# 1 Seeing the Big Picture

When Mei moved from Beijing to a small urban city in the northeastern United States, her family gathered her prior school records. With these in hand, they hoped to find someone at the school who would help them enroll their daughter. They waited by the school's front door for someone to let them in. When no one came, they knocked softly and when no one answered, they politely continued to wait. After several minutes, another adult walked to the front door. Instead of knocking on it, they observed that she pressed a button and spoke into an intercom. Shortly afterward, a buzzer sounded and the woman motioned for Mei and her family to enter through the front door with her. They followed the woman to the school office, where they waited several long minutes until the school secretary finally looked at them. Unsure about what to do, they said, "We bring Mei school." In reply, the secretary asked, "Does she speak English?" "Little bit," they replied. "Okay," the secretary said, "we'll have to figure something out." Then, the school's secretary gave Mei 's family a packet of forms to complete. Not sure what the forms were about, the family silently left the school trying to determine who could help them enroll their child. They finally were able to contact a Mandarin-speaking family member to ask for help. A week later the Li family returned the forms to the school only to be told that Mei needed some inoculations. This delayed her school entry by another week. By the time Mei began school, over 2 weeks had transpired.

When the first day of school arrived, Mei's family dropped her off at 7:00 a.m., the time that school started in China. Mei waited outside for over an hour for the doors of the school to open. No one had told her family what time school started. When Mei was finally able to enter the school, she was not sure where to go and was unable to ask. Overall she and her family did not feel welcomed by the school, and that feeling of being outsiders persisted throughout Mei's schooling.

## HOW ARE ENGLISH LEARNERS DOING IN U.S. SCHOOLS?

In the United States, English learners (ELs) represent a rapidly growing population. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2009), the population of ELs increased from 3.8 million to close to 11 million from 1990 to 2009, and these learners represent over 20% of the total population of the nation's students. This growth has occurred while the nation's total population remains relatively unchanged. As a result, while the total student population is not growing, schools are becoming more and more populated with ELs (see Figure 1.1).

## WHO ARE BEGINNING ENGLISH LEARNERS?

While many may believe that the growth is due to an increased population of immigrants, most ELs in the nation's schools—close to 75%, in fact—are born in the United States (Capps et al, 2005). The remainder come from many different countries. Additionally, there is sweeping diversity among the nation's ELs, including the reality that there are over 350 languages spoken among them (Capps et al., 2005; Garcia, Jensen, & Scribner, 2009) and the majority live 200% below the poverty level ("A Distinct Population," 2009; Goldenberg & Coleman, 2010). In addition, their public and public

**Figure 1.1**   Total Enrollment of General Student Population and English Learners
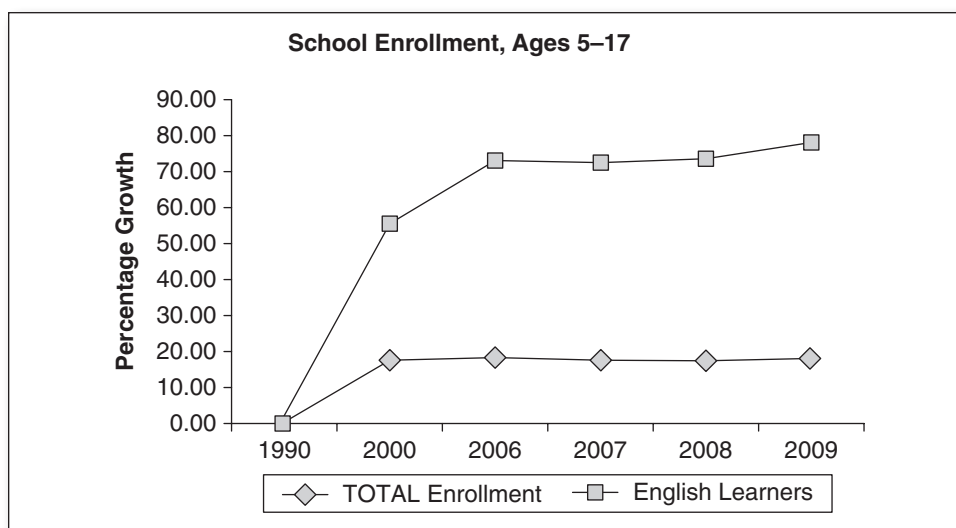


