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Vichet Chhuon
vichet@umn.edu

Angela Dosalmas

Nida Rinthapol

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Factors Supporting Academic Engagement Among Cambodian American High School Youth

Vichet Chhuon

University of Minnesota, Twin Cities

Angela Dosalmas

University of California, Santa Barbara

Nida Rinthapol

University of California, Santa Barbara

Abstract

This exploratory study examined the relationship between Cambodian American students' ($N = 77$) attitudes and beliefs regarding school climate and school engagement. We examined engagement through two primary constructs: academic intrinsic motivation and future educational expectations. Four specific correlates of engagement were examined to understand the quality of Cambodian American students' school engagement: sense of racial fairness; feelings of teacher support; perceptions of self-competence; and perceptions of positive classroom environment. Perceptions of self-competence were positively associated with higher educational expectations. Our regression models found that students' sense of positive classroom environment in addition to teacher support was important for motivation. Motivation and future academic expectations were also associated with students' perceptions of their own academic self-competence. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

Introduction

Current data has revealed that Cambodian students in the United States, on the whole, tend to exhibit lower levels of academic achievement relative to other ethnic populations. For example, of all Cambodians 25 years and older residing in the U.S., less than half (40.9%) reported attainment of a high school education and only 11.1% have earned a four-year college degree (Pfeifer, 2008). These figures are far below the national averages of 84.2% and 17.2%, respectively (Pfeifer, 2008). Research has also consistently shown that Cambodian students have



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poorer academic performance than their peers from other ethnic groups, including other Asian immigrant groups such as those from China, the Philippines, and Vietnam (Kim, 2002; Portes & Rumbaut, 2006; Reeves & Bennett 2004; Rumbaut & Ima, 1988). Given their school performance overall, immigration scholars have argued that Cambodian children are at risk of assimilating into the lowest social and economic segments of American society (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006; Zhou, 1997).

Most Southeast Asian students and their families, Cambodians among them, come to the U.S. with refugee status and many originate from lower socioeconomic statuses and experience disruption in education and family separation. Consequently, academic underperformance is not surprising when Cambodian students are compared to East Asian students whose families emigrated through starkly different contexts (Kim & Yeh, 2002). At the same time, research on Cambodian students tends to be aggregated within an Asian American collective that often falls under the “model minority” stereotype (Lee, 1996). As such, the present study disaggregates the experiences of Cambodian American high school students by focusing on the school experiences of this unique and understudied population.

Explanations for Cambodian American Achievement

Many studies on the challenges that Cambodians face in their school environment focus on models that place the burden of change on the very students who are experiencing inequities. For example, some research has argued that the lower achievement of Cambodian students might be associated with cultural norms that inhibit parental educational involvement and promote a fatalistic orientation to schooling (Canniff, 2001; Smith-Hefner, 1999). Other studies have maintained that Cambodian cultural norms emphasize that parents should not intervene in the formal education of their children (Garcia Coll et al., 2002; Hopkins, 1996; Um, 1999). Quantitative research has also suggested that Cambodian parents tend not to have much direct involvement in their children’s formal schooling. For instance, investigations with second and fifth grade Cambodian, Portuguese, and Dominican immigrant students in New York City (Garcia Coll et al., 2002) and Rhode Island (Garcia Coll, Szalacha, & Palacios, 2005) reported that Cambodian families scored lowest on every parent involvement measure. In addition, ethnographic interviews with members of the Cambodian community in the Boston area over a two-year period argued that Cambodian parents largely preferred to defer to the teacher and that parents were essentially non-interventionists in the schooling of their children, despite expressed concerns about their children doing well (Smith-Hefner, 1993). Other explanations, concomitantly, have centered upon immigration context, low socio-economic status, and residency in poor communities as the most likely to significantly contribute to low educational attainment (Kim, 2002; Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). While research on cultural factors is informative, we consider the school context, at a minimum, to be on par with cultural factors; and, therefore chose, for this exploratory study, to emphasize the school context in an effort to expand on previous research regarding the experiences of Cambodian American high school youth.

