Youth Leadership in session

**Introduction**

This case study will seek to describe in detail the daily operations and practices of The After School Success Program (ASSP - pseudonym). The goal of the researcher is not to draw conclusions about the success or failure of the academic or social goals of the program but rather to tell a story, and bring to light resonant themes that permeate the life of the organization. Particular areas of interest include the cultivation of a sense of belonging, how students are recognized for their work, and the role of participation and engagement in the day-to-day practices of ASSP. Using the tools of thick description and qualitative analysis I hope to reveal the ways in which these elements contribute to an environment that supports students in ways that are often overlooked and dismissed. My intention is that this research provides insight into the work of organizations such as ASSP, so that we may better understand how alternative and non-school based learning environments support adolescents as they develop into mature adults. Further work may build on this foundation and bring deeper analysis and perhaps an evaluative perspective to this program, its vision, and success at achieving its goals.
ASSP is located in a poor and working class community in the San Francisco Bay area. The goal of the program is to provide alternative educational opportunities to high school students in the surrounding community in order to provide them with specific vocational skills as well as credits toward graduation. ASSP works in formal partnership with the surrounding high school districts to recruit students who may be struggling in traditional classes, and may not meet the graduation requirements of the district. An MOU between ASSP and a local high school district states that the primary objective of the collaborative effort are as follows “To offer high quality vocational skills training classes, basic skills instruction and academic support, and employability skill training to students who are enrolled in area high schools and who may be struggling to meet graduation requirements, grade point averages, proficiency testing, or facing other challenges.”

Research Methods

My observations of ASSP are based on a participant observer relationship. I have worked for the past 3 years as the Web Design instructor for the program. This perspective offers both advantages and disadvantages for the purposes of this case study. On the positive side, I have unique access to the program staff through the close working relationship we have developed over the years. There is a level of trust which affords entrée to information and opinions that might not be available to outsiders. Also, I have an intimate understanding of the program mission and goals, and I am familiar with many of its operational practices. In some ways I am able to serve as my own key informant, with one foot immersed in the world of ASSP while another remains in the role of researcher. Also, instructors in the program are not day-to-day staff. Instructors work with ASSP as contractors who attend staff meetings in addition to their instructional duties. This means instructors mainly arrive at the program only during their class time and leave soon after. This allows me to maintain some distance in terms of the program’s daily activities. On the negative side, serving as an instructor inside the program
can in some ways bring me too close to the people and events of ASSP. My perspective may be colored by the relationships, or influenced by my knowledge of the organization. Such a subjective view may cause me to miss important details a researcher with no knowledge of ASSP would recognize easily. I have tried to write this account with a consciousness of the pros and cons outlined above. I have also tried to make my own biases explicit, in order to provide the clearest picture possible of the story of ASSP and the perspective from which that story has been written.

I gathered the material for this case study over approximately a 5 week period of time from October 15, 2002 through November 26, 2002. The names of all staff and students are pseudonyms in order to protect their privacy. I informed the program director, Shane, of my intent to produce a case study of the organization and received his permission to focus on ASSP. Shane is familiar with my work at Stanford and was happy to participate in the case study. I conducted interviews before and after my own class period on Mondays and Wednesday afternoons, and also on alternate class days. I interviewed the program director, two youth counselors, the instructor of the electronics classes and video classes, and the basic skill instructor. I also conducted interviews with students over 18 years of age in order to avoid the need for parental permission. Program staff provided me documentation of program materials, course descriptions, grant proposals, and MOU’s with local school districts. I also sat in on informal staff meetings and discussions as an observer.

Additional observations were conducted during class time in Electronics, Video Production, and Workshop classrooms during Tuesday class sessions. I also observed Youth Leadership meetings before my own class on Monday afternoons. I took notes as I observed interactions during the class periods. I did not tape class sessions because of a lack of parental consent for the students under 18 years of age. I received permission to tape both the staff meetings and adult interviews. Later in my office I transcribed these tapes and coded information according to
themes and categories. For example, elements related to school partnerships were coded as “Collab.” Items related to student recognition were coded as “Recog.” I chunked related themes and types of information in my notes for easy access at the time of writing.

