

*“I like my tutors always”:  
East African Students in a Public Library Homework Help Program*

Jordan Conwell  
*Bates College*

The more than one-hundred year old public library in a small urban city in the northeastern U.S. (henceforth referred to as Riverburg) describes itself as an integral sponsor of knowledge, culture, education, and information in the city and an institution that serves “users of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds” in order to retain status as “both a significant institutional symbol and a core working component of our democratic society” (library website). Perhaps as a result of its history and mission, the library houses an afterschool homework help program that runs most weekdays during the school year. This paper concerns how East African youth (many of whom are immigrant and/or refugee) in the Riverburg Public Library afterschool program, in the words of the program director in a conversation with me in October 2011, “view themselves both as a part of the afterschool program and in relation to the program.” A sizeable and visible minority group in the community, this group of students faces multiple obstacles to success in the traditional structures of the local public schools, some having to do with factors well outside of their control. The students’ cultural context presents unique challenges for the library afterschool program, which seeks to help these students succeed in school by providing a space where tutors can help them with their homework.

The 3,500 East African immigrants who live in the Riverburg area choose to do so because they find the area to be “a safe place to raise children and accrue human capital through educational opportunities,” although they may later move elsewhere in pursuit of other opportunities (Huisman 2011, 47). The families may bring both “strengths and liabilities” to the education of their children: The helpful strengths include a “strong sense of communal identity and pride, general resistance to U.S. racism, and positive attitude towards modern education,” while the concerning liabilities include a “lack of financial and cultural capital, generational conflicts, authoritarian parenting styles, and fractured families and identities,” which “can hinder opportunities for parents to develop the bicultural competence needed to help their children succeed in school” (Warsame 2011, 129-130). A homework help afterschool program may be able to maximize East African students’ strengths, such as a family attitude towards education, that support consistent program attendance. An afterschool program may also be able to combat the risks inherent in East African students’ and families’ demographic position. For example, program staff and tutors who work in or are affiliated with the local schools may become bicultural brokers for students and parents.

I was fortunate throughout my time as a community-engaged undergraduate to be involved in multiple local education efforts, both inside and outside of school buildings. I spent time as a classroom aide in kindergarten, 4<sup>th</sup>/ 5<sup>th</sup> grade English Language Learner (ELL), and 8<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms and helped out at an afterschool program at a local government-subsidized housing project. In doing so, I interacted and worked with the students themselves, as well as teachers and administrators dedicated to understanding and making the most of the difficulties and opportunities that accompany educating immigrant students while simultaneously incorporating their parents into the milieus of parent-teacher conferences, permission slips, etc. Afterschool programs that maximize strengths and reduce risks for East African students and families can be important contributors to positive change in the local educational environment.

My involvement with this particular afterschool program was limited to visits to the program site (to take field notes and administer surveys) and meetings before and during the project with the program coordinator and other community-based researchers working with local afterschool programs. Due to a shortage of tutors on one intended observation day, I ended up helping students with homework instead of taking field notes.

This analysis investigates two dimensions of the afterschool program's efforts to assess if and how the program is benefitting this demographic and discusses the implications of successful outreach to this group of learners. I utilize informal field observations and a survey to determine 1) how students feel about coming to the physical space of the library's community computer lab to receive help with their homework and 2) how these same students assess their ongoing tutoring experiences in the program. I argue that the Riverburg Public Library afterschool homework help program is making use of the combination of the flexible and collegial nature of the afterschool program setting and students' unique cultural knowledge. In the resultant environment, students are building productive working relationships with their tutors, and students' family members are meeting potential educational advocates for their children. Students are completing their homework, which may allow them to return to their school buildings the next day in the best possible position to fully participate in class and achieve success.

Community-based assessments of local educational efforts may have positive national implications. This research demonstrates how CBR can shed light on pathways to immigrant and/ or refugee student success in U.S. schools in the globalized twenty-first century, the focus of a growing body of interdisciplinary research. One-fifth of children currently living in the United States have immigrant parents, and one-third of all children in the United States will be living in an immigrant household by the year 2040 (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2008). Research on children of immigrants' experiences is integral to plans to harness their potential and forge a more inclusive tomorrow. However, the scholarly, political, and media attention on adult immigrants has created "a profound gap between the strategic importance of these children and the knowledge about their conditions" (Zhou 1997, 63-64). CBR can, and should, contribute to closing this gap by highlighting successful strategies for work with groups of students who are sometimes marginalized in traditional public education structures. Specifically, this community-based project points to the four-way intersection of flexible spaces and schedules, real relationships, valuing cultural knowledge, and advocacy on behalf of students and their families as a juncture of great promise for helping immigrant and/or refugee students achieve in U.S. schools.