School Engagement

The present study examined the relationship between Cambodian students’ attitudes and beliefs about their school climate and their school engagement. We examined engagement through two

primary constructs: *academic intrinsic motivation* and *future educational expectations*. In regard to motivation, we focused on academic *intrinsic* motivation because students who are intrinsically motivated have consistently been observed to demonstrate better conceptual understanding and experience more positive feelings toward school (Grolnick & Ryan, 1987; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Intrinsic motivation is best understood as the result of an optimal fit between the student and the learning environment (Ryan & Deci, 2000). *Extrinsic* motivation, on the other hand, involves engaging in learning through an outside reinforcement (e.g., free time) and punishment (e.g., detention), rather than learning for its own sake. Students who are intrinsically motivated are more likely to persist in school, hold higher academic aspirations, and experience increased emotional well-being. Unfortunately, students' achievement motivation tends to decline as they proceed through school and into the secondary grades (Anderman & Maehr, 1994).

Our second construct, future educational expectations, has been identified as having important relationships to grades, attendance, class participation, and later achievement (Muller, Katz, & Dance, 1999; Rumberger, 2004; Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2004). Essentially, students with optimistic outlooks on their educational and career trajectories are likely to be influenced by and perceive their school climate differently than those with pessimistic expectations.

Finally, we focused on four specific correlates of school engagement to understand the quality of Cambodian American students' school engagement: *sense of racial fairness*, *feelings of teacher support*, *perceptions of self-competence*, and *perceptions of positive classroom environment*.

Sense of Racial Fairness

Many ethnic minority students, including Cambodians, experience educational challenges related to low expectations, racism, and lack of teacher support in their schooling. An increasing body of research has linked students' perception of discrimination within the school environment to achievement via motivation and academic performance (Lee, 2005; Ogbu & Simons, 1998; Portes, 1999). Portes (1999), for example, explored the influence of various factors in immigrant students' (primarily Cuban, Latino, Asian, Southeast Asian and Filipino students) school achievement and found that experiences of discrimination were salient factors in school experiences of low achievers. As well, Um (2003) and Lee (2005) have shown how low and high achieving Cambodian American and Hmong American high school youth, respectively, reported frequent experiences with racism in their school environment. Southeast Asian youth, including Cambodians, reported being put down and ethnically stereotyped by teachers as well as by other Asian American peers (Lee, 1996; Um, 2003). Cambodian adolescent *males* in particular are often stereotyped negatively in their local communities as low achievers and/or gang members (Chhuon, 2009; Chhuon, Hudley, Brenner, & Macias, 2010; Um, 2003).

Feelings of Teacher Support

Research suggests that for minority and immigrant youth, feeling a sense of support from teachers and other school staff can play a critical role in students' academic well-being (Chhuon et al., 2010; Katz, 1999; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Suarez-Orozco, Rhodes, and Milburn, 2009; Valenzuela, 1999). Valenzuela's (1999) ethnography of one Texas high school argued that a sense of genuine "care" from teachers often led to whether or not Mexican American youth

academically engaged. Other research found that youth were not only frustrated by a lack of teacher support but perceived that the teachers themselves were a major source of ethnic discrimination (Katz, 1999; Lee, 2005; Stone & Han, 2005; Um, 2003). Given that many immigrant families, including Cambodians, settle in impoverished urban neighborhoods where schools tend to be overcrowded and understaffed, developing relationships with teachers may be challenging due to high staff turnover, particularly at the secondary level (García Coll & Magnuson, 1997; Teranishi, 2004). Other research suggests that students' perceptions of high teacher support can serve as a buffer from developmental risk factors including low socioeconomic status, negative peer pressure, and underfunded schooling (Chhuon et al., 2010; Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

Perceptions of Self-Competence

Students' perception of their own self-competence represents another important variable in student motivation and achievement (Bandura, 1994; Harter, 1982; Stipek, 1996). A student's view of his/her self-competence generally refers to how the student perceives success in a broad or specific area. Some research has shown that students from immigrant households, including Southeast Asians, tend to have lower self-appraisal of their academic competence than their peers (Kao, 1999; Padilla & Duran, 1995). This finding raises some concern given that much research has shown that a feeling of self-competence generally fosters academic motivation and promotes school engagement. Perceptions of self-competence are of interest to scholars and educators because of the motivational rewards that yield from students' positive perceptions (Harter, 1982; Stipek, 1996).

