

Exploring "At Risk"

An Ethnography on an After-School
Program Targeting "At-Risk" Elementary
School Students in the Rural Upper Midwest

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Ethnographic Research Methods

Abstract

We used participant observation and individual interviews to determine the effectiveness of the PRIMETIME program (Promoting Responsible Individuals through Mentoring and Enrichment: a collaborative effort to assure out-of-school time programming for Northfield youth in grades 4-12). We set out to determine how effectively the goals of the PRIMETIME programs at the Northfield elementary schools are being met. To do this, we examined what impact PRIMETIME has on the students who attend in terms of academics, social development, and personal satisfaction. We also evaluated the roles and responsibilities of staff, volunteers, and teachers to better understand their relationships with the students and how this interaction works to fulfill the PRIMETIME goals. By including the opinions of staff, volunteers, and teachers we were able to help identify benefits, challenges, and areas for improvement for PRIMETIME. We found that the PRIMETIME program is generally enjoyed by students and helps to expand students' social networks. In addition, the program fulfilled five agreed-upon domains of school preparedness. There were areas for improvement, the foremost being a need for better organization and communication among staff, workers, and volunteers. Overall, the PRIMETIME program is beneficial to the goal of maintaining and increasing on-time graduation rates by solidifying social networks and increasing school preparedness.

Setting

With the increased demand for improved student performance and accountability in Minnesota as well as the nation, many school districts have put forth a lot of effort and resources develop intervention programs to help improve the literacy skills of students. One way that the Northfield public school system has been filling this demand for the

past two years has been through the PRIMETIME Collaborative, a network of nine organizations and youth programs that have provided support for over 1,000 Northfield students.

We conducted a majority of our research at one of these organizations called the PLUS after school program at Greenvale Elementary School. PLUS is an academic and recreational program which tries to meet the needs of its students by providing additional educational services for its students. We conducted a smaller portion of our research at the Bridgewater Elementary School PLUS afterschool program, which follows the same day by day format as the Greenvale program.

Northfield, Minnesota

Northfield MN is located about 35 miles from the Minneapolis/St. Paul area. It has an estimated population of 19,331 people. 5,000 are St. Olaf and Carleton College residents. 89.4% of the population is white, while 5.7% is Latino, 2.4% is Asian, and 1.3% represents other races. Northfield provides a variety of living possibilities for individuals and families of diverse economic status (www.muninetguide.com). The average cost of living is 80.6 (low, U.S. average is 100), with living options including houses, town homes, apartments, mobile homes, retirement homes, and government funded living. Two private liberal arts colleges are in Northfield, as well as the Northfield Public School District (3 elementary schools, 1 middle school, and 1 high school), The Alternative Learning Center and ArtTech (for grades 9-12), Saint Dominic's Catholic School (K-7), and Prairie Creek (K-5). There are also a variety of pre-schools, educational daycare and church childcare programs. Northfield is home to several businesses, the major employers are: St. Olaf College, Carleton College, Malt-O-Meal, Sheldahl, Northfield Public Schools, and College City Beverage. With the educational,

economic, and bureaucratic institutions unified into 7 square miles, the capabilities for social improvement are strong.

The town of Northfield provides an environment open to improvement and change. The rise in the Latino population is one major change in the Northfield community. Latinos make up highest minority group among Northfield's minority populations. Several members of the Latino population speak English as a second language to Spanish because they have immigrated from a Hispanic country (the majority are from Mexico), or they were raised in a Spanish-speaking home. The Latino population generally has a lower income than other Northfield residents and forms a tight social network. The majority live either in Viking Terrace, a mobile home community, or in low-cost apartment complexes.

Greenvale Park Elementary School

Greenvale is one of the locations for the PRIMETIME after-school program and is one of the three neighborhood elementary schools in the Northfield Public School District. Greenvale has 537 students in grades K-5. 79% of the students are white and 16.8% are Latino (www.muninetguide.com). The Latino population is the highest percentage of any other school in the district. Greenvale is on the north-west side of Northfield, near St. Olaf College, and is located among several middle class neighborhoods, apartment complexes, and both of Northfield's mobile home parks (Viking Terrace and Florella's).

With the school cheer, "Stand up and cheer for Greenvale, it's the place for me. We are a school of winners, proud as proud can be. Working, learning, sharing together happily. So stand up and cheer for Greenvale, it's the place for me," this educational institution establishes a goal for all of its students. With an average of 15 students per class, teachers are able to build strong relationships with the students through praise

and discipline. However, some students need more attention, which the school also offers. There are accelerated programs, like Challenge Math, for students to attend if their level exceeds their peers. There are decelerated programs, like ESL, that assists students affected by a language barrier.