*Source:* National Center on Educational Statistics.

charter schools experiences widely vary. Over half are attending schools in places where they represent less than 1% of the total EL population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004). Like Mei, the student presented at the beginning of this chapter, they are enrolling in schools where there are few ELs like themselves and they are being taught by educators with no or limited experience working with this population.

In addition, ELs range in stages of English language development: Level 1: starting, Level 2: emerging, Level 3: developing, Level 4: expanding, and Level 5: bridging and reaching (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, 1996–2007). In this book, we use the term *beginning ELs* to include students who are at the starting and emerging levels of English language development. This includes ELs who are coming into schools from countries and commonwealths outside of the United States and have no prior experience with English and those learners born in the United States who are entering school for the first time. For the purposes of this book, ELs who are from literacy-oriented families and who have attended school for a commensurate amount of time as their U.S. peers in their home countries are considered beginners *at least* through the first year of school. Those students who do not routinely practice literacy behaviors and have little or no former schooling may be at the beginning stage of English acquisition for a longer period of time.

With all of these dynamics and changes that are occurring in the nation, schools that were once predominantly populated with monolingual English-fluent students are now finding themselves working with an emerging or continuously growing population of ELs. While this population of students is increasing quickly, their overall progress is very poor. The number of ELs who speak English and fail to complete high school is three times that of the general population, and ELs who struggle to use English—a significant and growing number—fail at five times the rate of the general population (August & Shanahan, 2006). Most are performing half as well as their native-English-speaking peers, many are failing, and a significant number drop out of school. Equally troubling is the fact that of those who complete high school successfully and are admitted to college, the vast majority quit (August & Shanahan, 2006; Goldenberg & Coleman, 2010).

While many educational scholars, policy experts, and practitioners have identified various reasons for these outcomes, little has recently been written about how to address students who are at the beginning stages of learning English. We believe that it is paramount to support educators to be proactive in addressing the needs of beginning-level ELs. The example that we provided in the start of this chapter is illustrative of some schools that have not taken the time needed to think through what should be in place for ELs and their families. Indeed, we know that many schools are making

efforts to be more welcoming and inviting, and it is not our intent to be dismissive or to paint the nation's schools with a broad brush. However, the absence of paying intentional focus to the growing population of beginning ELs and their families contributes heavily to the failures that are occurring. Further, while we believe that bilingualism is important and many schools are including bilingual support in various forms, the presence of the native language alone does not set the stage for success. Rather, schools must consider the ways in which new English speakers and their families are

- welcomed into the classroom and school community,
- honored as learners, and
- considered assets.

We call this reflecting on the *Big Picture* of what we know as school.

## RESOURCES FOR LEADERS AND TEACHERS OF BEGINNING LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

While much has been written about the general population of ELs (including by us), very little of what has recently been written has focused on starting or beginning-level learners of English. Let's go to another typical scenario when a new EL enters school in the United States: When Eduardo's family brought him to the kindergarten screening meeting at his new school, a team of educators that included his classroom teacher, an administrator, and a speech and language pathologist greeted them. The school regularly schedules this type of meeting to learn about each new student entering kindergarten. Before meeting with Eduardo and his parents, the team learned that he had been born in the same city that their school was located in, had not attended preschool, and had been cared for by his grandparents while his parents worked. When Eduardo and his family arrived, his teacher greeted them in English. While his father was able to answer some questions in English, most of the questions were answered with polite nods. Similarly, Eduardo was not able to answer any substantive questions. While his classroom teacher knew some greeting words in Spanish, she and the team could not interact in Spanish and were not able to learn much about Eduardo. After the meeting, they looked at each other and almost simultaneously asked the other, "How is it possible that a child born in the United States does not speak English? Let's give him the placement test to see how much English he has and decide what to do." Their plan is not unusual. Indeed, it is customary in almost all public schools across our nation. Information about proficiency levels in English is, by far, the most common means for determining the needs of students who are learning