Site and Program Description

ASSP is supported by another much larger organization call Social Support Services (SSS). SSS is a job training and social services organization that serves the southern portion of the county. SSS’s Bay Area location is only one part of a large international network of agencies that provide job training services, counseling, GED courses, and support for the unemployed. SSS has been in operation for over 30 years, a product of the social/economic development activities that spouted from civil rights movement. The Bay Area location is the second site created out of over 20 sites throughout the United States. ASSP was created in the mid 80’s. SSS provided on campus counseling services for a number of years to local high schools. Through county funding, SSS worked with
struggling students during a class period on high school campuses. Through a county collaboration, SSS expanded its services to offer vocational courses to the same high school population it served on campuses at its off campus location. Thus ASSP in its current form was created.

ASSP is located in a low to middle income diverse community within the San Francisco Bay Area. The population is majority Latino, followed by African Americans and Pacific Islanders. The community has had a history of crime and drugs, but recently has begun to develop economically. Many students from the community ASSP serves must attend high school outside of their immediate area. SSS is located in a small corporate and industrial park on the edge of the community. Software and electronics companies lie a stones throw away from small 2-3 bedroom 1950’s track homes.

A unique component of ASSP that distinguishes it from other programs is the fact that ASSP students receive up to 10 units of elective high school credits for completing a semester of work at ASSP. A typical high school course is 5 units. This means that ASSP students receive double the credit for their participation in the program. ASSP courses include a range of vocational classes in addition to leadership components and basic skill workshops and tutoring sessions. The list of courses available at the time of this case study is as follows.

- **Office Skills**
  - Basic computer skills and office applications such as Word, Excel, and Powerpoint.
- **Electronics**
  - Basics of electronic assembly, including sautering circuit boards, building radios, and constructing robots.
- **Culinary Arts**
  - Elementary cooking and professional food preparation on a large scale.
• Web Design
  o Basic design theory and use of web development tools such as dreamweaver and Adobe Image ready.

• Digital Video
  o Planning and production of 8 – 12 minute documentary videos for presentation to the community and local film festivals.

In addition to the core classes, ASSP includes a number of additional program components in which students can participate. Each student is required to attend a weekly workshop. In workshop students work on homework, receive tutoring, and participate in other supplemental curriculum, such as poetry and literary analysis. ASSP has established a partnership with a local college to provide volunteer tutors and mentors for students. Many students also choose to participate in Youth Leadership (YL). YL constitutes a small scale student government within ASSP. Students can serve various leadership positions such as president and secretary. YL organizes ASSP events such as monthly assemblies where students are recognized for their work throughout the month. Awards such as “Student of the Month,” and “100 percent attendance” are given out along with gift certificates for local retailers such as Target and Best Buy. YL also organizes and MCs ASSP graduation. Graduation occurs at the conclusion of each semester of class. Parents
and community members are invited to honor students who have successfully completed the program. Guests from the community speak, and students have the opportunity to perform cultural dances, recite poetry, or show their video productions.

Creating flyers for a Youth Leadership cultural event

**A Day at ASSP**

ASSP courses are taught Monday – Thursday from 3:30 to 6:30 in the afternoon. Students are required to attend class for three out of these four days per week, or a total of 9 hours per week. The number of hours students attend ASSP directly correlates to the number of credits they earn. Web Design and Culinary Arts are taught Monday and Wednesdays. Electronics, Culinary Arts, Office Skills and Video Production are taught on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Students attend workshop for their third day of class either on Tuesdays or Wednesdays.

The large, white, one story SSS building that houses ASSP looks similar to the low rise corporate offices that surround it. Upon entering the door to SSS one is greeted by a receptionist desk. The receptionists at SSS are students in addition to working at the front desk. SSS courses end at 3:30 and during this time of transition one can see the adult and teen students of both programs filtering through the halls. ASSP is located in the rear of the complex, down a long stretch
covered with pictures of SSS program participants engaged in various activities from their classes. In one photo, a young Latino man proudly holds up an electronic component of some type and smiles for the camera. In another, a middle age Black woman is caught glancing up from her computer screen as her hands sit lightly on the keyboard. The ASSP offices lie at the end of the hall next to the culinary arts classroom/cafeteria.