## **Literature Review**

Afterschool programs with an academic component (like homework help) may be especially beneficial for students variously characterized as at-risk, ELL, immigrant, and refugee and can help prevent early school failure, for which African-American children are especially at-risk (Afterschool Alliance 2011; Beck 1999; Naidoo 2008; Posner and Vandell 1994; Riggs 2006). Research may support programs that serve these populations by identifying their areas of programmatic strength while simultaneously unearthing aspects in need of improvement or better understanding between students, tutors, and program coordinators. Findings regarding benefits for students variously characterized as at-risk, ELL, immigrant, and refugee will likely be applicable to East African immigrant students in Riverburg. Although immigrant learners are neither "consistently at-risk" nor "consistently advantaged," contrary to some segments of

political and popular opinion (Crosnoe and López-Turley 2011, 130), the East African students' demographic background predisposes them to be members of one or more of those groups, thereby presenting unique educational challenges for those who want to help them succeed in the local public schools.

At-risk students benefit from afterschool homework help through the extra educational time each day as well as the chance that "homework completion might affect children's confidence and status within the school environment" (Beck 1999, 116). Further, programs "are often better able to take advantage of the assets that ELL [English Language Learner] students bring to the table, such as their knowledge of other languages, customs and cultures" because they are less rigidly structured than formal school settings (Afterschool Alliance 2011, 2). Afterschool programs present ELL students with opportunities to practice their English skills with peers and adults – both one-on-one and in groups – in a "low-pressure" environment, and these skills can subsequently "lay a foundation for literacy development and help support academic achievement" (3). The benefits of program participation for ELL students can also extend to parents, who can utilize program staff members with whom they and their children build relationships as "brokers" between the family and the school (3).

Immigrant and refugee students may also accrue distinct positive outcomes from effective programs due to their status(es). The research on immigrant and refugee youth in afterschool programs advises considering students' various statuses as at-risk, ELL, immigrant, and refugee in analyses of programs that serve them to cultivate "comprehensive ecological models that include important factors at the levels of children, their families, and their culture" (Riggs 2006, 78). For example, ethnographic and interview research on afterschool tutoring centers in Western Sydney, Australia, that sought to promote literacy development among African refugee high school students found that students' computer, literacy, and writing skills improved as a result of attending tutoring sessions. Further, African refugee students demonstrated heightened work ethic, a drive to succeed in high school, and a desire to attend college (Naidoo 2008). The center "encouraged refugee student narratives, one of the learners' strengths" in tutoring sessions (Naidoo 2008, 145). Effective homework help programs for students from at-risk, ELL, immigrant, and/ or refugee demographics have the opportunity to make use of their distinctiveness from formal school settings as well as students' backgrounds for achieving positive academic outcomes.

## **Methods**

Our CBR team utilized a cross-sectional paper survey as the primary data gathering tool to create our final product for our community partner, a brochure for the library and two other Riverburg-area afterschool programs to help them better collaborate to serve area youth. We made use of survey research's efficiency and versatility (Chambliss and Schutt 2006) given the time-constraints of the academic semester (Strand et al. 2003) and the uniqueness of the Riverburg area youth, who vary in English language ability. I collected 16 completed surveys on the day of survey administration at the library site. Adults at the program, tutors, and I helped students understand and answer survey items if they had any questions about them.

We operationalized this project's two major concepts (student perceptions of the physical space of the library and student satisfaction with tutoring) with survey questions. We measured student perceptions of the physical space of the library with a question asking students to choose one response to the statement, "I like the computer lab where Library Homework Help is held." (The answer choices for that item were "A lot," "Some," and "Not at all.") We measured student

satisfaction with tutoring via four questions about students' academic experiences at the program. Students' interpersonal interactions with their tutors and program coordinators were captured with "sometimes/ always/ never" items that asked them to choose one response to each of the following: "My tutor is helpful," "I feel respected by my tutor," and "My tutor cares about me." How much homework students are completing at the program was captured with the question, "On a usual day at Library Homework Help, how much of your homework do you finish?" (The answer choices for that item were "All of it," "Most of it," "A little of it," and "None of it.") The final item on the survey was an open-ended question that asked students "What is your favorite part about coming to Library Homework Help?" I coded the open-ended question to help answer both research questions.

