



Practices and Approaches of Out-of-School Time Programs Serving Immigrant and Refugee Youth

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Abstract: Opportunity to participate in an out-of-school time program may be a meaningful support mechanism towards school success and healthy development for immigrant and refugee children. This study extends existing research on best practices by examining the on-the-ground experiences of supporting immigrant and refugee youth in out-of-school time programs. Findings from semi-structured interviews with program directors in 17 Massachusetts and New Hampshire programs suggest a number of program strategies that were responsive to the needs of immigrant and refugee students, including support for the use of native language as well as English, knowing about and celebrating the heritage of the students' homeland, including on staff or in leadership individuals with shared immigrant background, and giving consideration to the academic priorities of parents. The development of such intentional approaches to working with immigrant and refugee youth during the out-of-school time hours will encourage enrollment of, and enhance effectiveness with, this vulnerable population.

Introduction

U.S. Census data estimates that over 40 million foreign-born individuals reside in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). These include immigrant families seeking better economic conditions, and refugee families fleeing war and atrocities. For many parents, migration provides financial opportunity and the path to educational opportunities for their children (Hagelskamp, Suárez-Orozco, & Hughes, 2010). Yet, immigrant and refugee youth can face unique challenges related to language proficiency, differing levels and rates of acculturation, and English language learning (Morse, 2005). Regardless of their socio-economic status, immigrant and refugee youth and families often start from a position of social disadvantage. These are students who may lack preparation for the basics of elementary education, and face

greater challenges in learning English than their better prepared (both English proficient and English Language Learning [ELL]) peers (August, & Hakuta, 1997). They may frequently face challenges in school such as struggles to balance differing value systems of home and school cultures (Rotich, 2011; Takanishi, 2004) and lack needed support to bridge dual cultures (Shields, & Behrman, 2004). Immigrant and refugee children also often attend schools in high poverty areas (Orfield, & Yun, 1999), which lack adequate resources and teacher training (Rong, & Prissle, 1998). Youth faced with these barriers may disengage from school or become discouraged from future learning opportunities (Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2003). These obstacles leave many immigrant and refugee youth at risk of not receiving sufficient education and other human services to enable them to become independent, successful, productive adults (Rotich, 2011).

Much work has been done to examine the challenges for immigrant and refugee youth in formal school programs (Morse, 2005; Porche, Fortuna, & Rosenberg, 2009; Rotich, 2011) and how schools can address the needs of immigrant and refugee youth (Birman, Trickett, & Bacchus, 2001; Green, Rhodes, Hirsch, Suárez-Orozco, & Camic, 2008). Some school-based recommendations to support immigrant and refugee students are: hiring bilingual teachers, which can provide benefits to both English language learners and native English speakers (Hernandez, Denton, Macartney, & Blanchard, 2012), recognizing the challenges immigrant and refugee students and their families face (Suárez-Orozco, Bang, & Onaga, 2010), and enhancing teacher training to identify and support the needs of diverse immigrant and refugee students and families (Takanishi, 2004).

Out-of-school time (OST) programs that complement school-based learning by fostering positive socioemotional and academic outcomes (Durlak, & Weissberg, 2007; Wong, Go, & Murdock, 2002) may also provide valuable support for immigrant and refugee youth. Multiple studies have shown a number of positive outcomes for afterschool programs pertaining to cultural inclusion (Williams, 2001), socialization with peers (Wong, et al., 2002), and positive social-emotional outcomes (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010). These positive findings are particularly important for children who also experience the challenges of adjustment to the United States, especially for those whom the U.S. educational system is much different from that of their home country. Some research suggests that OST time programs can also “lessen the effect of social disparities and increase the quality of life in communities” (California Tomorrow, 2003. p. 6). Wong and Murdock (2002) emphasize the value of the afterschool program environment as a setting where youth can learn how to deal with racial, ethnic, and language differences among their peers, skills which may have particular relevance for immigrant youth, who are also likely to be youth of color from low-income families (Passel, 2011). Lazarín (2008) notes the importance of OST for English language learners to acquire both language and content skills, as they have more to learn to catch up with other students, with less time to gain these skills. Therefore, opportunities to fully participate in OST programs may be a meaningful support mechanism towards school success and healthy development for immigrant and refugee children.