**Break Time**

When students first arrive from 3:30 – 4:00 they are on break for a half of an hour before classes officially begin. They relax in the Culinary Arts classroom, which doubles as a cafeteria for the program. The students are provided with free snacks when they arrive. They sit and mingle at the chairs and tables while munching on peanut butter crackers, chips, oranges and apples, and soda. On this particular Tuesday afternoon the conversation is boisterous and the diverse group of students is highly active. There are perhaps 15 students spread throughout the small group of 4 tables. The discussions range from the events of the day at school, to music and sports, to gossip about friends. A thin Black teen named Andre, sits with two young women Tasheena, and Ana. “Stop messin’ with me.” Say’s Tasheena. Andre grins and puts his arm around her. “Why you hatin’?” he asks. “Cause you always in people’s business.” Says Ana from across the table. Tasheena laughs. Andre releases his arm and moves on to refill his soda. “Haters…” He says under his breath.

On the other side of the room a group of 3 Latina young women hold a quiet conversation in Spanish while they share a bag of Doritos. Next to them a Polynesian girl sits with her head down on the table, arms folded. Imani, a youth counselor walks in the door and glances around the room. She is of a dark caramel complexion, in her late 40’s, and has sharp Ethiopian like features. She wears a purple head wrap, and has multiple bracelets on each of her wrists. An orange silken shirt peeks out from under a casual suede jacket. She walks over to the girl with her head down, puts her hand on her shoulder and leans close. “Are you OK
Lia?” She asks. “Yeah, I’m just tired” The girl responds, not lifting her head. Imani pats her two times on the shoulder and walks to the soda machine to pour herself a glass of water. A young Black woman walks over to her and tells her that she has to leave early from class. “You need to have someone talk to me before I can let you go.” Says Imani to the girl as she places her hand gently on her arm. “You wanna call home?” The girl nods and they leave the cafeteria together.

John
The culinary arts instructor John, works behind the counter in the kitchen. He is preparing for his class while the students eat snacks. John is a large White man with jet black hair and intricate tattoos on both of his arms. He is perhaps 6’3 and well over 200 pounds. He speaks with a rough tone to his voice in contrast to the way he moves smoothly around the kitchen as he prepares for the class. He reminds the students regularly to keep the room clean, and throw away their food. John has worked with SSS and ASSP for 4-5 years. At one time the cafeteria ran as a café for the entire SSS program. John ran the café for 2 years, but now only works with ASSP. “I didn’t get along with the head of the restaurant. He got on my nerves.” SSS runs a restaurant in the downtown area of a local community.
The SSS culinary program participants work at the restaurant as a part of their training. The restaurant’s director also ran the café at SSS. The café was recently closed because it was too expensive to operate. This happened after John no longer worked there. “I ran that place right. But, they didn’t want to listen. I like working with the kids though. I’ve used more than a few of them on my catering jobs.” In addition to working with ASSP John, works large catering jobs at corporate events, country clubs and hotels.

A student preparing meals in culinary arts

“John can I get some more chips?” A large Somoan teen asks John as he walks behind the counter and heads into the storage room. “Hey, make sure they clean up that mess first.” John responds, pointing to the littered tables. “Hey y’all need to clean up that mess before I get mo’ chips.” Shouts the young man. A few teens groan, others begin to clean up. It is ten minutes before classes begins. More students begin to file into the cafeteria. As the crowd grows, the energy in the room builds and students begin to spill into the hallway. Moments before 4 o’clock Shane, the program director walks into the room. “OK, you guys. It’s time to go to class. Let’s move.” He calls loudly across the room. A few students begin to shuffle their belongings. Others stay put and continue their conversations. Slowly, the room begins to empty. The hall becomes a buzz of
activity as the students begin to go to class. I rise, put my labtop away, and tag along behind the group headed toward the electronics classroom.