Although only 12.5% of the students that attend Greenvale Elementary school are classified as Hispanic, 43% of the students that participate in the PLUS after school program are classified as “students of color” most of these students being Hispanic. The majority of first and second grade students that were interviewed and observed at Greenvale Elementary school were between the ages of 6 and 8. 80% of these students participated in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes.

Bridgewater Elementary School

Bridgewater is the newest of the three public elementary schools, built in 1999. Located on the south-east part of town, Bridgewater's property lies within sight of Northfield's high school and middle school. There are 612 students grades K-5 and 12.4% are Latino (muninetguide.com). Their school mission statement is to "be a respectful, successful, safe community of high-achieving learners." One notable difference between Bridgewater and Greenvale is the interior structure of the two buildings. Greenvale essentially contains one large open space with dividers seperating its classrooms, while Bridgewater has walls which help contain noise. Bridgewater is the farthest elementary school from the colleges.

Methods

In order to examine how the PRIMETIME program operates, assess its effectiveness, and determine ways by which it can be improved, we conducted open-

ended interviews and participant observation at two of the three elementary schools involved. Because the program's goal is for students to graduate high school, it was vital to explore students' perceptions of the program and their future plans. Teachers, volunteers, and coordinators, on the other hand, have an intimate perspective on what the students' specific needs are in order to realize these goals. Participants, therefore, were selected based on their involvement with and knowledge of the PRIMETIME program. At the school with the largest program, Greenvale Park Elementary, we interviewed four teachers, the program coordinator, six college volunteers, twenty second-grade students, and eleven first-grade students. At Bridgewater Elementary school, which has a smaller program, we interviewed one teacher and ten second-grade students.

We asked students questions in five categories: school and the PRIMETIME program, language, family, authority, and future education. We asked teachers, coordinators, and volunteers questions about the operations of the program, the hierarchy of authority, suggestions for program improvement, potential goals for the program, benefits for students, social networks, Spanish language, and communication.

We chose to become participant-observers in order to more deeply understand the operations of the program. In order to conduct participant observation, each researcher became a student volunteer for the program. One student worked with second graders on the day portion of the program for nine months. Another worked with first graders on enrichment days for four months. The other researcher worked on activity days (including swimming lesson days) with first and second graders for four months.

The interview responses were confidential. Identifiable information provided by the adult and student subjects was coded and assigned project-specific identifiers through the use of pseudonyms or numbers to the subjects to keep their answers to questions separate from their identities. These "crosswalk" documents were kept secure through locked computer files, and are accessible to the researchers and to the community partners. Community partners do not know of the participation of the adult subjects (teachers, staff, and volunteers). Names were not attached to the answers given, and will only be known to researchers through a coding sheet. Time was the only cost to participants. Personal interviews did not exceed 30 minutes for students and 60 minutes for adults. Benefits to the participant included the opportunity to voice opinions about the program and help the coordinators of PRIMEtime ensure the continuation of an effective program.

Strengths of our methods were confidentiality and in-depth understanding of the complexity of individual's views because of the open-ended aspect of our interview technique. Weaknesses were a non-representative sample size and time constraints, considering that the PRIMEtime program was much different the last few years. We were also limited by issues of interviewing young children. Our status as three college-age, Caucasian females shapes our biases, what the interviewees are willing to convey to us, and how they act around us.

Problem

Program Structure

The PRIMEtime after-school program is a Minnesota grant-funded program run by teachers, coordinators, and volunteers and is geared toward at-risk students. The program coordinator explained that the federal government currently defines "at-risk" as

students who qualify for free lunch. These qualification guidelines are set by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Our study focused on elementary school students in Northfield, Minnesota. Students could qualify for this program by meeting one or more of thirty qualifications including status as a non-native English speaker and a free lunch recipient.

Enrichment Days

At Greenvale Park Elementary, Tuesdays and Thursdays are “enrichment days” in which students are in a classroom setting with a certified ESL teacher. The class meets from 3:30-4:30 pm after a quick snack for the students. Teachers structure academic games and activities around a central theme to generally improve students’ reading and math skills. For example, during our time at Greenvale, both the first and second grade classes were learning about the rainforest. The student to adult ratio is about 15 to 2, with 30 average children, two teachers, and two volunteers. A fourth grade girl, a sister of one of the students, helps out as well. Both teachers and volunteers speak Spanish as a second language, while the student helper speaks Spanish as a first language. All of the authority figures on enrichment days are female except for two college-age male volunteers and one high school volunteer. There are two classes; one is for first graders and the other for second graders. As Greenvale Park is built in an open-classroom design, the rooms are only split by two blackboards on wheels, making the enrichment sessions quite noisy.