English. While it is very helpful information, it is not comprehensive. What is missing, as we detail in this book, places ELs at a significant disadvantage. There is an urgent need for a more appropriate means to address the needs of beginning-level EL.

While over half of our nation's beginning ELs are born in the United States and the remainder have just arrived from other countries, all of these learners are at a distinct disadvantage compared to their native-English-speaking peers. That is, they rely on their educators and schools to help them gain equal access to the learning environment. Although the right to gain access is required under federal Office of Civil Rights (OCR) (2005) regulations, the means that schools use for students to gain this important access is often marginal.

## CHALLENGES FACED BY BEGINNING ENGLISH LEARNERS AND THEIR FAMILIES

Students at the first stages of learning English are generally not familiar with American school culture, American public schools, or being learners in these settings. While this is particularly true for students born in countries other than the United States, even if beginning ELs are born in the this country, they are likely not familiar with the dominant culture—that being monolingual English—and are more than likely being taught by a dominant population of white middle-class monolingual-English-speaking educators who are not accustomed to working with linguistic-minority learners (Hollins & Guzman, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

All ELs at the beginning stages are not familiar with English and cannot use it to learn. In addition, many of the students who are new to the United States have come from countries whose educational system is significantly different than that of the United States. For example, some ELs did not attend school on a regular basis, others attended for a few hours a week, and still others come from countries where children begin school at a later age than in the United States. We discuss these differences in more detail in Chapter 2.

## WHAT IS BEING DONE TO ADDRESS THE NEEDS OF BEGINNING ENGLISH LEARNERS?

In an effort to address these gaps and challenges, many districts are scrambling to find the right answers to help their ELs succeed. Because this is a fast-growing population, some schools are being reactive to the growth as opposed to being proactive about it. Rather than create programming and

plans for the certainty that beginning speakers of English will enroll, schools use a "wait and see" approach, figuring that the best means for educating ELs is to do so as it is happening. In the scenario at the opening of this chapter, for example, the school secretary responds with "We'll have to figure something out."

Some schools isolate ELs from English-speaking peers (Gándara, 2010). Perhaps their thinking is that students who are not yet familiar with the language need a completely separate program. Indeed, among the nation's schools, beginning-level ELs are often separated from their English-speaking peers by virtue of being placed in classrooms in which they do not associate with native English speakers and/or are isolated by being taken out of the classroom (Gándara, 2010). Other schools believe that ELs should be part of the whole school and provide them with an educational program that is almost entirely in the general classroom, figuring that these students learn best by being immersed with fluent English speakers (Haynes, 2007b; Zacarian, 2011). This response is made with the assumption that students learn English best on their own through an immersion experience and does not pay particular attention to the language, cultural, and learning needs of ELs. As a result, most are finding that these approaches are not successful.

To address these gaps and challenges, some schools are drawing from various models of English language and academic development (which we discuss in Chapter 4), including bilingual education, sheltered instruction, structured immersion, and English as a second language, assuming that these will address all of their ELs' needs. Others are purchasing textbook series that have accompanying supplemental materials for ELs. In these instances, schools hope that these modifications will satisfy what is needed to help them effectively address the needs of their ELs as they enroll in school.