**Electronics Class**

The electronics class is taught by Frank Smith. Frank is one the senior members of the SSS and ASSP staff. He has taught at ASSP since it’s inception and at SSS for nearly 25 years. He is of medium height, perhaps 5’10 and of slight build. His thinning gray hair is lightly greased and brushed over a balding scalp. On the day I visit class Frank is wearing what I have come to find is his traditional outfit; gray cotton slacks with suspenders and a white button up shirt with red pin stripes. In his right breast pocket is a large black pocket protector with 5-6 pens and pencils attached. Frank wears thick rectangular glasses with light gray frames, and has a trimmed gray beard.

Frank was kind enough to provide me not only with access to his class but also to an interview in which he shared the history of both SSS and ASSP. Frank has taught electronics during his entire tenure at SSS and ASSP. His class averages around 15-20 students. He mentioned that the program content was similar at first,
but they soon discovered that the electronics curriculum for adults was far too challenging for the students. They moved to a project based curriculum where students learned only enough theory to help them understand the creation of the various electronics projects. The students begin with basic electronics assembly activities. They learn how to sauter components on to circuit boards, and learn how to read electronics diagrams and schematics. They then move on to various projects of increasing complexity. The projects include AM/FM radios, working telephones, and even small robots with motion or sound sensors that move across the floor.

The electronics classroom is the same class in which the adults work. It is thick with electronic components and parts and is cluttered but relatively neat. The class is arranged in 4 rows of waist high work benches. Each bench contains two workstations with bar like stools positioned next to each workstation. Each station contains 2ft high shelves filled with pieces of equipment. The desk space contains a blue foam mat and various tools including a sautering iron and a clamp for holding components during sautering. 2 tables line the rear wall and support 7 PCs, each with a connection to the Internet. In addition to the electronic parts and equipment. Open computers litter some of the workstations. Floppy disks and cds sit next to them and exposed wires and components sit in neat piles. On the wall opposite the computers a large white wall unit stores additional parts and materials. A large number of books also line the open shelves of these wall structures.
As I reach for the handle to open the door to the class, it opens abruptly in front of me. A tall Black teen, with a short afro and bright red shirt bursts out of the room and runs down the hall. A moment later another similar looking teen runs through the door behind him. They are both laughing and their voices trail off as they run down the hall. I walk through the door and look around the room. Students are getting ready for class. They pull projects out of the cabinet, set up equipment and some begin to surf the Internet. Frank says nothing, and calmly leafs through a pile of folders on his desk. The students begin to work on projects with no prompting. There is an audible buzz in the class, but it is not loud. A few conversations rise above the murmur, but there is nowhere near the level of activity that was seen in the cafeteria during break time. The class is primarily male. 6 Hispanic young men, 4 Black males and one Polynesian male in addition to 3 hispanic young women. A few students wander around the class, apparently still searching for something to work on. One of them, Mario, an 18 year old senior at a local continuation school, stops behind one of the girls sitting at the computer and looks over her shoulder. He says something to her in Spanish. She looks up and smiles, and replies back to him in Spanish. He laughs and nods, then sits at the computer next to her. He opens up Yahoo chat, and begins to type.
The two students who ran out of the classroom open the door briskly and walk over to their seats. They are still laughing. The tall young man in the red shirt sits down quickly and begins to set up his workstation. I discover later that his name is Terrance. The other young man takes his position on the other side of the room. Quickly, the room is quiet. “Mr. Smith” Says the Terrence, “I need your help.” Mr. Smith walks over to his workstation and takes a look at his project. He is building a battery tester. He looks at the diagram in his project book, furrows his brow and looks up at Mr. Smith. Mr. Smith glances at the small circuit board, and offers Terrance advice. “What color is this wire?” “Black” responds Terrance. “Right, so this goes here, so the white one goes there. Make sure you suter this carefully, or it won’t work.” Says Mr. Smith with confidence. Terrance nods, and picks up his suterting iron. He takes a quick look over to the diagram and begins to suter.