Activity Days

At Greenvale Park Elementary, the activity days are every Monday and Wednesday. During the winter and colder spring months, students are kept to the enclosed gymnasium or the cafeteria. The student to adult ratio is about 10 to 1, with 50

total children and an average of 5 adults. They are connected by two different hallways, with the bathroom facilities in the halls. The cafeteria has long tables with attached benches that fold out from the wall. There are four each on two opposite sides, a total of 8 benches. The cafeteria is used for taking attendance and receiving a healthy snack (e.g. granola bar or all-natural fruit snacks). It is also a space for doing arts and crafts, usually coloring. In the gym, children are provided with seven jump ropes, two soccer balls, three trench balls, and two basketballs. Half of the gym is usually dedicated to a soccer game, while the other half has a game of HORSE or PIG at a basketball hoop, a variety of jump rope games, and ball/hula hoop throwing, and wrestling. The activity day part of the PRIMETIME program shares a small closet for its materials. The coordinator is a native Spanish speaker and is the third coordinator for Greenvale Park this year. There are four male volunteers. Two attend St. Olaf, one attends Carleton, and one is a Latino Northfield High School student. The high school student is the only Spanish speaker. There is also a middle-aged woman who always helps out in the cafeteria.

Later in the spring, Mondays are spent at the Northfield Middle School pool. All of the children take attendance and get their snack in the Greenvale cafeteria then take a bus across town to the middle school. When they arrive, girls and boys separate into the gendered locker rooms to change into their swimming attire. The two female PRIMETIME instructors are there supervising, as well as the Northfield Community Education and Recreation Director and three of her certified water safety employees. The children are kept in the shallow end of the pool (3 feet deep). Those who choose not to swim sit on the benches or go to one of the Middle School gyms with a couple of the male volunteers. The student to adult ratio is much narrower at the pool due to the increased number of staff.

Why the Program is Important

Education programs for mostly Latino students are of interest because of the growing population of Latinos in the United States. Cavazos-Reqh notes that “18.7% of the U.S. population older than the age of 5 years speak a language other than English at home, a number that doubled from 1980 to 2000” (Cavazos-Reqh 2008). It is also estimated that “currently over 19% of all students enrolled in Grades K-12 are Latino” (Cavazos-Reqh 2008). It is of interest specifically in Northfield because of the high population of school-age Latinos (16.8% of the students at Greenvale Park). Leaders in the program such as the hard-working and caring teachers, coordinators, and volunteers identified the need for more attention to these students. In a more and more competitive job market, it is vital that people graduate from high school in order to survive. One of the said goals of the program is future graduation from high school. Another said benefit is social interaction and a solidification of social networks.

Network Theory

Network theorists believe to instill values and social norms, relationships between humans, groups, corporations, or societies must be formed. These socializing processes internalize the desired (or undesired) behaviors in the actors (Ritzer, 420). This approach rejects many sociological theories which focus on motives produced from the isolated actor, and concentrates more on the “objective pattern of ties linking the members of society” (Ritzer, 421). One of the said benefits of PRIMETIME is the construction of social networks for the students. Because of this, we examine teacher-student relationships and family influences on education.

Emphasizing social ties helps link group A to C through B. To better explain this, if there is a tie between group A and B, and a tie between B and C, then there is a tie

between A and C. The coordinators of PRIMETIME (B) had a tie with the students (A) when they had a desire to improve Northfield's on-time graduation rate. However, this tie needed another social group to assist the program financially. So PRIMETIME (B) contacted the Minnesota Department of Public Education (C) by going through an extensive application process in order to receive a competitive grant. Since they were awarded the grant, PRIMETIME became the social bridge between the group of students receiving social and educational enrichment at no economic cost and the government, which now provides those economic costs.

Other important ties to observe are between college and high school volunteers, students of PRIMETIME, and the institutions of higher education. The college and high school students serve as a bridge of knowledge as to what high school and college life is like.

PRIMETIME has also networked with many other social groups and organizations in Northfield such as TORCH, Northfield Community Park and Recreation, Northfield City Pool, WINGS (Women in Northfield Giving Support), Northfield Area United Way, Healthy Community Initiatives, Connected Kids Mentoring Program, Comadres, and Project Friendship. The more social ties, the more social interactions, and the more social interactions, the more ideal norms and behaviors will be instilled. For example, the Northfield Community Park and Recreation Director assisted in the days spent at the middle school pool by hiring lifeguard certified swim coaches. Without this tie, PRIMETIME leaders may not have had access to such instructors, and the popular swim day may have never existed.

