



Promoting positive youth development for Asian American youth in a Teen Resource Center: Key components, outcomes, and lessons learned



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ABSTRACT

This study explored Asian American youth experiences in peer-led youth development programming delivered at a federally qualified community health center. We used a qualitative approach to examine narrative data from in-depth interviews with 18 study participants. Our analysis involved data immersion, coding, thematic sorting of coded excerpts, and comparisons of themes across interviews. Several features identified by participants as being important to positive experiences were consistent with key features of positive youth development programs described in existing literature. These included: 1) an abundance of opportunities for skill development and active participation, 2) an atmosphere promulgating positive social norms, 3) a safe space for youth to explore deeply personal issues, 4) an inclusive environment, and 5) a supportive organizational culture and program staff. Participants perceived positive development across individual, peer, family, school, and community contexts of their lives, and reported various aspects of growth in identity development, interpersonal relationships, practical life skills, healthy behaviors, career choice, and civic engagement. This study contributes to the knowledge about aspects of youth development programs that are successful in engaging and supporting Asian American youth.

1. Introduction

As one of the fastest-growing racial/ethnic subgroups in the United States, the Asian American youth population (ages 0–17) is expected to increase by 86.7% between 2014 and 2060, outpacing the projected percentage increase of 11.8% in the overall U.S. youth population (Colby & Ortman, 2015). Comprising more than 20 unique cultures, Asian Americans are extremely diverse in their language, religion, histories, and educational and financial attainment (Association of Asian Pacific Community Health Organizations [AAPCHO], 2015; Liu et al., 2012). Existing research tends to lump diverse Asian ethnic groups into one category, largely ignoring their heterogeneity and treating them as a single model minority (Jacob, Gray, & Johnson, 2013; Ramakrishnan & Ahmad, 2014). Although Asian American adolescents in the aggregate have lower rates of substance abuse, unsafe sexual behavior, and status dropout than any other racial/ethnic peer group (Hong, Huang, Sabri, & Kim, 2011; Sickmund & Puzanchera, 2014; Tosh & Simmons, 2007), Asian ethnic groups face diverse risks and stressors stemming from acculturative stress, minority experience, identity conflict, and intergenerational tension (Liu et al., 2012; Rogers-

Sirin, Ryce, & Ririn, 2014). Asian American youth are also under-represented in youth programs and prevention strategies (Yancey, Ortega, & Kumanyika, 2006; Lee, Borden, Serido, and Perkins, 2009b), although they are more engaged with, satisfied with, and likely to benefit from youth programs and health promotion interventions that are culturally and linguistically appropriate (Kegler, Young, Marshall, Bui, & Rodine, 2005; Wang-Schweig, Kviz, Altfeld, Miller, & Miller, 2014). This study explored the perceptions and experiences of adolescents and young adults who received peer-led youth development programming at a community health center serving a primarily Asian American community. We aimed to narrow the knowledge gap in the youth development literature about what components are key to engaging and fostering positive outcomes for Asian American youth (Lauricella, Valdez, Okamoto, Helm, & Zaremba, 2016; Y. M. Lee, Florez, Tariman, McCarter, & Riesche, 2015). To our knowledge, this is the first study to examine youth-focused programs delivered at a community health center, and to consider how such programs can leverage the resources of these centers, which are access points to high quality primary and preventive care services for the most vulnerable and underserved communities (AAPCHO, 2015).

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1.1. Risk and protective factors

Youth development practitioners, policy makers, and prevention researchers believe that social and environmental factors have critical influences on adolescent health and developmental outcomes (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004). In several contextual settings—individual, peer, family, school, and community—youth may be exposed to risk factors that increase their likelihood of engaging in problem behaviors (Huang, Lee, & Arganza, 2004). A risk and protective factors model is frequently used in conjunction with a positive youth development approach in order to develop strategies for preventing youth problems and promoting healthy youth development (Small & Memmo, 2004). Strengthening protective factors can help youth cope successfully with risk and resist problem behaviors (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006a).

Asian American youth are exposed to diverse risk factors specific to their cultural background (Huang et al., 2004). The majority of Asian American youth are immigrants or children of immigrants, and encounter issues that stem from their immigration histories (Liu et al., 2012). Asian American youth and their parents have different experiences with acculturation—the adoption by an immigrant group of values, attitudes, and behaviors of the host society—and this deepens their generational and cultural rift, causing conflicts between them (Rogers-Sirin et al., 2014). Asian immigrant parents are often minimally involved in their children's schooling due to their long working hours, limited English skills, and unfamiliarity with the U.S. education system; they thereby often lack the capacity to provide the emotional and academic support that their children need (Beam, Casabianca, & Chen, 2011; Hune & Takeuchi, 2009). At the same time, Asian American youth become their parents' English language interpreters and negotiators. Such roles can feel unfairly burdensome to Asian American youth, and contribute stress and tension to their parental relationships (Bajaj, 2008).