Emerging research on OST programs has begun to identify ways that OST programs might best address the needs of participating immigrant and refugee youth and families. Harris (2004) points to the importance of continuous evaluation that allows flexibility and responsiveness to the community’s specific cultural needs, providing special activities that are inclusive and welcoming to immigrant youth and families, and hiring staff that share culture and language with immigrant youth. Similarly, Easter and Refki (2004) document the importance for OST programs to reflect specific attributes of the immigrant communities they serve, which often

value community needs over individual needs. Birman and Chan (2008) report that culturally sensitive staff should understand the family values and language as well as the immigration circumstances of a particular family and immigration-related (acculturation, immigration, traumatic) stress. Finally, some research suggests that afterschool programs with a focus on immigrant youth can be most effective when using a strength-based perspective, focusing on “the constructive assets they seek to build, rather than the negative behaviors they seek to avoid” (Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services, 2009, p.4).

The current study extends existing research on best practices for OST work with immigrant and refugee families by examining the on-the-ground strengths and challenges of supporting immigrant and refugee youth in OST programs. Through a multi-site exploration of concrete practices and approaches in a diverse set of OST programs in Massachusetts and New Hampshire, this work broadens the base of research beyond case studies (Peercy, Martin-Beltran, & Daniel, 2013) to a larger-scale overview of OST practices and challenges. This work expands the scope of OST research on supports for immigrant and refugee youth, and furthers understanding of how programs in daily practice respond to the needs of students and families, as well as the approaches to staffing, relationship building, language and acculturation, and academic support in which they engage.

Methods

Site Recruitment

This exploratory study used purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990) for program recruitment targeting OST programs which enrolled immigrant and refugee children and youth. Researchers conducted a website and internet search to identify potential OST study sites in targeted urban regions of eastern and western Massachusetts with large immigrant populations. Additional web-based searches and team-based referrals were used to identify community-based cultural organizations in the target regions, including an urban site in New Hampshire, which offered educational and social support to immigrant youth and families. School district bilingual and special education personnel were also contacted for program referral, along with district coordinators of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers programs. These afterschool programs are school-based federally supported programs providing academic enrichment opportunities during non-school hours especially for children who attend high-poverty and low-performing schools. Research staff contacted the full pool of 120 programs directly by phone using a pre-screening protocol which included questions related to size of program, estimated percent of recent immigrant or refugee youth (arrived in U.S. within one year) attending the program, and willingness for a director interview on site. Thirty-two (32) of the programs responded after several communications from the research team. Seventeen (17) programs met inclusion criteria (reported direct service to refugee and immigrant youth) and agreed to participate.

In some of the sites, program directors had overstated the participation of recent immigrant children and interpreted the term “recent immigrant” to include second generation immigrant children or even just simply considered any “multicultural child” as a recent immigrant participant. The pre-screening criteria were refined to include specific inquiry into the number of English Language Learners regularly attending the afterschool program.

Sample

The 17 OST programs in the sample (see Table 1), according to program enrollment data, enrolled immigrant and refugee children from the immigrant and refugee populations most

represented today in the Massachusetts (Massachusetts Executive Office of Health and Human Services, 2014) and New Hampshire communities. Programs operated under the auspices of diverse organizations: local branches of national organizations (Local branch), city sponsored parks and recreation departments (Parks & rec.), school districts (School-managed), community-based organizations (CBO), and both established and grassroots immigrant/refugee founded organizations (Immigrant/refugee founded).