What we would like to see, therefore, is a stronger tie between the institutions of St. Olaf and Carleton College and PRIMETIME. We believe that if there is more public advertisement and recruiting for volunteers on campus (specifically in Spanish classes),

the at-risk students will form a tie with the colleges. Perhaps this tie will lead to a goal and a work ethic of the students to someday be members of a similar academic society.

Social Capital

Bourdieu identified three kinds of capital: cultural capital, social capital and symbolic capital. "Cultural capital involves various kinds of legitimate knowledge; social capital consists of valued social relations between people; symbolic capital stems from one's honor and prestige" (Ritzer, 523). Social capital in particular plays a large role in one of the goals of PRIMETIME. By expanding the students social networks, the PRIMETIME program increases their social capital. Because 80% of the students who attend the PRIMETIME afterschool program at Greenvale Elementary School come from Spanish speaking homes and are either first or second generation immigrants, their families are less likely to be acquainted with the community, the public school system and the school teachers. Families who have been living in Northfield longer are more likely to be acquainted with all of these things. Also, because many of the Latino students' family members are not native English speakers and most members of the Northfield community are not Spanish speakers, language also acts as a barrier to becoming acquainted with teachers and other members of the Northfield community. The PRIMETIME program offers students a way to connect with the community and increase their social capital through giving students time to better acquaint themselves with teachers, high school and college volunteers, and other PRIMETIME coordinators and staff.

A study in California pressed the importance of young and educated adults working with Latino youth. "The young adults encountered by Latino children in community programs can play key roles in helping them feel confident and safe in their neighborhoods; learn alternatives to violence; gain educational experiences; and acquire

the bi-cultural skills needed for success in school. Young adult staff can also give children a chance to talk and write about their dreams for careers, education, families, and their communities" (Cooper, Denner, and Lopez, 55). According to Bourdieu, these aspects all are defined as social capital. The young adult volunteers involved with PRIMETIME can provide students with this social capital, and they are such an important part of the program. They have a power, by being younger and more easily related to, to guide the students by setting positive educational and social examples.

The study done by Cooper, Denner, and Lopez also explained that the family and the school can both positively and negatively influence the young students' work ethic, attained knowledge, and social behavior. The family of at-risk students are often categorized as low-income and low-educated, making it hard to assist in a child's school work and setting an example to pursue higher academics. We found, however, that especially students who were children of immigrants described their parents as having a high level of agency in terms of education. For example, one student described that her mother teaches her to read in Spanish and she teaches her mother to speak English. Several students mentioned that their parents are also enrolled in ESL classes. An explanation for this may be the nature of immigration to the United States as a way to increase social capital.

Teacher-Student Relationships

One said benefit of the PRIMETIME program is the construction of a social network of students, teachers, and volunteers. Villalba et. al. found that four general themes affect Latino students in rural elementary schools in the Southeastern U.S.: "(a) school/teacher characteristics and resources, (b) academic experiences in U.S. schools, (c) family and cultural traits, and (d) personal/social/economic factors" (Villalba et. al. 2007). Likewise, Elias and Haynes found that "Considerable variance in end-of-year

academic outcomes was predicted by initial levels of academic social-emotional competence and improvements in social-emotional competence and perceived teacher support over the course of the year” (Elias & Haynes 2008). Teachers' relationships with students that are strengthened by longer amounts of contact in the PRIMETIME program are vital to student outcomes.

In a study by Markham, Green, and Ross, they identify major stressors for English as a second language teachers. They include the difficulty of working with students at a wide range of English proficiency, the need to serve too many ESL students, adjustment problems of ESL students, and minimal support by non-ESL faculty and administration (Markham et. al. 1996). These stressors were also evident among ESL teachers working in the PRIMETIME program.

Family Influence in Education among Latino Students

We asked students questions about their families such as what languages they speak to whom and who they read with because a lot of research pertaining to low-income, Latino education focuses on family influences and cultural differences that result in a different approach to education. It is debatable as to how much parent involvement truly affects children’s development. For example, Foster and Kalil found that “substantial diversity exists in the developmental contexts among children living in the same family structure” (Foster and Kalil 2009). However, there are many studies that suggest that parent involvement is extremely important. For example, Loukas et. al. found that maternal acculturation mother-son relationship quality directly correlated with subsequent delinquent behaviors among boys while maternal monitoring directly predicted less delinquent behaviors for girls (Loukas et. al. 2007).

