Hmong High School Students in Afterschool

Effects on Achievement, Behavior, and Self-Esteem

by Kimberley A. M. Boyer and Susan M. Tracz

By 2040, Asian Americans are expected to account for 10 percent of the country's total population (Lee, 1999). However, few studies focus on afterschool interventions for Asian-American young people or examine how afterschool programming affects them. One reason may be the myth of the model minority, the stereotype that Asian-American students are all high-achieving conformists (Olsen, 1999; Walker-Moffat, 1995). However, Asian Americans are far from being a monolithic group. For one thing, their backgrounds are highly diverse.

The Asian population is made up of 31 different ethnic groups who speak close to 300 languages and dialects (Olsen, 1999). Among these groups, wide differences in experiences are common. Recent immigrants, particularly those from underprivileged areas where education levels are low, are less likely to have the resources to support their children's learning than are immigrants from more affluent regions. Experience of trauma before and during immigration likewise takes its toll. For example, the families of the Hmong students who are the focus of this study came to the U.S. as refugees, often after long and debilitating stays in refugee camps. The children of such immigrant families must cope not only with language and cultural differences but also with recent trauma and with all the challenges of living in poverty. Contrary to

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the "model minority" stereotype, these young people face at least as many barriers to educational and social success as do members of other minority groups in this country.

Afterschool programs can support Asian-American young people by providing academic support and culturally specific programming designed to help them bridge their native and adopted cultures. However, little is known about the effect of afterschool participation on academic and social outcomes for Asian-American students. This causal-comparative study helps to fill this gap by studying the differences in achievement, behavior, and self-esteem between Hmong students who did and did not participate in afterschool programs in two high schools in the Central Valley of California. The focus on a specific ethnic group is a reminder that Asian Americans are not a single entity but a diverse set of groups. Our study helps to fill another gap in the literature by focusing on the high school level, where the effects of afterschool programming are much less well documented than at the elementary and middle school levels.

The Experience of Hmong Students

Beginning in 1975, the Hmong from northern Laos began to immigrate to the United States (Bliatout, Downing, Lewis, & Yang, 1988). Recruited by the CIA during the Vietnam War, many Hmong later fled from Laos to Thailand, where large numbers lived in refugee camps for up to 20 years (Goodkind, 2006). Between 1975 and 1999, about 1.2 million Southeast Asian refugees resettled in the U.S. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement, 1999). Some of these families experienced catastrophic losses during the Vietnam War and in the refugee camps. These losses were further compounded by the losses involved in emigrating.

The total Hmong population in the U.S. is estimated at more than 235,000 people (California State University, Fresno, 2011). California's Hmong population is estimated to be nearly 85,000; in the Central Valley, the population is about 47,000. The adjustment issues these immigrants faced in the U.S. included poor health, post-traumatic stress disorder, poor English language skills, lack of formal education, conflicted intergenerational relations, unemployment, poverty, and identity confusion about family and other roles (Beiser, Turner, & Ganesan, 1989; Pernice & Brook, 1996).

According to Lee (2001), the proportion of Hmong who are 17 years or younger is 44.1 percent; the U.S. average is 24.3 percent. Initially, when Hmong students began to attend U.S. schools, their achievement rate was perceived to be low, and Hmong students had high dropout rates, in part because of the early marriages of girls. To compound the burden, newly educated English-speaking children often did not respect their elders as their culture expected, perceiving their parents and grandparents as clinging to traditional ways. Later this pattern was broken as two distinct types of Hmong students emerged. Some students were highly successful in school, reinforcing the stereotype of the model minority. Girls were higher achievers than boys. However, for other students, low achievement, early marriages and pregnancies, dropping out, and gang membership continued to be problems.

A Shortage of Research

The positive effects of afterschool programs generally are well documented. Teens in afterschool tend to have higher achievement, higher test scores in high school, better attendance, better study habits, and better psychosocial indicators (American Youth Policy Forum, 2006; Espino, Fabiano, & Pearson, 2004; Fabiano, Pearson, Reisner, & Williams, 2006; Goerge, Cusick, Wasserman, & Gladden, 2007; Vandell, Reisner, & Pierce, 2007; Welsh, Russell, Williams, Reisner, & White, 2002). These positive outcomes are especially important for young teens and high school students, who are increasingly likely to drop out of school or engage in risky behaviors as they grow older.