Table 1
Program descriptions for sample

Program Description	Identification Label in text	Grade Range	Ethnic Background of Youth	Languages of Youth
Immigrant Director and Staff	CBO	K-8	Ethiopia, China, Nepal, the Philippines, Korea, Latin America	mostly English
National Agency	Local branch	6-8	Cape Verdean, Vietnamese, Haitian, Dominican	English, Vietnamese, Spanish, Haitian Creole
Immigrant Run/Founded	Immigrant/refugee founded	K-6	Chinese, other Asian	Cantonese, Mandarin, English
School-based	School-managed	K-5	Latino	Spanish/English
National Agency	CBO	K-7	Iraq, Brazil, Dom. Republic, Mexico, Guatemala, Haiti, Portugal, Honduras, Russia	Spanish/English, Russian, Creole, Portuguese, Arabic
School-based	School-managed	K-5	Haiti, Creole, Vietnam, Asia, Middle East, African American	Spanish, Arabic, Creole,
Immigrant Founded	Immigrant/refugee founded	6-12	Latino: Dominican and Puerto Rican	Spanish and English
Immigrant Founded	Immigrant/refugee founded	6-12	Latino, Columbia, Guatemala, Honduras, Dominican Republic, Mexico, Lithuania	Spanish
Seven partner ethnic immigrant agencies	CBO	6-12	Latino, African Refugees; Bhutan, Burma, Iraq, Soviet Union	Over 20 languages
City Parks and Recreation	Parks & rec.	6-8	White American, Latino/a	English, Spanish
City Parks and Recreation	Parks & rec.	5-8	Latino, American, African, African American	English, Spanish
Immigrant Founded	Immigrant/refugee founded	K-8	Vietnamese, Cape Verdean	Vietnamese, Cape Verdean, English
School-based	School-managed	K-6	Cape Verdean, Portuguese, Cambodian, Latino	Port, English, Spanish
Refugee Founded	Immigrant/refugee founded	6-12	African refugees	English, Swahili, Kirundi, Arabic, other African language
National Agency	Local branch	K-8	Latino, Haitian, African, African American	Spanish, Haitian Creole, African languages
School-based	School-managed	K-5	Vietnamese, Cape Verdean, Haitian, Jamaican, Guyanese. Latino, African American, Asian, European American	Spanish, Vietnamese
National Agency	Local branch	3-8	Latino, African American, Asian, European American, African, Arab American	English, Spanish, Arabic, African Dialects

Procedure and Protocols

Directors participated in a 40 to 60 minute interview with one of the researchers at the program site. Each program received a \$50 gift card in appreciation for participation. All procedures were approved by the Wellesley College IRB. Researchers obtained information on student attendance, staffing, demographics, and language use from program staff. A semi-structured protocol was used to (1) obtain information about the range and characteristics of immigrant and refugee youth served, (2) describe staffing and professional development related to support of immigrant and refugee youth, (3) describe program areas and/or content that specifically supports these youth; and (4) identify strategies for supporting immigrant and refugee youth and families, as well as barriers and challenges. Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed for analysis.

Analysis

Analytical Method

Analyses were conducted using NVivo8 qualitative software (QSR International) to facilitate our process of creating interpretive codes (Miles, & Huberman, 1994). Our qualitative analyses were intended as an exploratory-needs assessment designed to increase our understanding of the needs, and program response to, immigrant and refugee youth. We first read through each transcript and identified the topic-level or "bucket" codes (Harry, Sturgis, & Klinger, 2005) for the semi-structured interview questions. We then reviewed the transcript output for each of these buckets and began to describe initial themes. Because we found that overarching themes were identified across responses to various questions, we conducted a second level of meaning coding, as agreed on by the research team.

Findings

Parent and family interactions

Almost all program directors (94%) identified relationship building with families as a key component of providing support for immigrant and refugee youth and families in their programs. Program directors discussed engagement strategies such as initiating one-on-one parent contact, using translation and/or interpretation assistance, being knowledgeable about family culture, and hosting family events. Several directors described "family night" events as ways to include parents in an evening event that did not require English language proficiency. Eighty-eight percent (88%) of directors also talked about their role helping to connect families with resources, including streamlining or navigating links to outside service organizations which provide educational services, training or financial support. For example, one director shared, "We're helping the parents be advocates, because a lot of them don't know their rights as parents...if their child is being appropriately placed at the public school. We help with that. It could be that, sometimes, they're placed in a special education class when it's really an issue of language. Or maybe they need special education services and they're not being given them. So that's where we help the parents" (Immigrant/refugee founded).