In a study conducted by Graciela Orozco, she identifies four themes that reflect the values of 18 low-income, immigrant, Latino parents. They were “(1) the special place of children in the family; (2) "saber es poder"--knowledge is power; (3) "querer es poder"-where there is a will, there is a way; and (4) the importance of culture and of being bilingual” (Orozco 2009). This may be a partial explanation for the high level of agency in children's education among Latino parents. In exploring motivations of immigrant versus native agents, Gitlin et. al. found that immigrant families were motivated by family cohesion, a “good parent discourse”, safety, and the desire for opportunities (Gitlin et. al. 2003). Therefore, the students' families played a large role in the students' attitudes toward education and often displayed a lot of personal agency in educational spheres.

Major Program Challenges

Major challenges for the program according to teachers and staff are the high turnover rate of employees, communication problems between authority figures, marginalization in comparison to other school activities, and a lack of space. Similarly, Bussert-Webb's study on a similar program found that students frequently talked about concerns with lack of curriculum integration, escape from the classroom, testing, time, and work while they failed to talk about creative engagement, enjoyment, multicultural education, and community (Bussert-Webb 2009). An analysis of a California elementary school survey found that “elementary schools serving high proportions of low-income and ESL students...should focus first and foremost on establishing a strong foundation of excellent, coherent, school-wide practices related to the core standards-based curriculum, on assessing and monitoring student achievement, and on providing the adequate resources schools need to do this work” (Williams et. al. 2007).

A college volunteer who has worked at the program for two years mentioned that in previous years, volunteers, teachers, and staff would meet for five minutes at the beginning and end of each program day to create a project or set a goal for day and plan how the students would be organized. He thought that this would be immensely helpful for the program. Organization would also be improved if there were more volunteers working with PRIMETIME. A program coordinator suggested more advertisement of the program at Northfield's colleges in order to increase the number of volunteers (advertising in Spanish classes would be particularly helpful). Volunteer training would also improve organization within the program.

External problems mentioned by some of the authority figures that were interviewed were marginalization in comparison to other school activities and a lack of space. A program coordinator felt that because PRIMETIME is free for students, if other school activities are taking place in the gym, they are pushed out. This coordinator was also concerned that the only space for the activity day materials was a shared closet. Teachers at Greenvale Park shared the concern about space in that during enrichment days, both classes share a classroom divided by two white boards. Restructuring what spaces can be claimed by PRIMETIME would be beneficial to the program.

Findings

A large part of the PLUS after school program at Greenvale Elementary school is geared towards advancing students' literacy. Although not all of the students in the PRIMETIME program are participants in English as a Second Language classes, 80% of them are. After interviewing these students, many of them could not remember speaking English for more than two years. Education experts estimate that it takes the average learner of English at least two years of study to hold conversations, and five to

seven years of write essays (Weigel 2006:1). Using these estimates, first and second grade students that take part in English as a second language (ESL) classes will need additional English tutoring in order to keep up with their fellow students who speak English as their primary language. The classroom enrichment days at PRIMETIME provide for this need through a combination of reading and writing in English and in Spanish to promote learning and language development. The student interviews revealed that the majority of ESL students did not start learning English until they were in kindergarten, as Spanish is spoken in the home and the students had not had the chance to be immersed in English until they started attending public school. In order for ESL students to catch up and maintain a level of English consistent with students who are native English speakers, they need as much immersion as possible. In addition to classroom enrichment days, the recreational days also offer English immersion for students who are still learning the English language by providing an additional opportunity for students to interact and use English.

Chris ¹ is a college freshman who has been working with with PLUS program on a daily basis since January of 2009. During the four months he has worked with the students he has noticed the vast improvement of one of the ESL students who had only been attending Greenvale Elementary school since August.

“When I began working at Greenvale in January I couldn't understand anything that Juanes was saying in English. Whenever he would try to speak to me, he would need to use a fellow student to translate what he was saying in Spanish into English. A few days ago I was walking outside with him and holding a conversation, he was speaking to me with correct English grammar and using complete sentences.” Chris added that he had observed Juanes' interactions with his fellow students at the afterschool program and saw that the other students were very eager to help him learn

English. "When they're not in the classroom, they're outside socializing and teaching him new vocabulary without even knowing it, if they were home and not here (at Greenvale Elementary School) they would probably be at home watching television or playing".

After asking most of the students what they actually would be doing if they were at home and not at the after school program, 85% of the students indicated that they would either be at home bored and/or watching television. 100% of the students said they liked coming to the after school program for a variety of reasons. Several students indicated they really liked going to swimming lessons on Mondays, while other students stated they really like playing outside, coloring and making new friends. Other students said they liked learning how to bake cookies one day and several students simply stated they liked learning more. One student elaborated "I like coloring and reading, I want to learn as much as I can because I'll be able to go to high school and college then teach my own kids what I know." Although most of the students did not know what college was, after a simple explanation usually "its a place you go after high school to learn more" almost all of the students indicated they wanted to go there because, as several students put it, they "want to be smarter."