Most of the research on the effect of afterschool programs on high school students examines programs in middle school, where the foundation is laid for academic and social success in high school. For example, Vandell and colleagues (2007) found that middle school students in high-quality afterschool programs experienced significant gains in mathematics achievement. They also found a reduction in incidence of misconduct, with a corresponding increase in positive work habits. Similarly, researchers (Espino et al., 2004, Fabiano et al., 2006) examined the high school outcomes of eighth grade students who attended Citizen School afterschool programs in Boston. Fabiano and colleagues (2006) found that participating students had better school attendance, better English and math grades, and fewer school suspensions than did students who did not attend afterschool programs. In a study of LA's BEST programs for students in grades 6–9, Huang and colleagues (2005) followed four cohorts of students through grade 12. LA's BEST students were reported to have higher self-esteem and lower dropout rates than did matched nonparticipants (Huang, Kim, Marshall, & Pérez, 2005).

Studies of afterschool programs in high schools are less numerous because fewer students attend high school programs. Indeed, as students drop out, fewer even attend high school. The studies on the effects of afterschool programs on high school youth that do exist generally show

positive results. For example, a study of the After School Matters program in Chicago (Goerge et al., 2007) found that participants had fewer absences, fewer course failures, better high school graduation rates, and lower dropout rates than nonparticipants. A report by Hipps and Diaz (2007) on the After School Safety and Enrichment for Teens (ASSETs) program—also the setting of our research—revealed that ASSETs had some significant effects on students and schools. Participants passed California's English language arts and mathematics exit exams at significantly higher rates than did similarly situated students not involved in afterschool programs. The program also increased students' awareness of options after high school and facilitated positive relationships with adults and peers.

Ethnicity is rarely mentioned in these studies of the effects of middle and high school afterschool programs. In those that do specify the ethnicities of the student samples, the percentages of Asian-American students are predictably low, from 3 percent (Vandell et al., 2007) to 9 percent (Welsh et al., 2002). In the LA's BEST study, Asian-American students were the third largest group after Hispanic and African-American students (Huang et al., 2005). Even in these studies, however, the effects of afterschool programs specifically on Asian-American students go essentially unexamined.

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We know of no research that examines afterschool programming for Hmong high school students. The only study we have found of afterschool programs serving low-income Hmong immigrant youth is that of Lee and Hawkins (2008), who conducted a qualitative study of community-based programs in Lakeside, Michigan, serving children ages 6–12. Through observations and interviews, Lee and Hawkins examined how these programs supported students' development of their cultural identity by drawing on Hmong culture, history, and family structure as well as mainstream American culture. Children were encouraged to learn English while continuing to speak the Hmong language. The director advised students to adopt aspects of the dominant American culture that were necessary for social mobility and success but not to give up their cultural identities. Lee and Hawkins concluded that participants felt safe and comfortable in trying out their new Hmong-American identities, so that they developed their self-esteem and could be successful in school. However, the study did not quantify academic and psychosocial outcomes among participating Hmong youth.

Methods

In order to begin to quantify the effect of afterschool programming on Hmong high school students, we conducted a causal-comparative study of the differences in academic outcomes, academic behavior, and self-esteem between such students who attended and did not attend afterschool programs.

Setting

The setting for our study was the After-School Safety and Enrichment for Teens (ASSETs) program in two high schools in the Central Valley of California. These two high schools average approximately 2,600 students apiece in grades 9–12; both have high Hmong enrollments. These schools were chosen for this study because they were early ASSETs program grantees, beginning the ASSETs program during the 2007–2008 academic year. Our research covered the 2008–2009 academic year.

ASSETs is a 21st Century Community Learning Centers program established by the California Legislature in 2002 as part of a statewide effort to address the underachievement of California youth (California Department of Education, 2008). Priority is given to projects that serve students in schools that, like the two schools in this study, ranked in the lowest three deciles of the Academic Performance Index (Hipps & Diaz, 2007).

The ASSETs programs we studied offered academic support activities every day. Academic programs included mentoring, tutoring, and workforce readiness training, as well as frequent and extensive training to prepare students for academic testing. Students could drop in and out depending on their schedules and participation in other ASSETs activities. Cultural enrichment and awareness activities like dance and cooking were offered in modules so students could pick and choose. These classes typically met three to five times a week. Program facilitators were school teachers or college students.

At each of the two schools, about 200 students attended the ASSETs program each day. Roughly 15 percent of the attendees were Hmong. In both schools, all students were invited to attend, but program facilitators and mentors purposefully recruited struggling students who were

referred by teachers and administrators to take advantage of the academic help the ASSETs programs offered.