On the other side of the workbench, Alfredo, Mr. Smith’s assistant works with two Hispanic male students on an open computer. Alfredo was a student in Mr. Smith’s adult class. His performance earned him a position as Mr. Smith’s assistant in both the adult and teen classes. An open, empty tower shaped computer sits on the counter top. Michael, a short young man with a long pony tail tied behind his shoulders and a grey flannel shirt, screws a circuit board to the computer case. Alfredo and the other young man, Esteban, lean over the case, watching closely. They speak in Spanish, and looked extremely focused on their work. Alfredo looks up to explain to me what they are doing in a thick Spanish accent. “I teach them to build the whole thing. From beginning to end. First we take it apart, then we put it all back. That way, they understand it all.”
After electronics I visit Donald Abrams. Donald is one of the newer staff at ASSP. He is a young black man of about 25. His short black hair and stubbled goatee frame a pleasant and inviting demeanor. Donald is a youth counselor. His job is to work with students once they have enrolled in the program. He keeps them on task toward earning their full 10 credits, and stays aware of their high school performance as well. He also spends time recruiting on local high school campuses. He has developed relationships with counselors at various schools, so they are aware of the services ASSP offers. Donald is about 5’8”, perhaps 190 pounds. He has a stout frame and round calm face. On this day he wore a blue polo shirt, a black fleece jacket and slightly worn blue jeans.

Before we begin, Donald pauses in the hall to have a conversation with one of his students that is headed toward the bathrooms. “You know you’re low on hours. If you miss too many more you’re gonna get dropped.” The young Latino stands quietly and stares at his feet. “What’s up?” Donald continues. The young man shrugs, hands in pockets. “I know you want to graduate, otherwise you wouldn’t be here. Anyway, come talk to me after class.” The young man nods, still looking at his shoes, and continues toward the bathroom. “I need to talk to Vicente in your
Donald says to me as we continue down the hall, in reference to one of my students who has had spotty attendance recently.

We arrive in the computer lab. Students are sitting quietly, surfing the Internet after class. When we sit down, I ask Donald what he thinks is important about ASSP. “ASSP is about helpin’ kids out who don’t usually get opportunities. It’s about helping them to graduate. They need a place to feel comfortable about themselves.” Says Donald. Donald came to ASSP after a year in an Americorps service program. Through his placement at a mentoring program for African American students at a local high school, Donald was introduced to the director of ASSP. Donald’s experience at the mentoring program encouraged him to stay in the non-profit sector. He wanted to remain for an additional year after his internship, but the mentoring program couldn’t afford to keep him on fulltime. An interesting opportunity presented itself. “The director of the program knew that they needed a youth counselor here and set up a job share situation for me.” Donald worked 1/2 time at the mentoring program and 1/2 time at the school after school program throughout the following year.

“I’ll never do that again.” Donald said about his job share experience. “I was just pulled in too many directions, and never felt like I could give either job enough time and energy. I started to burn out.” Although it was difficult Donald said the experience provided him with a unique look into how two different youth programs functioned. This year, Donald decided to come on board with the school after school program fulltime. He feels more comfortable now in his role as a youth worker. “I don’t have to hesitate to express my opinion. Now I know my stuff,” Donald shared. “I can tell from a glance at a transcript what a student needs to do to get back on track. I’m more confident and assertive.”

As we speak, one of the students in class calls out to Donald. “Hey D, I’m not gonna be here on Thursday. I gotta appointment.” “What kind of appointment?” Donald replies, raising one eyebrow. “Uh, Doctor” The young Tongan girl
replies. “Tell your moms to call me by tomorrow afternoon and we’ll figure it out.” Says Donald, returning to our conversation. As we continue, Donald shares with me some his thoughts about ASSP. “Here, the kids are just so much more comfortable. They feel like it’s another home. They bring their parents, they stay late. In the mentoring program, it was all about academics, but the kids, weren’t feeling it. They didn’t feel like the program was theirs. It was always about what someone else wanted them to do.” Donald believes that ASSP’s biggest success is the community it creates for kids. “This is a place where the kids feel like they belong. It’s in their community, their peers are here, they get to lead. It may not always be all tight and perfect, but I think it helps them.”

When we finish the interview, Donald walks over to the student who called him previously and sits on the table next to the computer. “You know what.” He said quietly. “Hmm?” replied the student, eyes never leaving the computer screen. “You can’t be calling out like that when I’m trying to have a conversation.” Said Donald. “Oh, I’m sorry D” The student replies, looking up with an embarrassed grin.