Help from some program directors often moved past advocacy to direct involvement with other local organizations on behalf of families. One director commented, "Say they need assistance with childcare vouchers. I direct them to the childcare resource center, and I would make the phone call and say you know so-and-so is coming so please see what you can do to help them" (CBO). Another director spoke about the comfort and assurance their assistance brings to an overwhelmed immigrant parent: "I'm willing to go with parents to schools a lot, and even if I don't speak the right language, because they know I'm on their side and I can help them figure

out what's going on" (CBO). Several directors reported their response to requests from the schools for support: "The school department is asking us to help them with their parent teacher meetings because they have very low turnout, but I think it's because of relationships...they don't trust the schools."

Directors discussed the importance of consistent contact with families through phone, e-mail and in-person conversations at drop-off and pick up as an avenue toward building trust. One director shared, "It's a slow and steady progress, particularly with the parents, over a course of years, to build up that trust, so they know that they are valued and respected by our staff" (Parks & rec.).

Staffing

Directors described the role that staff backgrounds and staff training play in supporting immigrant children and families in their programs. Most directors (76%) mentioned that it is important that the staff profile reflects the populations served by their program through language, racial or ethnic diversity, or immigrant experience. One director summarized, "That's one of our biggest assets is that—to have staff who reflect the population served—because it helps build relationships" (Local branch). Another director described the background and experience of a staff member, "Parents respect that she came as an immigrant to this country and raised her own kids in a foreign culture" (CBO).

Program directors often identified having staff who speak the primary language of their immigrant families as a significant program support. Programs that were able employed staff or recruited volunteers who shared both ethnic background and language fluency of students and families. One director shared, "The five [staff members] that speak Haitian-Creole were all born in Haiti. So it's nice for the students to see that, 'I look like them, they came from where I came from...' It's really nice to see that" (School managed). Additionally, some directors talked about the importance of the program leadership coming from within an immigrant community adding "I think that's why the students respond so well to us, is they know that we're coming from a similar space" (Immigrant/refugee founded).

Most directors (64%) recalled staff training as a mechanism to support their work with racially and ethnically diverse children and families. While several directors described diversity training undergone by their staff, few programs offered training opportunities directly related to working with immigrant populations. General diversity training was the most cited professional development opportunity that would likely include content focused on working with immigrant youth and families. In general, among the directors, opportunities for targeted training seemed slim or left as optional. A director shared: "They're required to have had 20 hours per year for professional development. So the first 20 hours are mandatory, and one of those trainings could be about diversity. But, if it's—they're already over their 20, then some of those trainings do become, you know, they're not mandatory at that point" (Local branch).

In the context of working with immigrant children and parents, one program director expressed the importance of focusing training on building relationships with whole families, creating a care-giving partnership. This particular program had accessed on-going training through a nationally known training and technical assistance center. The director commented: The most important thing is to develop—if you have a relationship with the family—you can't just have a relationship with the child; so serving the family as a whole is really where I think our strength is. And through—that training helps us kind of—it's like the paradigm shift of how we—it's an approach in dealing with families. And so I feel like that training in and of itself has helped—

tremendously helped us—it's a totally different way of thinking about who a child is, who this family is" (Local branch).

One program director who supervised a racially and ethnically diverse staff questioned the relevance of outside training or trainers on diversity when expertise and experience clearly lay within the program. She summarized: "I don't think they would need, as far as diversity training, just because...what would be more important for them would be opportunities to talk. I hired a professional facilitator to kind of facilitate our Friday staff meetings to talk about what does it mean to be Latino, what does it mean to be an immigrant, because the staff has their own experiences that they can draw from. If I had a white staff, I probably would do a diversity training that involved a more explicit discussion about, well what are Latino and immigrants experiencing? With our staff, it's more 'what's your experience, and how is it similar to our students and how is it different'" (Immigrant/refugee founded).