Participants

We recruited from among all Hmong-American students in the two high schools chosen for this study. The final sample consists of 226 Hmong high school students. Approximately one-third (77) participated in the afterschool program, and two-thirds (149) did not.

Of the 176 students for whom gender information was available, 42 percent were male and 58 percent were female. Nearly equal numbers of students were in all four grades, 9–12. According to the student surveys, parental education levels were low, with 36 percent of students' parents having only an elementary school education or less and another 41 percent having some high school education. We did not have demographic data for all students because some students did not answer those questions on the survey.

Data Sources

To measure academic performance, we used student scores from the California High School Exit Exam for English language arts (ELA) and mathematics. Only 11th- and 12th-grade students take these tests, so scores were not available for students in grades 9 and 10. We assessed academic performance using cumulative grade point average (GPA) and academic behavior using individual attendance rates. The attendance rate was calculated as the number of days a student was present in school divided by the number of days that student was enrolled. All of these data came from school district records.

To measure the affective outcome of interest, we used the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1989), the most widely used self-esteem measure in social science research. The Rosenberg scale contains 10 items that are rated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." We administered this assessment to participating students along with a survey of pertinent demographic information.

Procedures

In order to examine differences between Hmong youth who did and did not participate in the ASSETs program, we took several steps. First, we secured approval from the institutional review board of California State University, Fresno. At one school the principal assisted with recruiting students from their homerooms. In the other school, students were recruited with announcements asking them to come to the library for further information. As an incentive, participating students were entered into a lottery for an iPod. Once students volunteered, we gave them informational packets that included an introductory letter; a consent form; and a DVD that educated the students and their parents about the purpose of the study, the surveys, and other relevant materials. After permission was secured, we brought students together to take our survey, which included self-esteem and demographic measures.

We then divided the 224 Hmong students whose parents gave consent and who responded to our survey into two groups: students who had participated in the ASSETs program for at least 30 days since August 2008 and students who had not. We identified members of these groups based on their answers to our survey questions and then checked the afterschool site attendance databases. We chose 30 days as the cutoff point based on research by Hipps and Diaz (2007) indicating that significant increases in student achievement took place at 30 days or more of participation in the ASSETs program. Furthermore, students who dropped out of ASSETs tended to leave within the first 30 days, so that those who persisted past 30 days tended to continue in the program.

Next, we collected archival 2008–2009 data for students in both groups, including exit exam scores in ELA and math, cumulative GPAs, and school attendance. Using student ID numbers as identifying information, we merged our survey data with the archival data for analysis. We ran a variety of statistical tests to determine significance. For example, we ran chi-square tests of independence to determine whether gender, grade, or parent education level affected whether or not students participated in the afterschool program. We calculated average results for each of the dependent variables—ELA scores, math scores, GPA, attendance rate, and self-esteem—by afterschool participation and by grade and then ran tests to determine whether these results were significant at the 0.05 level.

Effects of Afterschool Participation on Hmong High School Students

We found no significant differences in afterschool participation by gender or parent education level. Students whose parents had only an elementary school education, for example, were no more or less likely to attend the afterschool program than students whose parents had college degrees. However, we did find a significant chi-square value between grade and afterschool participation: a higher proportion of students in grade 12 than in other grades participated in ASSETs.

Tests comparing the effect of afterschool participation on academic outcomes showed some statistically significant differences. We found that the difference in GPA by ASSETs participation was in the negative direction: Students who participated had an average GPA of 2.05, lower than the average GPA of nonparticipants, 2.47. However, on the California High School Exit Exam, 11th- and 12th-graders who participated in the afterschool program had a higher average ELA score than did nonparticipants. The average ELA score was 371 for participants and 355 for nonparticipants, a statistically significant difference. (The passing score is 350.) Participants also had higher math scores than did nonparticipants, though the difference was not statistically significant.

In our measure of academic behavior, ASSETs participants had significantly better average attendance rates, at 99 percent, than did nonparticipants, at 95 percent.

The findings for self-esteem were mixed. Ninth-grade students who did not participate in ASSETs had higher scores for self-esteem than did participants. However, for all other grades, participants had higher self-esteem scores than did nonparticipants, with participating seniors having the highest self-esteem score of all.

Understanding the Results

In contrast to much of the published research on afterschool programming for middle and high school students (Fabiano et al., 2006; Goerge et al., 2007), which reports higher achievement rates for afterschool students than for non-participating peers, our findings were mixed. Though students in the ASSETs program achieved higher scores on the ELA exit exam than did non-participating students, participating students had lower GPAs. It must be noted that GPAs for both groups of Hmong students were relatively low: just 2.05 for participating students and 2.47 for non-participating students. In this respect, Hmong students in this study apparently experienced an achievement gap comparable to the often-cited gap experienced by Hispanic and African-American students. Clearly the Hmong students in our study did not fit the model minority stereotype of Asian Americans.

