastly, they maintained that the children are alienated from school because of a lack of curriculum and teaching that speaks to their cultures, experiences, or history.

Elders from the community, including advocate – and now *Nuestro Grupo* member – Martha P. Cotera, responded by pointing to the originating documents of the ESB-MACC. Established in 2005, the idea of a Saturday school had always been envisioned. Expressions of disparity and needs motivated those present to form an organization, *Nuestro Grupo*, that would continue to work to address these problem areas.

The planners of the September 20 event expected a lively discussion on literacy, curriculum, children's literature, and the urgency for action, since our two major speakers – Garza de Cortéz and Rendón – and many members of the audience were known for their critical views on the subjects. But the meeting turned even more constructive when members of the audience began to ask what we could do. Co-author Emilio Zamora pointed out that “we have so many persons with the skills to offer solutions, all we need is to come together committed to creating change.” A group of us decided to convene after the meeting and prepare a plan for curriculum writing that would also attach to the teaching of Mexican American history and culture in the context of a Saturday school.

THE PARTNERSHIP WIDENS

Key to the success of *Academia Cuauhtli* were converging interests and broad-based support. Our budding project fell on fertile ground in two significant ways. First, district leadership – notably former Chief Academic Officer Pauline Dow – wanted to expand curricula for a district demographic that is increasingly

Latino. According to the AISD website, Latinos constitute 60 percent of youth in schools, as compared to 24 percent Anglo and 9 percent African American (AISD n.d.). A full 24 percent of AISD students are English learners, a good number of whom are immigrants. The ESB-MACC was equally motivated due to concerns that gentrification is impeding their efforts to optimize audience participation at its events and programs, including its after-school program put in place to ostensibly serve children attending nearby East Austin schools. In addition to support from the district and a welcoming, accommodating space, our project included faculty with expertise in content and provided teachers with relevant professional development and flexible schedules.

The development of our curriculum relied heavily on the efforts of Zamora, a history professor at the University of Texas at Austin. He had previously initiated the one-year *Tejano History Curriculum Project* as an extension of the *Tejano Monument project*, which erected a statue in 2012 at the Texas State Capitol as a tribute to Tejano contributions to Texas history and culture (Zamora 2012a). In the district, we worked closely with the Office of Academics, the Bilingual Education Office, the Fine Arts Office, and the Curriculum Writer's Cadre (CWC) of AISD teachers, which meets every June to develop curriculum for multiple subjects – increasingly in English and Spanish for the district's dual language program. Zamora, Valenzuela, co-author Brenda Rubio, members of the CWC, and the selected *Academia Cuauhtli* teachers also offered professional development workshops for AISD teachers.

Zamora, the project's principal content specialist, developed the first iteration of the curriculum, which the CWC subsequently aligned to state and district standards. This process ensured

“A deep commitment by all of those involved in Academia Cuauhtli to policy and political struggles related to identity, language, community, and the importance of our local history and institutions is foundational to all our efforts.”

that the curriculum was appropriate for each grade level and elaborated a curricular road map for Academia Cuauhtli teachers. Participating teachers rotated to avoid burnout, since all Cuauhtli teachers also teach full-time in their regular AISD classrooms.

ESB-MACC staff worked hard to make the space (two classrooms, a parent classroom, theater, and outdoor space) as accommodating as possible. We cross-promote and attend ESB-MACC events, which are often free and open to the public. This increases the number of opportunities for Nuestro Grupo members, partners, and Cuauhtli families to strengthen our bond and educational partnership.

Other key partners that have provided resources to Academia Cuauhtli are the Austin Area Association for Bilingual Education, various sub-units within the AISD, and faculty, undergraduate, and graduate students from five central Texas universities: South University, St. Edwards University, Texas State University, Huston-Tillotson University, and the University of Texas at Austin.

Nuestro Grupo also contributes to the effort of highly respected community advocates like Martha P. Cotera and

Oralia Garza de Cortés, as well as former public school teachers like Modesta Treviño and Velia Sánchez Ruiz, who facilitate Nuestro Grupo’s access to Austin’s local Latino arts community and institutions. They also serve as our group’s deep institutional memory regarding the poor conditions of education for Mexican students in our school district and the stories and histories of advocacy that, despite great hardship, created the political and policy space for bilingual education in our schools. A deep commitment to policy and political struggles related to identity, language, community, and the importance of our local history and institutions on the part of all of those involved in Academia Cuauhtli is foundational to all of our efforts.