### **"Do You Like the Computer Lab?": Perceptions of the Physical Space**

The community computer lab that houses afterschool homework help is located on the second floor of the Riverburg Public Library, and it is maintained by the library and a local education collaborative. The lab has brick walls, some windows with views of the street, clean floor and table surfaces, and it is kept at a pleasantly cool temperature. Fourteen desktop computers are set up in pairs with a separate desk (or bank) for each pair. There are three or four banks on each side of the lab, and a large space in the middle of the lab separates the sides. There is also one computer at a separate bank (which contains the lab's printer) in the back of the lab near a window. Many chairs are usually in front of the computers and at other places around each bank. Long "overflow" tables surrounded by chairs stand in both the front and back of the room, and extra chairs are also stacked in the front of the lab. The divided set-up of the lab allows the program to separate the lab into a "math/ science side" and an "English/ history side" to match students' assignments with tutors' strengths.

The physical space of the library facilitates productive time on task by fostering a less spatially rigid, "low pressure" (Afterschool Alliance 2011, 2) learning environment that students may not find in their schools during the day. 10 out of 15<sup>1</sup> students indicated that they like "the computer lab where Library Homework Help is held" "A lot." In my field notes I recorded the thought, "this lab is a community space" in reference to interactions that I noticed between students, tutors, program coordinators, and library staff. I later noted "energy and noise" in the lab, although the space "still felt productive." The banks and overflow tables easily supported one-on-one or multi-student tutoring, and computers were often rearranged or differently oriented so that more students could work at one computer or with one tutor. The flexibility of this set-up also allowed wandering tutors to quickly sit down and fix an issue (like helping a student change the font in Microsoft Word) and then move on without distracting other tutors and students working at that same bank. Similarly, another tutor could easily pull up a chair to join a group already in progress in order to help a particular student one-on-one. The overflow tables allowed students to work on many different types of assignments without distracting from the informal milieu of the math/ science or English/ history sides of the lab.

The low-stress environment also extended beyond students, tutors, and program coordinators to students' parents and family members. One parent who entered the lab knew the program coordinator, and they shared a kind greeting. The perceived barrier that may keep students' family members from entering the school building did not carry over to the homework help lab at the public library, at least in this case. The program coordinator may be fostering

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<sup>1</sup> One student did not complete the back of the survey, which contained the battery of questions for the first concept.

relationships with students' family members that could allow her to be a "broker" (Afterschool Alliance 2011) in formal school settings if necessary. I was particularly encouraged by this interaction because I have heard numerous accounts of the local schools' efforts to incorporate the families of East African students. The schools tell family members that they are indispensable parts of their children's paths to achievement, and they encourage cultural competency among teachers and other employees so that East African parents are comfortable and understood when they enter the school setting for activities, parent-teacher conferences, etc. However, it is currently unclear whether the schools' efforts are making adequate inroads with East African families. A recent series of focus groups was cancelled when every parent who had responded to attend backed out on the day of the first meeting. The program coordinator is in a unique position to be valuable to the local schools' efforts and to the students. She has a sense of the school system and its local stakeholders. She also knows the students both personally and academically and is familiar with their family members. These relationships she holds with the students' schools and families allows this program to do more than helping students complete their homework, but also helping the schools to connect with the families.

### **“How's Tutoring Going?": Homework-Focused Interactions with Tutors and Adults, Resources, and Homework Completion**

In general, library homework help volunteers are work study students from a local community college, America Reads and America Counts work study students and education students from a local liberal arts college, and other volunteers – a mix the program coordinator describes as “a little bit of everything” (person correspondence). Four female volunteers from the liberal arts college and two local adult male volunteers (one from the community college and one from a nearby city) were available to help students with their homework on the day I observed the program. Tutors' utilization of students' cultural knowledge within the aforementioned low stress environment creates a powerful, productive learning space that East African students may not be afforded during the day in the local public schools. Despite their best intentions, local educators are bound by time and space constraints (such as classroom availability and period-based schedules), expectations (such as having to teach towards standardized testing), and funding concerns that afterschool homework help program is not bound by. The combination of valuing immigrant student knowledge within a low stress environment is a key aspect of the program's outreach to this particular demographic, evidenced by the fact that students are completing homework while also building skills and relationships.

Tutors and students at the library homework help program work on an array of assignments with an eye towards worksheet completion, test preparation, and class presentations, among other ends. Tutors maintained exemplary body language with students throughout the afternoon, such as leaning in, making eye contact, nodding, smiling, and asking positive guiding questions, and it was clear the volunteers had established rapport with students over weeks and months. Tutors at library homework help often sought to take advantage of the cultural knowledge that East African students “brought to the table” (Afterschool Alliance 2011) by linking homework tasks to students' interests and backgrounds to help them understand assignments. For example, the volunteer from a nearby city related the vocabulary word “conflict” to two soccer players having a disagreement (soccer is very popular among the East African boys). Unfortunately, since these types of examples often draw upon cultural backgrounds, some of them were politically insensitive. For example, another volunteer tried to explain a “surplus” of food to a student with the question, “What did you have here that you

didn't have in Africa?" Some well-intentioned attempts at embracing students' backgrounds were better thought out than others.