Asian American youth often struggle with the differences that they perceive between the expectations and values of American society and that of their immigrant families (Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001). Feelings of isolation and anxiety are common among Asian American youth who may lack the English language skills to effectively communicate with their teachers and peers (Lee, Juon, et al., 2009a). Seeking social acceptance, they are prone to rejecting their ethnic culture in favor of the dominant culture (Leung, 2004). However, by distancing themselves from their ethnic heritage, these adolescents compound the acculturative stress that they may experience while struggling to form their identities, thus negatively impacting their mental health (Lee, Juon, et al., 2009a). Asian American students have the lowest reported levels of self-esteem within secondary schools, compared to all other racial/ethnic groups (Bachman, O'Malley, Freedman-Doan, Trzesniewski, & Donnellan, 2011). Those who readily abandon their heritage culture exhibit higher rates of substance use, low test scores, and dropping out of school (Leung, 2004; Thai, Connell, & Tebes, 2010). Having a bicultural identity has been defined as exhibiting comfort and proficiency in both one's ethnic culture and the culture of the host society, holding values from both cultures, and identifying with both cultures (Schwartz & Unger, 2010). The formation of a bicultural identity among Asian American youth contributes to a healthy sense of self, high self-esteem, and openness to diverse cultures and perspectives (Phinney et al., 2001; Tadmor, Tetlock, & Peng, 2009).

Huang et al. (2004) identified several other protective factors, in addition to having a bicultural identity, that could mitigate risk and increase resilience among Asian American adolescents: the capacity to cope with racism and prejudice, a sense of peer belonging, parental involvement in schools and other social settings, a variety of supports from extended family members, and relevant and attractive youth-focused programs in the ethnic community.

1.2. Positive youth development

With the growing acceptance that an adolescent who is free of risk factors is not necessarily “healthy” or “fully prepared” (Pittman, 1999), the dominant framework of youth prevention efforts has moved away from focusing solely on reducing risk to appreciating the diverse resources and supports that promote successful developmental outcomes (Duncan et al., 2007). Positive youth development (PYD) represents a paradigm shift away from a deficit model of development, to a strengths-based approach, that recognizes youths' need for ongoing support and challenging opportunities to nurture their talents, practice new skills, and develop competencies needed to succeed in the spheres of work, family, and civic life (Benson et al., 2006a; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Since PYD gained prominence in the mid-1990s, many researchers have contributed to developing an operational definition of PYD, core PYD constructs and principles, and conceptualization of positive developmental nutrients or assets that predict developmental success (Benson et al., 2006a).

Benson et al. (2006a) distilled five core constructs of PYD through a synthesis of the literature: a) developmental contexts (e.g., schools, families, neighborhoods, programs), with the potential to generate supports and opportunities; b) the child's own nature and inherent capacity to grow, thrive, and actively engage with supportive contexts; c) the child's developmental strengths (e.g., skills and competencies important for successful engagement in the world); d) developmental success as measured by the reduction of high-risk behavior; and e) developmental success as measured by the promotion of thriving and resilience. In contrast to the risk and protective factors approach, positive youth development places additional emphasis on providing youth with supports, opportunities, and developmental assets across a broad range of developmental contexts in order to promote competence, achievement, and thriving (Benson et al., 2006a).

Another prominent framework of PYD is the “Five Cs” model of PYD that has been developed over several years with contributions from a number of youth development researchers (Heck & Subramaniam, 2009). The Five Cs model was empirically tested using longitudinal data from the 4-H Study of PYD, which sought to understand the mechanisms involved in the emergence of PYD (Lerner et al., 2005). By following the developmental course of 1700 fifth graders, the 4-H study provided empirical support for five latent PYD constructs of Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Caring; and suggested that the more youth exhibited these Five Cs, the more likely they would be to achieve developmental success or thriving, and make a positive Contribution (a sixth C) to themselves, their family, community, and civil society (Lerner et al., 2005).

Building on the conceptualization of positive youth development as comprising core developmental characteristics that lead to positive outcomes among youth, Lerner (2004) coined the “Big Three” features of effective PYD programs. According to the “Big Three” components, effective youth development programs are marked by: 1) sustained and caring adult-youth relations; 2) activities that build important life skills; and 3) opportunities for youth participation and leadership in community-based activities (Lerner, 2004). These three essential attributes are associated with key indicators of PYD (e.g., the “Five Cs”), and having them distinguishes youth development programs from youth programs that do not focus on youth development (Lerner, 2004; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003).

Positive youth development has shown promise in helping to steer youth toward healthy outcomes through structured programs and activities in after-school or community settings. Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray, and Foster (1998) found that the most successful youth development programs provided safe and caring environments where adults supported and empowered youth; provided activities that were challenging and involved youth at all stages from idea generation to implementation; were flexible to the needs of youth and the community; maintained high expectations; and promoted positive social

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