Unfortunately, these programs and textbooks have not shown the positive growth for beginning ELs that is sorely needed. The OCR, a division of the U.S. Department of Education, has been investigating programs for ELs across our nation (Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Wang, 2010, p. 4). It is doing this in light of the poor outcomes of this population of students, their isolation in public schools, and poor communications with EL parents. In fact, U.S. educational officials have designated equal access to quality education as the civil rights issue of our generation (US Department of Education, October 6, 2011). The education of ELs plays a significant part in this designation. In addition, the advent of public charter schools has prompted further investigation by the OCR as recent reports on charter schools have found that they "stratify students by race, class and possibly language . . . [and] are more racially isolated than traditional public schools in virtually every state and large metropolitan area in the nation" (Frankenberg et al., 2010, p. 4).

The situations described in the scenarios in this chapter are emblematic of many schools. Whether they have large or small populations of ELs, educators have not yet figured out how to welcome this growing population into the fold of what we call school. They do not have procedures in place to meet the needs of beginning-level ELs.

Whereas much has been written about teaching ELs, including books that we have written on this topic, little has been written for these specific stages of English language acquisition as a whole school–whole community effort. There is an urgent need for this way of thinking.

Perhaps the political climate for educating ELs has perpetuated our lack of responsiveness for students who are just beginning to learn English or the lack of available resources for beginning speakers of English and the preparation of their teachers. Regardless of the reasons, beginning ELs are all too often an isolated and marginalized population in U.S. schools and, at the same time, the most vulnerable and at-risk-of-failing population.

When students and their families do not feel welcomed into the community, such as in Mei's case, it can foretell a troublesome future. When a student is not valued and honored as a learner and member of the school, and parents are equally disconnected from the important introductory process, their investment in learning and being connected as members can range from being significantly impacted to destroyed. The importance of the transition process from one language and culture to another cannot be minimized. This involves the need to learn a new language, the explicit and implicit rules of a new culture (including that of the school), and the academic content and thinking skills needed to learn in the context of a U.S. public school.

## USING A THREE-PHASE PLANNING APPROACH FOR BEGINNING LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

Much has been written about the merits of early intervention. Early intervention programs are those in which students' needs are addressed when they enroll in school and, when appropriate, before school begins. The rationale for this thinking is that students will receive much-needed support as it is needed and to the degree in which it is needed so that they may be ready to learn grade-level content and be active members of their learning communities. Such well-known educational activities as preschool programming and *Response to Intervention,* in which schools systematically provide interventions when they are needed to prevent students from failing (Hamayan, Marler, Sanchez-Lopez, & Damico, 2007), speak to the advantages of our being proactive about using early

intervention techniques. Similarly, schools need specific, well-developed and proven-to-be-effective programming that addresses the sociocultural, language, academic, and thinking skill needs of beginning ELs.

Also, parents of ELs must be welcomed into their child's school. When parents and students do not speak English, the barrier for them to access school and for the school to access them can seem and be overwhelming. Addressing the needs of entry and beginning ELs and their families requires that we think intentionally and anew about the ways in which our schools are prepared for this growing population as they enroll in our schools. In this book, we provide a means for schools to be intentionally responsive to the needs of entry- and beginning-level ELs and their families.

In this book, we present a three-pronged approach for creating an environment in which ELs and their families are intentionally prepared to be active participants and members of their school communities as they enroll in a school for a first exposure to English. This approach consists of the following steps:

1. Identify and implement what is needed for beginning ELs and their families to be assets and active members of the classroom and school communities in a social and academic way.

2. Design and modify instructional programming for entry- and beginning-level learners of English.

3. Provide professional development to all school personnel so that the school environment and academic programs are inclusive of beginning-level ELs.

## SUMMARY

In this chapter, we described the increasing number of ELs in the nation's public and public charter schools, highlighting the following:

- the growth of ELs in relation to the total general student population
- the number of languages represented
- the academic performance outcomes of ELs
- what we mean by "beginning ELs"
- our rationale for using a three-pronged approach to create an environment in which ELs and their families are active participants and members of their school community