I recorded tutors and students working on spelling words, vocabulary, grammar, sentences, history, English multiple choice questions, graphs, scientific notation and unit conversions, a science project about trees, and math assignments. Positive student-tutor interactions aided in completing assignments, especially when tutors were able to help students understand troublesome second-language terms (e.g. "cultivating means harvesting"). One student-tutor pair spent the entire tutoring session working on a PowerPoint presentation about the Articles of Confederation. The tutor asked the student helpful guiding questions like "how did it affect the Constitution, why did it matter?" and "When I'm reading your presentation, let's pretend like I've never heard of the Articles of Confederation." Similarly, two female students and one tutor worked on science projects about trees throughout the afternoon. Lastly, a math/science tutor discussed an upcoming presentation with a student, saying "Explain your illustrations and drawings, what you did..." while carefully taking the student through the provided grading rubric.

Student survey responses reveal the fruits of these labors. Students are immensely satisfied with the tutors: 15 out of 16 students indicated that their tutor was "Always" helpful (the other indicated "Sometimes"), 15 out of 16 students indicated that they "Always" "feel respected by [their] tutor" (the other indicated "Sometimes"), and 13 out of 16 students indicated that their tutor "Always" "cares about [them]" (the other three indicated "Sometimes"). Student satisfaction with tutors and resources translated to an impressive and encouraging amount of reported homework completion: 6 out of 16 students indicated that they finish "All" of their homework "On a usual day at Library Homework Help," and the other 10 indicated that they finish "Most" of their homework. Not a single student indicated that they only finished "A little" or "None" of their homework. The open-ended survey item further buttresses these findings. 4 students wrote something positive about the tutors when asked to indicate their "favorite part about coming" to the program. Notable responses included "I like my tutors always" and "Meeting new tutors everyday." Six more students wrote that doing or getting help with their homework (or some variation) was their favorite programmatic aspect. Another 4 students explicitly included some variation on the term "finish" their homework as their favorite feature.

Program coordinators and tutors at the library also constantly seek to improve the quality of the homework help that they offer. The program coordinator and the volunteer from a nearby city carefully scrutinized one student's assigned homework so that the coordinator could report "inconsistencies between the [student's] skill and work" that teachers are assigning. The assignment under consideration asked an ELL student to construct word problems in English, a daunting task. Program staff recognizes that the effectiveness of afterschool programs with an academic component is partially determined by "the quality of homework that students receive" (Cosden et al. 2004). Monitoring homework quality is one more way the program contributes to achievement for this group of students.

## **Conclusion**

Non-traditional educational efforts can contribute to the formal school success of a group of at-risk students as well as encourage their parents to be informed and engaged participants in their children's education, facts exemplified by the Riverburg Public Library's homework help program's outreach to East African students. This community-based research project points to the four-way intersection of flexible spaces and schedules, real relationships, valuing cultural

knowledge, and advocacy on behalf of students and their families as a juncture of great promise for helping immigrant and/or refugee students achieve in U.S. schools. These findings have multiple implications for the Riverburg program, similar programs around the U.S., and CBR's role in research on the education of immigrant students.

The field notes and surveys used for this project indicate with a new degree of specificity the process by which the Riverburg homework help program is contributing to the school achievement of their community's most visible group of at-risk learners. The program can now continue to improve upon these areas of programmatic strength and share what is working for them with other non-traditional educational initiatives in the area, of which there are many. Further, they may be able to approach allies and stakeholders in the local schools and present them with ideas about how to integrate what works afterschool into the formal school environment. If my own experience is any indication, teachers, ELL coordinators, and others across schools and grade levels would be eager to hear and implement proven strategies. With replication, the process of flexibility, relationships, valuing unique knowledge, and advocacy could become a small part of district-wide or regional efforts to help immigrant students succeed in U.S. schools.

Given their increasing numbers and diversity, the consequences of children of immigrants' educational experiences, achievement, and attainment will reverberate far beyond their years in school buildings. Their success or failure in school will be the primary determinant of their chances of becoming socioeconomically secure and "conscious, articulate citizens" (Ellison 1981, xx) prepared and empowered to make contributions to the policy. Therefore, this project also demonstrates an avenue by which CBR can play a part in a critical area of education research and policy in the United States. Community-based projects that integrate knowledge of local educational structures, prior research and theoretical models, and textured primary data are well-suited to uncover why or why not outreaches to specific groups of students are successful and help disseminate best practices for fostering immigrant school achievement.

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