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The relatively low GPAs of all Hmong students may be at least partially explained by cultural and educational background. Formal schooling in all subjects relies on reading and writing. Hmong is an ancient culture, but, unlike many Asian cultures, its language has only recently acquired a system of writing (Bliatout et al., 1988). Meanwhile, about 40 percent of the parents of the students in our study had, at best, only a grade school education—a finding consistent with their backgrounds as refugees. Parents with little education themselves, and particularly those raising children in marginal settings such as refugee camps, are not likely to engage in the child-rearing practices that prepare children to excel in school, such as reading aloud. As a group, then, the Hmong students in our sample may have started with an educational deficit that helps to explain their relatively low grades.

The fact that afterschool participants had lower average GPAs than did nonparticipants may also be attributed to the students' starting point before the afterschool intervention. Students with low GPAs were targeted for recruitment into the ASSETs programs so that they could benefit from the specialized academic support the programs offered. Tutoring in core subject areas, credit recovery classes, and exit exam tutorials were designed to help ASSETs students get and stay on track to graduate. As a group, ASSETs students are likely to have started out with lower GPAs than their non-participating peers.

Two areas in which the ASSETs program does seem to have helped participating students are preparation for the high school exit exam and school attendance. Test preparation was offered to all students in the high schools in our study, but it was offered only sporadically, and students often did not take advantage of the opportunity or use it regularly. Meanwhile, ASSETs students received targeted tutoring to help them with the exam. Evidence of the effectiveness of this exit exam training is that participants had significantly higher mean scores on the ELA exam than did nonparticipants. ASSETs students also had better attendance rates than did non-participating students. These findings echo the research described above that found higher results on some measures of academic achievement and behaviors for afterschool participants.

The ASSETs program also seems to have had positive effects on self-esteem. In the ninth grade, students attending the afterschool program had lower average self-esteem scores than those who did not attend. Perhaps these students were experiencing more freedom

as they started high school, while the ASSETs students felt confined by their participation in a school-related activity after school. However, students in grades 10–12 who participated in ASSETs had higher self-esteem scores than did those who did not participate. The highest self-esteem rating was for seniors who were assisted academically by ASSETs as they neared the achievement of a high school diploma. Program participants may have benefitted from the positive adult relationships, academic support, and Hmong cultural enrichment provided by ASSETs, similar to the students in Lee and Hawkins's (2008) qualitative study.

School and afterschool educators who work with Hmong students should pay particular attention to the students' distinct cultural context. These professionals need to understand the ecological realities and ethno-cultural dynamics faced by Hmong students in order to help them more effectively.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The ASSETs afterschool program produced positive outcomes for the Hmong high school students in our sample. The implication is that other Hmong high school students could also benefit from afterschool programs. If they receive intensive test preparation, students are likely to improve their test scores. They may be more likely to attend during the regular school day if they are motivated to attend the afterschool program. Furthermore, exposure to experiences related to their home culture with the support of caring afterschool staff may improve their self-esteem.

Self-esteem is one possible indicator of mental health status. The process of acculturation—the cognitive and behavioral changes brought about by close contact with a different culture—can be stressful for acculturated individuals, often producing depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Rhee, Chang, & Rhee, 2003). As Rhee and colleagues (2003) found, professionals must recognize the importance of communication, within families and across cultural groups, in promoting self-esteem among adolescents. School and afterschool educators who work with Hmong students should pay particular attention to the students' distinct cultural context. These professionals need to understand the ecological realities and ethno-cultural dynamics faced by Hmong students in order to help them more effectively. Many afterschool programs like ASSETs strive to address these realities. Afterschool programs' ongoing efforts along these lines can produce positive social-emotional outcomes not only among Hmong students but also among students from any disadvantaged immigrant group.

As with all studies, this one leads to future research possibilities. Future studies that address academic differences among Asian subgroups, including the Hmong, may be useful in dispelling the myth of Asians as the model minority. Studies comparing the academic and social outcomes of Hmong students and of members of other non-Asian minorities may find more similarities than differences. Other research could compare outcomes among Hmong students whose families have lived in the U.S. for longer and shorter periods of time. This avenue of research could provide useful insights into Hmong students' educational and acculturation processes.

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