

## Myths and Realities

As Samway and McKeon (2007) have noted, “a body of myths” or “urban legends” have been associated with ELLs and their education. They have identified fifty-eight myths about ELLs that fall into ten categories: demographics, enrollment, native language instruction, second language acquisition, literacy, placement, assessment, programming, staffing and staff development, and parent and community involvement. Espinosa (2008) has focused on six “commonly held beliefs” about young ELLs or “dual-language learners.” Other researchers have discussed myths related to language acquisition (McLaughlin, 1992), second language learning (Snow, 1992), and bilingual education (Crawford, 1998). NCTE (2008) has also highlighted several myths about ELLs in a research brief. While it is beyond the scope of this project to attempt to identify and debunk every possible myth or misperception about ELLs, it is possible to try to summarize and dispel some of the most common misconceptions noted in the literature that are associated with the ELL population (Crawford, 1998; Espinosa, 2008; McLaughlin, 1992; NCTE, 2008; Samway & McKeon, 2007; Snow, 1992).

### **Myth #1: The number of ELL students is decreasing and most of them are foreign-born and recent arrivals.**

**Reality:** As evidenced by data from the U.S. 2000 Census and other sources (cited in Samway & McKeon, 2007), the number of ELLs is rapidly increasing in the United States. Also, more than 50% of ELLs have been born in this country, 24% of PreK-5 children are foreign-born, and the vast majority of ELLs are from Spanish-speaking backgrounds (Center for Public Policy, 2007; Matthews & Ewen, 2006). ELL children may be immigrants, refugees, undocumented immigrants, members of indigenous Native American tribes, or citizens of U.S. territories (i.e., American Samoa, Guam, Puerto Rico).

### **Myth #2: Students who are not legal residents cannot be enrolled in school.**

**Reality:** Equal access to public education has been mandated by law for undocumented immigrant children since a Supreme Court decision in 1982 (*Plyer v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202) under the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The U.S. Department of Education-Office of Civil Rights (2000), as well as every state, has provided specific guidelines regarding the access to education for ELLs, *including* undocumented immigrants, and other underrepresented groups. These students are also required to attend primary and secondary schools until they reach a mandated age.

### **Myth #3: ELLs should not use their native languages in the home, social settings, or the classroom because this will impact their ability to learn English effectively.**

**Reality:** Research on bilingualism suggests that use of the native or primary language (L1) can mediate content-area instruction in English (L2), when L1 is used for cognitive and academic skill development (Cummins & Swain, 1996; Hakuta, 1986; Handscombe, 1994; Ovando & Collier, 1985). Note that the use of dual or bilingual approaches assumes that the learner has acquired proficiency in speaking, reading, writing, and listening in L1. If the learner does not have L1 proficiency in reading and writing, then achieving L2 (second language) proficiency will be much more challenging (Cummins, 2000).

**Myth #4: Once ELLs are able to speak fluently, they have successfully acquired English.**

**Reality:** In a study of 400 student referrals, Cummins (1984) successfully demonstrated that fluency in conversational language (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills or BICS) does not predict successful use of academic language (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency or CALP) for academic tasks. Being able to speak fluently in the social setting does not necessarily reflect mastery of language or its associated higher order thinking skills. In a review of the research, Samway and McKeon (2007) have noted that “the ability to learn content area material becomes increasingly dependent on interaction with and mastery of the language connected to such material” (p. 31). In other words, while knowing vocabulary and facts is important, it is the ability to take that basic, concrete information and use that information in order to understand more abstract concepts, synthesize information, and communicate it effectively, both in oral and written forms. This implies that early learning professionals may have culturally and linguistically diverse learners in their classrooms, who may speak English fluently yet can be identified as ELLs because of their lack of academic language proficiency.

**Myth #5: Reading and writing instruction should be delayed until ELLs are proficient in English.**

**Reality:** Exposure to meaningful literacy practices in reading and writing can facilitate the development of English language skills. Several studies have shown that ELLs can read and write before achieving oral fluency (Hans & Ernst-Slavin, 1999; Samway, 1993; Taylor, 1990), and that reading and writing can support aural and oral language development (Samway & Taylor, 1993). At the same time, reading and writing abilities can be supported through authentic oral language experiences (Samway & Whang, 1996; Uzria, 1987).

**Myth #6: ELLs should be placed in Special Education programs for language services.**

**Reality:** Being a non-native speaker of English does not constitute a handicapping condition. Delays in second language acquisition *are not* the same as delays in language development due to cognitive, motoric, or physical deficits. It is generally inappropriate to place an ELL in Special Education unless fair and culturally-appropriate assessment has

been conducted in the native language, per Public Law 94-142 (Education for All Handicapped Children Act), now amended as the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). Research shows that there has been disproportionate over-representation as well as under-representation of ELLs in special and gifted education programs (Donovan & Cross, 2002). IDEA has provided specific requirements for gathering and analyzing statewide data about the representation of ELLs in Special Education. In addition, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), U.S. Office of Special Education Programs, and the National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE) have guidelines available for educators about special education placement and assessment (Samway & McKeon, 2007).