THE NAMING OF ACADEMIA CUAUHTLI

A name like “Cuauhtli” is not automatically part of the lexicon for most Mexican Americans, ourselves included. Very few of us speak Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs, much less know about important symbols and terms like *cuauhtli*. This name nevertheless came to us through a respected local leader in danza named Rosa Tupina Yaotonalcuauhtli. We were receptive to the idea because of our association with the Mexican American social cause for equal rights and dignity, a movement that gives great importance to indigenous symbols and concepts that harken back to Meso-american times and reinforce a sense of collective identity.

According to the late Mexican anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, Mexicans who connect to this indigenous past constitute “*el México Profundo*,” or the Mexico that continues to connect with ancient traditions and a concomitant life of social and cultural marginalization

associated with the modern-day vestiges of colonization (Bonfil Batalla 1998; Colín 2014). Some Mexican people in the United States also identify with a Mesoamerican past. The farmworker's movement, for instance, adopted the eagle on their union label, banners, leaflets, and correspondence to signify the community's history of prior occupancy and a longstanding connection to a distant Mesoamerican past that finds expression today in the form of danza and indigenous forms of community organizing (Colín 2014). The danza tradition has therefore taken root in Mexican-origin communities in the United States, and the increasing numbers of danza groups are an artifact of migrations and transnational ties with their counterparts in Mexico (Colín 2014; Aguilar 2009; Poveda 1981).

A friend, Yvette Mendez, referred us to Rosa Tupina Yaotonalcuauhtli in July 2014 so that she could advise us on how to inaugurate our Saturday academy – and specifically whether the danza group that she directs, *el grupo de Danza México Xochipilli*, could carry out this task. Yvette explained to me (Angela Valenzuela) that to make this request, I needed to contact Yaotonalcuauhtli in person and that I should meet her with a gift of tobacco. All along, my intentions were for our inauguration to invoke through ceremony the spirit of hard work, reciprocity, and good intention that had guided the partnership through the many months leading up to our opening ceremonies on January 17, 2015.

Mendez subsequently invited me to join her at a workshop that was being delivered on the meaning of the Aztec calendar by *Abuela* (“Grandmother”) Tonalmitl, a keeper and elder of the Mexica traditions for more than forty years, who also happened to be Yaotonalcuauhtli's teacher of many years in Mexico City (see *Círculo Indígena Tlahuicoatl* 2015). *Abuela*

and *abuelo* are terms that convey special significance in the context of Danza Mexica traditions, connoting elder, erudite status. Gonzales (2015) maintains that these terms also reference what we might term an “elder epistemology,” whereby elders are accorded great respect, a phenomenon frequently observed in Mexican American culture – assuming that assimilation or subtractive schooling (Valenzuela 1999) does not minimize or entirely erase this orientation.

In great part due to my motivation to get to know Yaotonalcuauhtli, I found myself in the workshop that *Abuela Tonalmitl* was delivering at *Alma de Mujer*, a local retreat camp located on the outskirts of Austin. She spoke for several days regarding ancient knowledge that was at once expansive, complex, multi-layered, and complete. I mistakenly had thought that this ancient knowledge was fragmentary and that most of what is known about the Mexica came from the work of archeologists, anthropologists, and scholars who study the ancient codices. While much knowledge has indeed been lost as a result of conquest and colonization (Colín 2014), a significant amount has been remarkably preserved.

This knowledge has been protected to the point of being concealed and passed on from generation to generation. Certain individuals, like *Abuelas Tonalmitl* and Yaotonalcuauhtli, have dedicated their lives to its study, recovery, and promulgation throughout the hemisphere. Aside from a deep oral and, to some extent, written tradition (Leon-Portilla 1963), such elders have encoded much of the ancient knowledge into danza and have helped to preserve it over the centuries. A bit overwhelmed by this discovery, I nevertheless made an important connection to Yaotonalcuauhtli, who agreed to meet with me a few weeks later to discuss the inauguration of our Saturday academy.