Language and Acculturation

As one program director (an immigrant herself) noted, parents "all speak English at different levels" and have to have some knowledge of English in order to "survive" (CBO). All program directors discussed the common communication difficulties that families faced due to language barriers, although there was much variation in how programs responded to this challenge. In the best case scenario, programs had multilingual staff who could speak to families and students in their native language and also "translate a lot of our written materials into their home language" (School-managed), though we found few such programs among our sample. This was easier accomplished for programs that served one primary immigrant group, for example, a program run by bi-lingual staff serving Spanish speakers from the Caribbean and Central and South American countries.

One program director described relying on a local community organization that "have people down there who will translate" because although they had staff who were bilingual in "Creole, Khmer, and Spanish" (CBO) they could not communicate in Arabic with an Iraqi family. Another director noted that the local school district had translation services but these were lacking for the afterschool program. Instead, they would "build relationships with parents and say 'such and such's dad doesn't understand what we're talking about, can you translate?'" (School-managed). In the absence of program staff or other adults that can help, one program director noted, "It's hard when the parents are counting on kids for the information... a lot of the adults in the kids' lives are depending on them to translate, and it's very stressful on both ends" (CBO).

Three program directors explained that language barriers were not only an impediment to communication more generally, but also as a barrier to student learning experiences in the program. As many of the programs provided homework support, providing assistance to students struggling with language was a constant challenge. Only 2 of 17 programs employed teachers and tutors who were trained on English Language Learner support strategies. More often, programs were dependent on the "one" staff member who spoke the same language as the students, whether it be a direct service staff who spoke Cantonese or an attendant at the front desk who spoke Spanish.

Language can also be intertwined with acculturation issues. Children interpreting for parents can contradict cultural understanding of parental authority and control; several programs "wouldn't allow a child to do that because that's not really good" (Local branch). If a program has to "write up a child" for behavioral issues, the child might give "the parent a different

perception of what actually is going on" (Local branch). Nuances of the majority's cultural behavior and tradition may be lost in communication between an English-speaking program staff member and other-language speaking youth: "The way a teacher communicates to families – the message it sends is that [their language] is not important, in fact speaking [their language] is a problem" (Immigrant/refugee founded). More recent immigrant youth may also need to spend time with peers in similar circumstances and in the comfort of their native language and cultural traditions before moving through an acculturation process.

Academic Support

Programs in the study were more likely than not (59%) to offer homework assistance and tutoring as components of the afterschool programs, although the amount of emphasis placed on these supports varied. Four of the program directors described academic supports as their primary goal. A director at an immigrant/refugee founded African program described her goal "to reinforce what they learn in school. And because I know their culture, I know most of [the cultures of the different students], I know their language. I could help them to catch up in school. And because their parents are illiterate, some of them are even illiterate in their own language." A program director that recognized the need for academic help, but lacked staff who spoke the language of the students, devised alternative strategies of grouping students by language groups for homework time: "I don't speak Vietnamese, I don't speak Chinese, I don't speak other languages, but [students] interact with the other kids and they help each other."

High parental investment and interest in education was identified by many program directors, and was reflected in the choice of program content and the interaction of the youth with the program. Speaking about some of her program parents, one director commented, "They come a long way already to come to America to have an education, so they're very reserved and focused on their academics." Another program director described how she adapted the program to be more responsive to parents' demands: "They highly focus on education and they really value it. So, what we learned was to be more respectful of their wants and needs." Reporting feedback from a parent, one director quoted a parent as saying, "If homework is in English, I can't help them because I can't understand it. I don't understand English. So, you guys are always helping her out and now my daughter is getting good grades" (Parks & rec.).

Three of the program directors explicitly named the goal of supporting immigrant and refugee students on the path to higher education. "What this program is trying to address is realizing that for Latinos and their families, that higher education is essential. It's not a question of should I do this, it's I have to do this." As part of the effort to promote higher education, one program director told of "cultivating close relationship with the schools" to help ensure success of students. Two programs serving older youth reported helping families prepare for and navigate the college application process, including financial aid.