Perceptions of Positive Classroom Environment

Students' perception of a positive classroom environment can significantly shape their school engagement (Brophy, 1987; Urdan, Midgely, & Anderman, 1998). For instance, when material is seen as interesting or new ideas are perceived as welcoming in class, students are much more likely to be drawn into the learning process. For instance, Portes' (1999) study of ethnically diverse and immigrant adolescents suggests that for students from immigrant families, perceptions of social and cognitive support in the classroom were related to higher achievement. Thus, the observation that the successes and struggles of many Southeast Asian students, including Cambodian, can be linked to the quality of their learning environments is not surprising (Chhuon et al., 2010; Kim, 2002; Lee, 2005; Wright, 2004).

The Current Study

The data reported in this article are part of a larger study that examined academic motivation across other Asian American ethnic samples including Chinese and Korean youth. As mentioned, research that has focused on educational challenges for Cambodian students as a disaggregated group is glaringly scarce in the literature (Ngo & Lee, 2007; Um, 2003). Given this, we examined a number of perceived school-level factors to understand how these factors might influence Cambodian high school students' academic engagement. We hypothesized that students reporting higher levels of perceptions of teacher support, self-competence, racial awareness, and positive academic environment were more likely to have increased intrinsic

motivation and higher future academic expectations and goals. Given that research has reported differing gender experiences for Southeast Asian high school youth (Chhuon et al., 2010; Lee, 2005, Ngo & Lee, 2007), we also expected these relationships to vary by gender.

Method

Setting and Sample

Data were collected in a large urban high school in southern California. Both the school and surrounding community were economically diverse. Forty-seven percent of the enrollment was eligible for the free or reduced lunch program. The reported school enrollment during the 2005-2006 academic year was approximately 4,500 students. The school's ethnic breakdown was as follows: 15% African American, 12% Asian (including Cambodian), 36% Latino, and 33% White.

In an effort to ensure that participants in our sample identified as ethnically Cambodian, we recruited students from a Khmer language class. As a result, all 77 high school youth that participated in this study self-identified as ethnically Cambodian or Khmer. The Khmer language course was designed for students whose first language is English but whose home language included Khmer. This class fulfills the district's language graduation requirement and the language coursework requirement to enter a University of California or California State University campus. We were informed by teachers and administrators that the students enrolled in these courses represented a cross-section of academic achievement levels at the school. A balanced number of male ($n = 39$) and female ($n = 38$) students comprised our sample. Moreover, 19.5% were reportedly in the ninth grade, 33.8% in the tenth, 27.3% in the eleventh, and 19.5% in the twelfth.

Measures and Procedures

After parental consent forms were returned, students were administered a 53 item questionnaire that measured perceived future educational expectations (e.g., "When you graduate from high school, how possible is it that you will go to a 4-year university?"), support from teachers (e.g., "My teachers encourage me to do well"), positive classroom environments (e.g., "We try new ideas in English class"), racial fairness (e.g., "I think non-Cambodians are treated better than Cambodian students in my class"), self-appraisal of academic competence (e.g., "I am very good at writing reports"), and academic intrinsic motivation (e.g., "It is more important to do a school assignment to learn about a subject, than it is to get a good grade"). Surveys were administered to participating students in each class throughout one school day and took roughly 20 minutes to complete each session.