Handing out certificates at graduation
Discussion and Analysis

The above description captures the essence of many days of observation conducted at ASSP. It provides a glimpse into the daily life of the program and attempts to reveal the subtle details that make up the environment, the people, and the practices that are ASSP. As I observed, several patterns began to emerge that brought meaning to what I saw. These patterns and an interpretation of their meaning will be explored during the remainder of this study.

Cultivating a sense of belonging

As one moves through the spaces and rooms of ASSP, the sense of comfort and ease in the students is palpable. The behaviors and actions of the students during break time demonstrated a relaxed and informal attitude. They were uninhibited in their candid and vocal discussions, and occasionally cursed as they bantered with each other. While the discussions were lively, they never became seriously tense. Students could also be found chatting loudly the hallways before class, or gathered around computers in the computer lab looking up song lyrics. Beyond serving as a vocational school, ASSP is a comfortable place to “hang.” Donald referred to this sense of comfort during our interview. “This is a place where the kids feel like they belong.” The students seem to have a distinct awareness that they are allowed to relax and be themselves. Often they take advantage of this comfort, by pushing the boundaries of behavior. But just as often, they hold each other to high standards, and discourage each other from pushing the boundaries too far. In one instance during my observations, Andre, was talking loudly during an assembly. Two girls next to him admonished him to “Shut-up while people are talking.” Andre started to curl his lips and respond, but quickly stopped himself when he noticed the disapproving eyes of his classmates upon him. While from an outside perspective, what the girls said may sound rude; in context it was both appropriate and effective. These sorts of interactions were key to maintaining a social cohesion and sense of community at ASSP.
Staff contributes to the informal, yet connected environment at ASSP through their interactions with students. In the halls before class and during actual class sessions conversations exhibit a familiarity not often seen in formal classroom settings. Imani, the youth counselor, often refers to students as “Ya’ll” and uses Black urban dialect familiar to the students. In one student assembly, when the students began to push the boundaries of behavior, Imani stopped the class, and spoke to the students like an aunt or neighbor.

“Ya’ll can’t be acting like this in here. Uu-Uh. You’re bein’ disrespectful. You ‘sposed to be here to learn and you’re actin’ crazy like this. It’s embarrasin’.”

Students listened as if a parent lectured them. Their heads were down. Their eye’s shifted, and they squirmed uncomfortably in their seats. Scenes like this are the norm at ASSP. Often staff speak in tones and with accents culturally familiar to students.

The ethnic and cultural closeness between the majority of ASSP staff and students also contributes to the community atmosphere. The students see adults who look like them, and are familiar with their cultural attitudes and values. Imani uses language like many students’ mothers and grandmothers. Marissa, the staff administrative assistant, frequently holds conversations with students in Spanish. John, the culinary instructor, is socio economically closer to the black students at ASSP than many black students at Stanford likely are. Finally, ASSP is located within a stones throw of the roads and avenues of the community most of the students call home. All of these factors contribute to a strong sense of comfort and belonging for students at ASSP.
Recognizing the little things

Throughout ASSP students are recognized for small successes. The kinds of success recognized in ASSP are commonly non-academic. The emphasis is rather on building blocks of maturity; punctuality, consistent attendance, participating in the community, leadership, and helping others. These are all elements that contribute the development of a strong social fabric. Beyond the vocational skills students learn, they are socialized explicitly and implicitly to exhibit behaviors that build community. The students implement formal practices of recognition that have been integrated into program. Every month, all of the classes gather for assemblies to discuss issues related to the program and recognize students who have performed the best during the previous month. Youth Leadership coordinates and facilitates the event. Awards are handed out to the student with best attendance, the class with best attendance, and the “Student of the Month.” As mentioned earlier, students receive gift cards for local retailers worth up to 20 dollars.