Discussion

Results from interviews with our sample programs revealed specific strengths and challenges in working with newly arrived families who are still in a period of adjustment to the US. One key finding from interviews with program directors was the importance of building strong and trusting relationships with parents. While building relationships with parents is central for OST work with many populations (Sommerfeld, 2011), connecting with and supporting immigrant families can extend beyond programming responsibilities that take place at the centers. Directors reported providing assistance to immigrant families with the sorts of day-to-day needs that are often performed by social service representatives, such as understanding educational

and financial systems in the United States, health services, and getting referrals for such services. Immigrant parents are likely to receive little if any instruction in how agencies and institutions work in the US as part of their transition into the country. Responding to these family needs fits with the recommendation to recognize unique challenges faced by immigrant and refugee families, and provide supports to address them (Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Trainings for program staff that are likely to work with immigrant families should include an overview of strategies that will help them if and when they are called on to act as community liaisons. This may be as simple as having available listings and brochures (translated into multiple languages) of local community agencies and institutions that provide services for immigrant families. Further, OST program directors can build relationships with representatives of these agencies in order to be more effective in providing support for families as part of a collaborative network.

Program directors also emphasized the importance of having program staff who reflect the communities they serve, which included both language and cultural elements. This finding reflected best practice recommendations for hiring staff who share the same culture and language as participating youth (Easter, & Refki, 2004; Harris, 2004). Efforts to include one or more immigrant members of the community among staff, and who are well-established in their transition to the U.S., would be particularly valuable in offering guidance to new families. Staff training for work with immigrant and refugee youth was an area of greater challenge for program directors. While many participants reported diversity training for their staff, few reported staff participation in training specific to immigrant or refugee youth. This creates a challenge regarding how program staff obtain a fuller understanding of the nuances between immigrant and refugee families and students and how these families fit under the umbrella of diversity, particularly when staff backgrounds and experiences are different from the populations they serve.

Many directors described challenges of bridging language barriers, both with immigrant families and as barriers to learning for immigrant youth. Programs varied in staff background and ability to communicate in multiple languages. Having to rely on other families in the program or community members for interpretation may bring up concerns related to confidentiality, and conflicts between families if interpretation is needed for sensitive matters. Children acting as interpreters can pose a risk for family conflict, in that it disrupts the power dynamics between parent and child. In addition, staff varied in their knowledge of how best to support students with limited English language skills (both spoken and written). Programs best suited to working with immigrant youth provided opportunities for students to speak in their native language while at the same time increasing their English language skills. Fewer of the programs demonstrated formal translation and interpretation for students and families; more often materials offered were monocultural and monolingual. We do not know the extent to which lack of translation and interpretation services were due to limited resources, although this is a likely restriction.

A common concern when programs have limited language resources is that children, who have more exposure and practice in acquiring English language skills through their school settings (Suárez-Orozco, & Suárez-Orozco, 2010), will be asked to act as interpreters for their non-English-speaking parents. Programs that receive federal funding are required by Title VI Language Access regulations to ensure they are in compliance when offering services to individuals with limited English proficiency (United States Department of Health & Human Services Office for Civil Rights, 2004). However, all programs that serve immigrant children and families should consider how to address communication with non-English speaking constituents in ways that are informed by regulation requirements. These include having a primary contact

person “responsible for ensuring that the agency adheres to its language access plan, policy directives, and procedures to provide meaningful access to LEP persons” (United States Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, 2012). Interpretation services may be offered in-person and on-site or could be offered through telephone or internet/video interpreters.

Facilitating parental engagement by offering family literacy programs can become beneficial for improving the language skills of both immigrant children and their families. In addition to supporting English language acquisition, Bhattacharya and Quiroga (2011) stress that programs need to equally support ELLs’ socio-emotional and cultural needs, for instance by using materials that describe their history and cultural heritage, increase understanding of social justice concepts, and support skill-building in cross-cultural communication.