Results

We began by creating composite variables to examine our hypotheses using a principal components analysis (PCA) of our attitudinal constructs. A PCA was appropriate because of our interest in reducing our large set of measured variables to a smaller set of composite variables that retained as much information about the original variables as possible (Fabrigar, MacCallum, Wegener, & Strahan, 1999). In addition, the variables belonging to each construct were highly

correlated with one another; therefore, utilizing the composite variables based on the principle components also offered a way to manage the lack of independence between variables while still retaining much of the original information.

Correlations

In our full sample, bivariate correlations revealed that all four independent variables were related to motivation at the $p < 0.05$ level (see Table 1). In the overall sample, intrinsic motivation related negatively to racial fairness ($r = -0.25$), and positively to teacher support ($r = 0.36$), self-competence ($r = 0.35$), and positive classroom environments ($r = 0.35$). Overall, future educational expectation was associated significantly solely with self-competence ($r = 0.55$).

Table 1
Correlations

		Racial Fairness	Teacher Support	Self Competence	Positive Class Env.
<i>Motivation</i>					
	Overall	-0.25*	0.36*	0.35*	0.35*
	Male	-0.28	0.41*	0.27	0.39*
	Female	-0.24	0.32	0.42*	0.35*
<i>Future Educational Expectations</i>					
	Overall	-0.003	0.14	0.55*	0.17
	Male	0.06	-0.05	0.34*	0.09
	Female	-0.06	0.33	0.72*	0.26

*Significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed).

For males in our sample, motivation was significantly related to teacher support ($r = 0.41$) and positive academic environment ($r = 0.39$), whereas future educational expectation was only associated with perceptions of self-competence ($r = 0.34$). Self-competence ($r = 0.72$) was also the only measure of perception that related to future educational expectations for females in our sample while motivation was significantly related to female students' perceptions of self-competence ($r = 0.42$) and positive classroom environments ($r = 0.35$).

Regression

Next, we conducted regression analyses for both motivation and future academic expectations (see Table 2). In an effort to determine which variables significantly explained the variance of our dependent variables while controlling for all other variables, we began with a regression on our full set of predictor variables (teacher support, self-competence, positive academic environment, and racial fairness). Initially, we also included gender in the regression models since we hypothesized that a relationship with either motivation or future academic expectations and any of our predictors might be mediated by gender. Although our correlations slightly varied by gender, gender was not a significant main effect or interaction in any model, thus, it was subsequently dropped from this analysis. For motivation, a regression with the full set of predictors revealed self-competence as the only significant predictor at a 0.05 level ($\beta = 0.04$, $p = 0.04$).

Table 2
Regression Models

	R^2	β
Motivation (Full)	0.26	
<i>Self-Competence</i>		0.04*
Motivation (Stepwise)	0.20	
<i>Teacher Support</i>		0.13**
<i>Positive Classroom Environments</i>		0.08*
Future Academic Expectations (Full/Step)	0.32	
<i>Self-Competence</i>		0.32*

* Significant at the 0.05 level.

** Significant at the 0.01 level.

The more positively students viewed their self-competence the higher their motivation, so that for every one point increase in self-competence there was a 4% increase in motivation while holding teacher support, racial formation and positive academic environment constant. Subsequent to the full model, a stepwise hierarchical regression procedure was carried out. A model that included teacher support ($\beta_1 = 0.13$, $p = 0.009$) and positive academic environment ($\beta_2 = 0.08$, $p = 0.01$) as predictors was selected with this procedure. This model predicted a positive relationship as well, but in this model a one point increase in teacher support and/or positive academic environment would yield an increase in motivation between 8% and 21%.

In regard to future academic expectations, both the regression with the full set of predictors and a stepwise hierarchical regression resulted in a model where perceptions of academic self-competence was the highest predictor ($\beta = 0.32$, $p < 0.001$). In this model, the more positively students viewed their self-competence the higher their future educational expectations were such that each one point increase in self-competence resulted in a 32% increase in future educational expectations.