After giving Yaotonalcuauhtli the gift of tobacco and explaining to her the kind of school that we wanted to become, she suggested the name “Cuauhtli,” which means “eagle” in Nahuatl. She saw that we wanted to cultivate in children critical capacities and analytical power through our curriculum in order for them to effectively combat injustice in their own lives, as well as that of their communities. We discussed the importance of a “bird’s-eye view” that doesn’t get lost in the clouds, but rather is able to zero in on its prey with laser-like precision. “The *águila* (“eagle”) is also a sign of rejuvenation and is revered across many cultures over time,” she said.

I took all of this back to Nuestro Grupo in our first meeting in fall 2014, explaining to them what I had learned. Members of Nuestro Grupo had previously drawn on Mexica symbolism by adopting the *concha* (“shell”) as our organization’s symbol. We liked that it represented an ancient summoning of the community to forge common purpose. The symbol of the eagle seemed a natural extension of that decision, and after voting, we chose the name Cuauhtli. We were drawn to two aspects: the eagle’s capacity for rejuvenation through the molting process, where they lose a third of their plumage; and the eagle’s singular, 360-degree vision capacity.

We, too, seek to be rejuvenated by our curriculum so that children can experience Academia Cuauhtli as a happy, inspiring place. We feared most the possibility that the children would lose interest or not find our curriculum to be engaging. Yet how could we accomplish this if we ourselves were not also motivated and inspired? We all hold full-time jobs, and the bulk of our efforts to date have been on a voluntary basis. The eagle’s capacity for rebirth has therefore had enduring meaning for us as a symbol of recommitting and re-equipping ourselves for change in

the classroom.

With these things in mind, we initiated *flor y canto*, a philosophical statement of beauty and commitment to live life well, originating in Mexica tradition, and that literally translates into “flower and song.” At the beginning of every Nuestro Grupo meeting, someone shares a thought, verse, or song that is personally inspiring together with an explanation of its significance to our lives and work. This practice sets a cooperative tone for every meeting we hold and by all accounts motivates a positive, constructive energy and thought process.

Regarding the eagle’s 360-degree vision, we came to see Nuestro Grupo as its embodiment. Because of the intergenerational makeup of our group, which consists of highly respected elders who are not only deeply interconnected with the Austin community but also command great knowledge, experience, intelligence, and wisdom, we came to realize our capacity as a group to carry out the many tasks associated with this work. In such a space, where each person holds distinct talents and where every talent counts for the overall initiative, the value of each individual is affirmed.

PREPARING CHILDREN FOR DANZA AND THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF THE CIRCLE

The idea of the 360-degree vision is key to the epistemology of the circle as a way of knowing and being in the world: working together as a community, accompanied by the implicit protection and clear vision that the bird’s-eye view evokes. Danza came to find a home in our academy, curriculum, and praxis that we could not have predicted beforehand.

At Academia Cuauhtli’s inaugural festivities, Grupo Xochipilli, with Yaotonalcuauhtli directing, performed a

culminating ceremony to the aromatic smell of *copal*, burned incense that continues to be used today in a way that is little different from that of our pre-Columbian, Mesoamerican ancestors (Colín 2014). It followed music and dance performances by legendary Tejano conjunto artist Joel Guzmán, adult and student mariachi groups, and student folk dance ensembles. The hour-long ceremony transfixed the audience, particularly the fourth-grade children that we had recruited. One of the parents commented that he had participated in danza in his younger years, while growing up in Mexico.

Some of us in Nuestro Grupo discussed the possibility of making danza a formal part of the curriculum and invited Yaotonalcuauhtli to attend our Nuestro Grupo meeting. This overture turned out to be very emotional since the direction that we would be taking in the curriculum constituted, for some, a privileging of an indigenous identity from the central part of Mexico over other cultural expressions in Texas. The response represented a recognition of a cultural affinity towards a shared ancient past, as well as the realization that we would be learning and sharing with the children meanings from this valued past.

After a deep and frank discussion about the personal and curricular meaning of incorporating danza into the classroom and within Nuestro Grupo, we have come to understand that the 360-degree vision of the eagle not only brought Yaotonalcuauhtli into our orbit, but also brought an entire community of *danzantes* (“dancers”) to Cuauhtli, who together with Nuestro Grupo have strengthened our bonds of family and community, which now finds expression in our curriculum.