Program directors identified a high value placed on academic success by immigrant parents, and many reported a program emphasis on academic activities. This is consistent with research documenting immigrant families’ investment in academic success, driven by strong beliefs in the primacy of academic excellence for success of the next generation in the U.S. (Fuligni & Fuligni, 2007; Fuligni, & Yoshikawa, 2004). Beliefs about the children’s obligation to the family through academic efforts also drive parental expectations (Fuligni, Tseng, & Lam, 1999). Acculturation is also a factor for some parents who have greater concerns about their child becoming “too American” and losing their own ethnic culture; being “too American” may be interpreted as placing less emphasis on academics and more time on social interactions, thus leading to conflicts or mistrust between parents and program staff (Timm, 1994). For programs, negotiating the balance between academic and social and emotional learning activities with immigrant parents can be a challenge, and listening to parents’ emphasis on academic priorities is critical, rather than seeing parent involvement as a one-way instruction to parents (Adair, 2012). School-based programs that provide explicit guidance for immigrant parents in how to support academic success (Schaller, Rocha, & Barshinger, 2007) might inform how afterschool programs can partner with parents.

Overall, the OST programs that participated in the study described program activities that were consistent with many of the best practices that are cited in a recent large-scale evaluation of high functioning programs (Huang, et al., 2010), such as providing a cooperative and positive climate and strong social and emotional learning curriculum, although many of those programs were not originally developed to focus on the needs of immigrant youth and families, as was the case for most programs in our study. Our recruitment efforts demonstrated that some programs confused serving a multi-cultural or diverse community with serving an immigrant population specifically. While there are potentially overlapping issues of cultural differences or discrimination, for instance, there are profoundly unique concerns related to migration adjustment and acculturative distress that bear on experiences in out-of-school time. Refugee families in particular are likely to have experienced traumatic stress prior to arrival as a result of political violence or exposure to war, and this stress exacerbates parent-child conflict, difficulty with communication, and struggles to have children maintain religious and cultural practices in the context of mainstream U.S. settings (Betancourt, Abdi, Ito, Lilienthal, Agalab, & Ellis, 2015; Yako, & Biswas, 2014). Even well-meaning program staff may send subtle messages negative messages about perceived deficits of immigrant families (e.g., stereotypes about lack of value of education, absent fathers, and culture of poverty) that create barriers to parental involvement and student engagement (Jimenez-Castellanos, & Gonzalez, 2013). Providing empirically-based information on immigrant and refugee experiences, risk factors related to children’s wellbeing as a result of migration, and local and federal immigration policy should be included in professional development training for staff.

Some research suggests that afterschool programs with a focus on immigrant youth can become most effective when framed through a strength-based perspective, focusing on “the constructive assets they seek to build, rather than the negative behaviors they seek to avoid” (Bridging Refugee Youth and Children’s Services, 2009. p. 4). The bi-lingualism and bi-culturism of most immigrant youth can be viewed as an important asset for immigrant and non-immigrant youth. Under the supervision of trained and diverse staff, youth and their families can strengthen their bi-cultural identities, develop academic and leadership skills as well as improve bi-lingual literacy and cross-cultural skills (Hernandez, et al., 2012).

Immigrant youth are less likely than native-born youth to be enrolled in after school programs (Greenberg, 2013). Thus knowledge gained regarding ways to develop practice that is responsive to the specific needs of immigrant families is necessary to increase participation in these programs. Programming that integrates students’ lived experiences of culture and resettlement can be especially valuable in bolstering English language literacy skills while supporting continued ethnic identity development (Choi, 2009). Our study documented a number of program strategies that were responsive to the needs of immigrant and refugee students, including support for the use of native language as well as English, knowing about and celebrating the heritage of the students’ homeland, including on staff or in leadership individuals with shared immigrant background, and giving consideration to the academic priorities of parents. The development of such intentional approaches to working with immigrant youth in out-of-school time will encourage enrollment of, and enhance effectiveness with, this vulnerable population.

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