Discussion and Conclusions

Cambodians in the U.S. represent a rapidly growing segment of society whose social and economic success will rely on the successful schooling of its school-age youth. Cambodian students, however, are often treated as a statistically marginal population and viewed within an Asian American collective that assumes all Asian-descent students are uniformly high achievers (Ngo & Lee, 2007). Moreover, much of the extant literature has focused on cultural and broad structural explanations for Cambodian American student achievement (Hopkins, 1996; Portes & Rumbaut, 2006; Smith-Hefner, 1999). Unfortunately, these explanations do not sufficiently attend to the responsibility of educational institutions and their agents (i.e., teachers, counselors, staff, etc.) but rather imply that Cambodian American families must change in order improve the academic achievement of their children. Consequently, many Cambodian American youth fail to receive appropriate academic support and guidance.

The present study was interested in how Cambodian student perceptions of teacher support, self-competence, positive classroom environment, and racial fairness influenced their drive to learn and future educational expectations. These interests were guided by other research that argues investigation into student self-perceptions can provide fruitful data for improving

academic achievement (Finn & Rock, 1997; Murdock, 1999). For Cambodian students to successfully persist through high school and beyond, their intrinsic motivation to learn and college expectations must be supported. According to our results, some ways to do this might include training teachers in support methods specific to Cambodian youth as well as creating a more positive classroom environment in diverse settings. Although gender was not a significant factor in any of our regression models, the data suggests that for male students in our sample, teacher support was most strongly correlated with their drive to learn whereas females' sense of academic self-competence was most strongly correlated with their motivation. Perceptions of self-competence was also positively associated with higher educational expectations, suggesting that for Cambodian American youth, how they view themselves is important for what they expect to be able to accomplish in the future.

In our regression models, students' sense of positive classroom environment in addition to teacher support was important for motivation. Motivation and future academic expectations were also associated with student's perceptions of their own academic self-competence. However, teacher support might be the most salient variable for potentially informing schools about how to increase the success of Cambodian children. Students in general are likely to comply with expectations of their teachers when they feel supported and respected by their teachers (Murdock, 1999; Valenzuela, 1999). Additionally, some students might disengage from school if they do not have positive bonds with their teachers. Studies on disadvantaged students have documented how students' sense of connectedness with supportive adults at school can play important protective roles in at-risk environments (Conchas, 2006; Valenzuela, 1999). Moreover, other research with Cambodian American students found that personal connections were perceived as critical factors for successful high school and college adjustment (Chhuon & Hudley, 2008; Chhuon et al., 2010; Wallitt, 2008). Cambodian American students in these studies attributed much of their high school success to teachers that genuinely cared about them.

In summary, these data resonate with other findings in the motivation literature indicating that schools must provide an educational climate that promotes a positive attitude for all students. However, we recognize the limitations of this exploratory study. For instance, these findings cannot be easily generalized to other settings given our relatively limited sample size. Future research should include more developmental (longitudinal, cross-sectional) designs to better understand how Cambodian American adolescents' attitudes and beliefs in school vary over time. Furthermore, qualitative approaches, including ethnographic methods, should be pursued to provide additionally rich and textured information about those factors that support Cambodian students' academic motivation and engagement (Elliot & Bempechat, 2002). Nevertheless, we hope that these data can help direct other studies to further disaggregate the school experiences of Cambodian American students.

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About the Authors

Vichet Chhuon is a Postdoctoral Fellow in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Minnesota. His research interests include urban education, adolescent development, and achievement motivation.

Angela Dosalmas is a Ph.D. candidate in the Gevirtz School of Education at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her research interests focus on equity issues, identity and mathematics with a particular interest in women of color feminist theory.

Nida Rinthapol is a doctoral student in the Gevirtz School of Education at the University of California, Santa Barbara with an emphasis in Cultural Perspectives and Comparative Education. She is interested in the psychosocial factors that influence students' academic performance in the U.S., particularly those from immigrant and Southeast Asian backgrounds.



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