The PRIMETIME after school program addresses the academic and social preparedness of all students who need additional services like Juanes. Most educational experts agree that such preparedness includes at least five domains (Weigel 2006:1). In order to help structure our analysis of the PRIMETIME afterschool program we observed how PRIMETIME addressed each of the five domains of learning. The results of our observations were very positive, as it is clear that the program is aiding the students on all of these levels. The five levels are as follows:

1. Health and Physical Development

2. Emotional Wellbeing and Social Competence

3. Approaches to Learning

4. Communication Skills

5. Cognition and General Knowledge

Research has indicated that literacy and language abilities may predict reading achievement in later grades. There is also growing agreement that it is not only children that need to be ready for school, but that schools and communities also need to be ready to accommodate the diverse needs and experiences of children and their families. School preparedness is not just a child or family issue, but a community issue as well. The foundation for literacy and school success is laid during the early years, during this time young children develop the skills and attitudes that will help them be successful. During everyday experiences, children encounter opportunities to develop oral language skills, writing and reading skills, practice literacy skills on all levels, and refine their social and cognitive abilities. Based on the five agreed-upon domains of school preparedness, we analyzed the success of the PRIMETIME program at Greenvale Elementary School. We also used the five domains to discuss ways the program could be improved.

1. Health and Physical Development.

Although we only had the chance to observe the program for three months, the program proved to take the first domain of Health and Physical Development very seriously. The PLUS afterschool program conducted four days a week, Monday through Thursday. Tuesday and Thursday are designated as classroom days, while Monday and

Wednesday are designated as recreational days. Beginning in April, every Monday the students were bussed to the Middle School and given swimming lessons. Many of our interviews were conducted after the students began taking swimming lessons on Mondays, and most of the students identified Mondays as their favorite day of the program. One student shared, "I love days when we get to swim and play kickball. I never get to do that at home." The swimming lessons provide many students with an opportunity to develop healthy exercise habits, while having fun and interacting with their fellow classmates. Every face has a smile during the swim days and rarely does any child misbehave. Certified swim instructors teach proper strokes, while volunteers also jump in the pool to help and have fun. On Wednesdays the students have a second recreational day where they are provided with other opportunities to exercise while having fun. In the gym, there is usually a soccer game being played on one half, while the other is grounds for hula hooping, jump roping, tag, and basketball. When the weather is enjoyable, several students spent their time outside. This area is great for running around on the jungle-gyms and playing games like baseball or basketball, games that students often learn with the help of high school and college volunteers who come to Greenvale to mentor the students.

2. Emotional Well Being and Social Competence

All of the students we interviewed said that they made new friendships in the after school program. Also several of the volunteers noted that the program helps them to socialize and gain new friendships. Lance is a college senior who has been working for the PRIMETIME program for both years that it has been in existence. "The program helps them socialize and give structure to their day, it gives them something beneficial to do. The is teaching them social interaction methods that they do not learn in class. The classroom days function to teach them different ways to interact with one another, as

well as with teachers and volunteers”. He also noted that being with the students for two years has enabled him, as well as other student mentors, to get to know and understand the students in ways that other adults might not be able to. “They see that we're not the normal teachers and staff that they interact with while they're in class. They open up to us a little more...treat us less like a typical adult and more like a fellow student they look up to...sometimes it's difficult when it comes to discipline, but for the most part they know that we have the authority to keep them in line.” Because Lance and the other after school student mentors had gotten to know the students by interacting with them in both the classroom setting and during the recreational days, they became very conscious of friendships between the students and what one mentor considered “normal versus irregular interactions”. “It's gotten to the point that we immediately know if something has gone wrong between the students. Because we know them so well now, it's easier to help them if and when they get into fights. We act as mediators for them, and hopefully are teaching them the same mediation skills.”

Not only do the volunteers and teachers know the students on an individual level, the directors of PRIMETIME also do. When the directors come to visit, they know students by name and know a lot about their educational and social strengths and weaknesses. On the first swimming day, three students forgot to bring or did not have a bathing suit. One of the directors was at the middle school (the swimming pool location), and when she heard the news, she drove over to the Northfield Community Center to retrieve three brand-new bathing suits that appropriately fit each student. She could have simply sent them to the gym with the other kids who did not want to swim, but she went out of her way to provide them the opportunity.