**Myth #7: No Child Left Behind (NCLB) does not require ELLs to be tested for Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) because they do not speak English proficiently.**

**Reality:** Schools, districts, and states are required by NCLB (2001) to include ELLs in state testing and AYP reporting. They must be tested for listening, speaking, reading, and writing. They are required to take language arts and math achievement tests, although they can be excused for language arts if they have been in the country for less than a year; tests can be conducted in their native languages, if available. Specific statewide assessments are used to measure the academic progress of ELLs and to meet federal Annual Measures of Achievement Objectives (AMAOs). Guidelines are provided by the U.S. Department of Education.

**Myth #8: There is agreement among researchers regarding effective programming for ELLs.**

**Reality:** There is no one specific program or approach that works with all ELLs, as reflected in the range of ESL and bilingual programming identified by the National Center for English Language Acquisition (NCELA). Researchers have proposed a variety of strategies, practices, and programs to address the complex needs of ELLs in educational environments (Cummins, 1986; Gollnick & Chinn, 2006; Haynes, 2007; Kim, Roehler, & Pearson, 2009; Lachat, 2004; Nieto, 2000; Nilles & Rios, 2009; Pranksy, 2008; Robles de Melendez & Beck, 2007; Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008; Swain, 1986). There are several indicators of *effective* ELL programming: high expectations, integrated language and content-area instruction; concept development in L1; extensive professional development; supportive school environment; and school leadership (Samway & McKeon, 2007). NCELA (n.d.) has developed a chart, which reflects a continuum of ELL programming and describes each type of English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) or bilingual program model that might be used. Some models incorporate strategies that emphasize a pull-out approach, while other models integrate ELLs within the mainstream classroom setting (<http://ncela.gwu.edu>) [Note: These models are described in more detail later in this document.]

**Myth #9: Teachers of ELLs need to speak a second language.**

**Reality:** Speaking another language may be helpful, but not necessary because the language of instruction is English. Nationally, many (if not most) teachers of ELLs are not bilingual. Fluency and proficiency in another language, whether it is the teacher or a classroom aide, is an asset. There are early caregivers and educators who are bilingual, but as the research has shown, the majority of early learning professionals tend to be White and monolingual (Matthews & Jang, 2006). In any case, it is important that *all* educational professionals have ESL preparation and knowledge of culturally responsive pedagogical practices, considering dramatically increasing numbers of ELLs.

**Myth #10: Immigrant and refugee parents and families do not respond to invitations to participate because they just do not care.**

**Reality:** ELL parents and families may be reluctant to participate because they themselves lack effective English skills, do not understand the culture of American schools, or may simply have additional job or family responsibilities that preclude involvement (Samway & McKeon, 2007). Alternative approaches, which are more culturally sensitive to the needs of these families, such as using a cultural liaison or sending information home in the native language (Trumbell, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield & Quiroz, 2001), may produce better participation.

**Myth #11: Younger ELLs absorb a second language (L2) more quickly and more easily than older ELLs.**

**Reality:** While younger ELLs may appear to learn a second language (L2) more easily, much of their learning activities involve concrete representations of language or multi-sensory cues in, what Cummins (1981a, 1981b) has called, “context-embedded” settings. Cummins (1986, 2000) refers to the initial communication skills of beginning ELLs as Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS). BICS provide the basic language structure for communication and reflect the type of social language heard on the playground, at lunch, and in other social situations. This level of communication involves simple words, phrases, and sentences, and *may appear to suggest* that young ELLs have achieved language proficiency, when that is not the case. Citing several European and Canadian studies, Snow (1992) has reported that older children demonstrated better L2 acquisition and proficiency in school immersion programs than younger children, except in the area of pronunciation, where younger children sounded more like native speakers. Effective L2 acquisition and proficiency reflect what Cummins has labeled as Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), or the English used for instruction, textbooks, academic writing, higher order thinking, and more abstract and complex forms of linguistic communication (Cummins, 1986, 2000).

**Myth #12: Second language (L2) acquisition is the same for all children.**

**Reality:** Snow (1992) has suggested several factors that influence L2 acquisition and learning, including social class, peer or sibling influence, culture, home and school environments, and instructional practices. Cummins (1986, 2000) has theorized that there are two forms of proficiency: BICS--social language and CALP--cognitive academic language. In addition, other researchers have proposed five stages of second language acquisition (Krashen & Terrell, 1981) through which ELLs proceed, some earlier stages which last a few months to other later stages which may last several years. At the very least, researchers in the field of second language acquisition estimate that it takes at least five to seven years, at a minimum, to attain English language proficiency.