



## Speaking Their Language

**How a theory of change can improve your English learner equity planning**

BY CAROL LARSON AND TYRONE MARTINEZ-BLACK

**B**eginning in the 20th century, attempts have been made to improve the education of English learners (ELs). But in spite of court rulings, laws, and policies that protect and promote EL equity, large educational gaps persist between EL and non-EL students. Some researchers note that equity planning has been disjointed and are now calling for more comprehensive plans.

But how can educational leaders successfully rise to this challenge? One approach is to use change theory as a framework for promoting EL equity.

### **Toward a Theory of Change**

Most schools initiate change by identifying a problem or goal and then transitioning to action planning. For complex problems whose root causes are neither adequately understood nor addressed, this approach is like throwing pasta at the wall to see what sticks. Creating greater equity for ELs is a complicated goal that requires systemic change and substantive knowledge about the conditions that lead to inequities. Developing a well-informed theory of change (ToC) is critical to this process.

Why are there inequities between EL and non-EL students on achievement tests? Why are there fewer EL students in AP classes? Why do fewer EL students apply to college? In an equity-focused ToC, the answers to such questions are informed by multiple sources of information—personal experiences, school data, equity audits, and more. Together, these information sources can be used to identify conditional relationships that explain the problem and point to plausible solutions.

A well-developed ToC might suggest that EL students are less likely to apply to college due to a tracking system that limits EL access to core content, for instance. Thus, if certain innovations are made to scheduling, EL programming, and course content delivery, more EL students should be able to meet college entrance requirements.

The ToC will also identify the mechanisms required for change while providing a framework for objectives, actions, and indicators of progress and success. Thus, a ToC provides educators with a means for aligning an evidence-based theory with strategies for change while reducing the randomization of solutions. In order for it to be effective, schools should monitor the ToC's progress and

respond to unexpected challenges over time. In other words, the ToC can evolve as new information or circumstances arise.

### Equity Audits

In the process of collecting information for a well-informed ToC, there are two key sources of information that deserve special mention. The first is equity audits—assessments or tools used to determine whether resources, learning outcomes, or other factors are disproportionately skewed for specific groups. These are typically conducted throughout the ToC development and implementation process, and educators can use them to observe and measure inequities, facilitate discussions, and evaluate practices.

Key indicators for evaluating equity include teacher quality (i.e., whether students have equitable access to effective teachers), programmatic equity (i.e., whether students are disproportionately over- or underrepresented in particular programs such as special education), and achievement equity (e.g., student performance on assessments or graduation rates).

Other indicators can include students' perceptions of school climate, parent participation rates, classroom practices, access to resources, and other data. For example, an equity audit can be run to assess the level of EL parent participation on school boards, parent-teacher organizations, and other school decision-making panels. If inequities are observed, collecting additional information and conducting research might help identify the reasons why.

**Regardless of how you start the process, your initial theory should be grounded in research and observation.**

### Understanding EL Students

Learning about your EL students is another important source of information for your ToC. This will enable you to construct relevant theories and action plans. While it might be tempting to adopt generic EL approaches or replicate programs from other schools, it is important to recognize that EL students are a heterogeneous group that varies by native language, culture, socioeconomic status, English fluency, birthplace, and more.

Moreover, child development is not homogeneous. While there might be typical age ranges for achieving milestones, they don't apply to all children. Multiple factors, such as a student's home, school, and community; national policies; societal values; and economic systems influence child readiness, alongside historical and life events.

Examinations of student development within these contexts helps identify barriers that might interfere with learning and equitable outcomes. At the community level, for example, there might be a strong belief that students should only learn English; at the family level, language barriers might prevent parents from helping children with homework. Understanding the forces that affect EL students' lives will lead to a stronger ToC.

A good ToC will also consider students' "funds" of knowledge—their perceptions of the world, approaches to social interactions, and skills acquired outside of school. When I was volunteering at an orphanage in Mexico, for example, some of the children were skilled at mentally adding and subtracting monetary amounts. The director of the orphanage explained that they collected money from strangers to survive. Although acquired in a nontraditional setting, such knowledge could be an asset in school.

For educators who don't share their students' cultural backgrounds, it is important to engage in the wider school community in order to gain insights about the issues,



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values, and practices that concern EL students and their families. Strengthen the ToC by asking questions such as “What do our students come to school knowing?” “Where have they traveled and lived?” “What are their families’ routines, interests, activities, and cultural/religious beliefs?”

### ToCs and Schools’ Spheres of Influence

As you create an EL equity ToC, think about its application within a school system instead of focusing solely on the classroom. As stated earlier, the student’s bioecology includes layers of contexts, so inequities can occur in multiple areas. Within the bioecology, it is helpful for a school to identify its spheres of influence or key areas of school impact. These often include:

**The school environment.** In equity plans that advance opportunities for ELs, the ToC will guide systemic change and should address key impact areas within the school environment, such as school policies, funding, programming, curricula, instruction, assessments, and school culture. A well-researched ToC might suggest that assessment practices limit EL participation in gifted and talented programming and propose ways to increase their participation. Creating a ToC that accounts

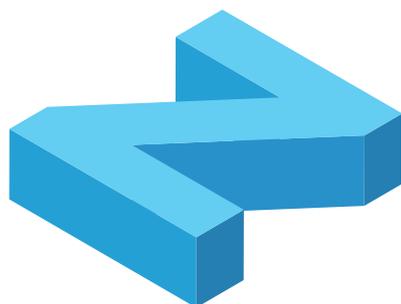
for EL assessment barriers, current research, stakeholder input, and other relevant information will lead to a targeted action plan.

**Professional learning.** Professional learning is a critical sphere of influence for ToC equity planning. Apart from promoting an expertise in content area and best practices for teaching ELs, the ToC will identify what type of preparation is needed to effectively implement any action plans. Professional learning should be continuous and align to the strategies framed by the ToC, while integrating an examination of the negative conscious and unconscious biases against EL students.

Educators also need to be able to think about and identify structural discriminatory practices that might have been institutionalized over time, such as the *de facto* segregation of some EL students. This work requires teachers to see themselves as agents of social justice and change.

School leaders should promote accurate understandings of culturally responsive approaches so teachers can create substantive action steps. Celebrating diverse holidays or honoring cultural heroes won’t close achievement gaps; educators must understand students’ cultural backgrounds, connect with their experiences, and create meaningful learning goals that meet students’ needs.

**Family and community engagement.** A ToC will be strengthened through the participation of multiple stakeholders. To increase engagement, schools might



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partner with local community organizations to support ELs and their families. For instance, schools and agencies such as libraries can pool resources to create a shared network of translators who can communicate ToC goals and other community initiatives to EL parents.

Schools should also strive to eliminate barriers that prevent EL parents from participating in school improvement. One study found that school participation varied among EL parents and was influenced by the parents' educational backgrounds, ethnicities, and perceptions of school climate. You must know your parents to find effective ways to encourage participation. Communicate the benefits of parent involvement while providing a welcoming school culture.

### Moving Toward Equity

Regardless of how you start the process, your initial theory should be grounded in research and observation, a demonstrated understanding of your students, and data. Once you acquire an understanding of the inequity problems in your school, you will be in a better position to address opportunity and achievement gaps.

Because the marginalization of students is rooted in conscious and unconscious beliefs, attitudes, practices, structures, laws, and policies, an effective equity plan will require a systemic approach that's integrated throughout the school community—not just in the classroom. ●

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For more information about the NAESP Partners program, contact Jackie McGrail at [jmcgrail@naesp.org](mailto:jmcgrail@naesp.org) or 703-518-6240.

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