3. Approaches to Learning

The children experience a variety of learning activities that focus mainly on reading and writing. They participate in group as well as being able to work individually. Classroom format normally goes as follows: the teacher holds their attention for 10 minutes while explaining what they will do for the next hour (in the second grade classroom, students are paid with fake money when they arrive to reward them for behaving the previous day. They used the money later to buy tickets to the Easter egg hunt). Then, they break off into groups for 35 minutes working individually before coming together for the last 15 minutes to discuss what they learned and piece their individual projects together. For example, last week first-graders constructed a mural of the rain forest by listening to a book on rain forest animals. Afterward they each drew and labeled an animal. After completing their animal they worked together to place the animals on a mural scene. We asked the students what their favorite parts of the after school program were and came up with several different responses, hinting towards the diverse approaches to learning that the students are experiencing. The responses were as follows "I enjoy doing rocket math and learning how to do math fast!" "My favorite part of the after school program is reading and writing, so I can go home and show my sister what I've learned", "I like coloring and learning about animals". Many of the students listed swimming lessons as their favorite, while others listed play days, eating (nutritious) snacks, and learning how to play various sports.

4. Communication Skills

The students develop their communication skills through in-class and out-of class-interaction. Because the students are often responsible to work together to finish a project as a group, the students must actively communicate their intentions to one

another. When they are working as a group constructing a project, such as the rain forest mural, the children often experience a variety of emotions ranging from severe dislike, apathy, to a strong desire to complete the task. Before leaving the classroom at the end of the day, the students are required to find a way overcome the differences they are feeling and finish their project.

5. Cognition and General Knowledge

The educational criteria at the PLUS program are centered around three basic areas of learning: reading, writing (spelling) and arithmetic. However the students are often given new ways to approach these subjects. On one classroom day the students were given a color by number drawing. However before they were allowed to color the picture the students had to correctly spell seven colors next to the seven letters they corresponded to. Another day the students listened to a story about exotic animals while looking at their pictures and memorizing their appearance and their names. After the story the students were asked to remember and label the animals as best they could.

Because there is a very high ratio of native Spanish speakers to English speakers, several lesson plans also focus on strengthening Spanish vocabulary for both the native Spanish speakers as well as the English speakers. When asked about language's role in enhancing the cognition of the students one of the teachers replied, "Native language use is on equal standing with English when it promotes understanding." There is an agreement among the teachers and staff that as long as the students are increasing their general cognitive capabilities in a beneficial and healthy way, the methods and languages they use to promote these capabilities are of secondary importance.

Summary of the Students' Perceptions of PLUS

The students generally like the after-school program, especially being with their friends, indicating a strong social-network influence on both entering and staying in the program. All of the students who were interviewed also said that they had made new friends while in the program. Many students want to keep coming to PLUS because it is boring at home. If they were not at the program, a majority of the students indicated they would be going outside or watching TV. Many of the interviews confirmed what we had suspected through participant observation: the students like learning and want to continue doing so. One second grade student stated "I want to learn more and keep learning more as long as I can, so that when I have kids I can teach them all the fun things I know like reading and coloring." Students in the program also thrive on friendly competition, especially timed tests. They frequently stated that their favorite activity was "rocket-math", a method of testing the students on their basic adding and subtracting math skills while being timed. The students are rewarded for accuracy and speed. Half of the students felt that the after school program was helping them in class, the other half was not sure. Only one student stated that he was not benefitting in class from the afterschool program. While all of the students liked coming to the program, they were not sure about who was in charge. Many of the high school and college volunteers were also unsure about the structure of the program and also stated that they were not sure how to discipline the children when they misbehave. Volunteer training would clear up this problem. When asked who was in charge most of the students shrugged or answered that they did not know. One girl's response was "one of these grown-ups, I think".

Teacher Perceptions of PLUS

A teacher at Bridgewater Elementary school expressed that her students who participate in PRIMETIME enjoy this after-school program much more now than programs in the past. "Before, when I reminded each student that they needed to go to their after-school program towards the end of the day, they often frowned with disappointment. This year, kids are eager and happy to go. It seems to be fun for them. They like the activities and are excited to work with college and high school volunteers." This teacher also shared that PRIMETIME is educationally beneficial. "When my students start going to PRIMETIME, they get more of their homework done."

A Greenvale Elementary teacher thought the program was particularly beneficial because "It gives the students a chance to get to know and become friends with other children outside of their regular classroom. They can extend their learning beyond the school day and it gives them something positive to do after-school. It is also an opportunity to bond and build relationships with teachers. For the most part, it extends the social network of students and gives them opportunities to bond with after-school program teachers and other students." She felt that PRIMETIME should continue the academic-based days all four days to promote continuity and increase learning time. She also indicated that there have been issues with the non-academic play days. She believes that there is not enough discipline on those days to promote positive social interactions, and offered her advice on how to expand/ improve the program. She was not sure about the immediate goals of the program, but knew that the encompassing goal was to enable students labeled "at risk for not graduating on time" the means to do so. Because the children are in first and second grade, she felt immediate goals needed to be implemented. "These goals need to be mainly

academic/social goals, with integrated content in the areas of math, language/literacy, science, social studies, and the arts." She likes how the classroom days are structured and feels that the students are benefitting by expanding their time with the teachers. However she feels that overall interaction between teachers, coordinators, and volunteers needs to be expanded. "Even a five minute daily meeting would be able to do so much for the teachers and the students." Overall however, her impression of the program and the daily rewards that she receives from being able to see her students improve makes participation worthwhile.