While this lesson plan draws organically from the practice of danza, it also

borrows from other texts to flesh out basic understandings of indigenous ways of knowing – especially those related to the core concept of the circle in indigenous scholarship and thought (Gunn Allen 1986; Graham Crofoot & Crofoot 2002; Klug & Whitfield 2003). Danza represents not only a form of dance that is integral to ceremony but also a view that is rooted in ancient, Mesoamerican history. The performance acquaints the *danzante* with not only a different way of knowing – because through danza and ritual, one enacts its coalescing, egalitarian values – but also a different way of being in the world through the tangible experience of connectedness to others, as well as to something much larger than all *danzantes* combined: a “moving habitat” that danza inspires (Colín 2014).

According to Yaotonalcuauhtli (2015), our abuelos and abuelas were very wise and intelligent, and they created danza to acknowledge the importance of the circle and all that it teaches us in order to live our lives – harmoniously, peacefully, and in balance in every way.

The first, most inner circle is that of the family. The second circle consists of the schools where students have their teachers, principals, and friends. The third and outermost circle is called the church or community and it includes our Academia Cuauhtli Saturday school.

Circles are important to the natural world: the sun, moon, and Earth are circles, with the Earth inside the circles of the sun and the moon. In a circle, all can see each other. No one is greater or lesser. All are equal. There is always an order. Danza requires discipline for entering into that order. If the circle moves to the left, the *danzante* has to move to the left; if to the right, the *danzante* must similarly follow. Danza is an implicit and explicit recognition of a divine order based

on an understanding of cycles or circles and the importance of these to health and well-being. According to Yaotonalcuauhtli,

Our people loved metaphors and analogies, so the elders say that danza is itself a “living codice.” We are emulating the movement of the planets, stars, animals, and humans. We are communicating when we dance. And we aspire to have order in movement.¹

This is a window to the indigenous component of the curriculum that was taught to as many as thirty-three students (when all were in attendance) nominated by the principals from Metz, Sanchez, and Zavala elementary schools. Except for holidays, they attend for three hours every Saturday morning of the school year. Classes are in Spanish and include topics not often taught in depth at the elementary level, such as the various indigenous groups of Texas, the role of Tejanos in the Texas revolution, the Chicano art movement, and the traditions and cultural heritage of their ancestors, of which this lesson on the circle is a part.

Members of Nuestro Grupo participate in the learning process primarily with discussions during two types of gatherings. They join in the weekly planning meetings when the curriculum writers and the teachers agree on the classroom activities and their learning objectives. The curriculum writers, teachers, and other members of Nuestro Grupo also convene once a week to address logistical issues and to share the meaning of the work that we do, including the collective spirit embodied in danza as a cultural practice and classroom activity.

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¹ Yaotonalcuauhtli, R. T. 2015. Personal communication.

A COMPELLING CONNECTION
TO AN ANCIENT PAST

When we first reached out to Rosa Tupina Yaotonalcuauhtli, we could not have predicted that she would gift us with our name and ultimately direct our fourth-grade children in danza itself. We also could not have predicted our own transformation that occurred through our deeper engagement with danza. At least one member of our group is now a member of Grupo Xochipilli, and several among us participate in *temazkales* (“sweats”) that are organized by Grupo Xochipilli. In addition, Angela Valenzuela joined members of Grupo Xochipilli at a three-day danza ceremony in Mexico that takes place annually at Cuahtemoc’s grave in Ixcateopan, Guerrero, to celebrate his birthday.

Our curriculum writers plan to incorporate this instruction into the road map for the coming year, while others among us continue to study it. Most of all, everyone is celebrating the children’s and our community’s embrace of danza. Through the dance steps, drumbeats, ceremonies, and the cleansing scent of the ever-present copal, what persists, if mysteriously so, is the epistemological power of an ineffable, heartfelt connection to an ancient past. This past not only survives into the twenty-first century, but retains a compelling beauty, authority, and soulfulness to attract a new generation – just as it has for centuries.

For more information about Academia Cuauhtli, see <http://www.facebook.com/AdademiaCuauhtli>.

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