Summary and Conclusion

Project Summary

- PRIMETIME is an after-school program in Northfield, Minnesota that provides at-risk students, the majority being Latino, with academic support and social enrichment. With two days dedicated to classroom learning and one-on-one tutoring, it provides time for homework as well as interaction and relationship-building with educated volunteers and staff. The other two activity days allow children to be physically, artistically, and socially active with peers and volunteers.

- Studies have shown that the Latino culture promotes strong family ties, which can greatly influence the academic success of young Latino students (Orozco 2009). Many interviewed students revealed that Spanish is spoken at home and that their parents can not read or write in English. If the students' level of English surpasses their parents, their parents can no longer help with homework. Older siblings can either benefit or inhibit academic performance because they set a behavioral and educational example to follow.

Several interviewed students said older siblings help them with homework, while others said no, claiming them to be "bad" or "mean."

- PRIMETIME provides space for students to establish social ties with young adult volunteers. These educated volunteers are a bridge of knowledge to academic and social life in a high school or college setting. With most of the students expressing a desire to go to college, these volunteers are great role models for them to associate with. The program also lends the opportunity of creating social ties with teachers, a bond that previous research found to be vital early-on in children's' education.

- Due to their young age, many students do not know why they attend PRIMETIME. Several see it as a place to meet friends and get help with homework. They are happy to be included, but are unaware of the overarching goal: to increase on-time graduation rates.

Conclusion

After our participant observations, interviews, and sociological and anthropological research, we'd like to acknowledge that the PRIMETIME after school program is beneficial and necessary to maintain to increase on-time graduation rates. The school and the family do not provide a strong enough pathway towards educational success for these at-risk students. They need something extra to socialize them through these developmental stages of life.

PRIMETIME directors not only coordinate the resources and activities to improve health and physical development, emotional wellbeing and social competence, engagement of learning, communication skills, and cognition and general knowledge, they are often directly involved. Using the previous example of the swim suits, it's

apparent that the directors know each student at an individual level and truly care for them. People like Carita Green and volunteers have developed relationships with these students over a long period of time. The more volunteers and staff members stay with the program, the better they understand each students' learning and behavioral style. One teacher saw improvement in the classroom and stated that kids are much more enthusiastic about this program than programs in the past. The smiles on their faces anticipating PRIMETIME prove that they are truly having fun. Furthermore, students are getting more of their homework done because they have structured time to work on assignments.

In relationships with young and educated volunteers who provide students with more social capital, students have a relationship much different than they do with a teacher. They have someone associated with higher education to look up to and hang out with. The students at Greenvale and Bridgewater often greeted volunteers with warm hugs. Many wanted to play with the younger volunteers or sit down next to them on the bus. One day, one of us received five drawings from various students. One was of a student and a volunteer holding hands and another was a heart-shaped thank you card.

Networking between the government, students, and community partners allows PRIMETIME to instill positive values in the students to work towards their goals. The PRIMETIME directors have clearly formed strong ties with these groups to attain proper resources. The tie with the government provides money for teachers, daily transportation to their homes after school, transportation to places like the middle school pool, and other great parts of the program. Without that financial support, the students would suffer the costs. PRIMETIME gives students social and educational opportunities that they would most likely not get at home.

Our project will be used for qualitative data to support the programs funding. Not only does this benefit the PRIMETIME directors, it benefits the children and the community. We also intend it to inspire other college and high school students to volunteer or work for this program. For guidance on further research, we would suggest volunteering more frequently or for a longer period of time. We went two whole weeks without volunteering because of spring break. We would have built stronger relationships with the staff and students and therefore received more data for analysis. More suggestions we have would be to keep a daily journal for every volunteer experience. Recording detailed observations disallows us to forget observed data. Interviewing more students would also be helpful to have a broader selection of quotes.

If there were more programs like PRIMETIME with directors who wish to give these kids chances that they would not otherwise have, endless groups of people would benefit. Being a racial, economic, and social minority is difficult in today's world, so why not mend that gap and give every child an opportunity? Every single child said they liked PRIMETIME, and it would be devastating if the PRIMETIME experience were taken from them.

1All names have been changed

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