On the form that instructors fill out to nominate their student of the month, academic and non-academic measures are weighed equally. Questions such as “Does this student help others in the class?” or “How does this student exhibit leadership in activities outside of the classroom?” are considered important components of the judging criteria. Instructors are also encouraged to write about qualities that make the student stand out and deserving of recognition. This practice is interesting also because it provides students with multiple opportunities to be recognized. They may be recognized individually by simply coming to class consistently. If an entire assembly of students arrived with perfect attendance from the previous month, they would all receive gift cards. Students may also be recognized as a group. The award for best class attendance is a pizza party for that class. Finally, there is the more challenging individual recognition for the student of the month, who receives a $50 gift card.
Students are also recognized for sharing their creative and cultural talents. During graduation, many students perform cultural dances, show their videos, or recite poetry. These performances are often deeply intimate expressions of pain, loss, or love. They are acknowledged by boisterous howls and shouts from their peers when they demonstrate the courage to share their expression. Imani, the youth counselor, often shouts “That’s right,” or “Go on now,” in congregational call and response fashion as students recite poetry.

Students are also recognized informally in the classroom. During a workshop writing assignment, the instructor Marcus spontaneously called the class to attention to acknowledge a poem written by one the students. “Listen to this poem Sola wrote. Girl, this ain’t no joke. This is hot.” He read the poem aloud, and the class applauded without prompting when he was done. Sola, a large Tongan girl with tight brown curls and a shining silver tooth at the center of her smile, beamed proudly. In the same class, Marcus told a student as he struggled to answer an essay question, “Just give me your best effort. That’s what I want. If you give me your best effort I’ll be happy.” Often the small successes in ASSP are linked to effort and engagement, rather than academic superiority.
Meeting students where they are

The majority of students in ASSP are doing poorly academically. They have strong negative associations to performance in school. Another strong theme at ASSP is the emphasis on engaging students in participating and expressing themselves rather than focusing on measurements of their academic success. The graduation performances described earlier illustrate this clearly, but it is also apparent in other contexts. For example, the video production class often must stay late during the final phases of their projects to complete productions on time. Why do the students do it? Kona, a student recently released from juvenile detention says in his video “I used to do negative, now I do positive because I have the opportunity to do something I like.” His simple statement demonstrates not only the fact that Kona has found something he likes, but that he is comfortable doing it, and feels a sense of efficacy; the sense that he can do it.” Kona’s video does not have high production quality, but it is expressive, and compelling. Most importantly though, Kona feels proud of it, and feels empowered because he did it.

The curriculum adjustments in the electronics class towards a more project based approach also highlight this philosophy. Student work is completed at an individual pace. The number of projects completed is not the determining measurement of success. The learning that takes place in relation to a student’s particular skillset when they enter the class are of more significance. The amount of sincere effort they put forth is also a large factor. Allowing students to develop pride and confidence in their work without judgment permeates the organizational practices of ASSP. As counselor Donald said in talking about ASSP students. “They need a place to feel comfortable about themselves.”
Conclusion

The After School Success Program provides an opportunity for students who may be struggling in a traditional high school environment to stay on track towards graduation. Through the process of conducting this case study it became clear that ASSP is about far more than the simple provision of vocational training classes. ASSP offers a complex mix of services that provide students with a comfortable space for learning, a non-judgmental atmosphere and a multiple opportunities to be recognized. These three themes integrate into an approach to working with youth that focuses on treating them with respect, and expecting that they will some day develop into mature adults. It is consciously linked to the Youth Development model found in many organizations such as the YMCA and Boys and Girls clubs. The Youth Development approach sees adolescents as potential to be developed rather than problems to be solved. A Department of Health and Human Services report on Youth Development states:

“A consistent theme in the research literature on adolescent development is that positive growth and development are fostered when adolescents have developed a sense of industry and competency, a feeling of connectedness to others and to society, a belief in their control over their fate in life (even if there are many things over which they actually have little control), and a stable identity.”

ASSP works with students across these arenas of adolescent development within a specific socio/cultural context. Their unique approach merits further study to ascertain its effectiveness in terms of both quantitative and qualitative outcomes.

While I was not able to document the depth of impact throughout the program, I was able to record a number of individual stories of teens that successfully graduated because of the efforts of ASSP. Also, I discovered a number of students
who after their experience in ASSP, came back to SSS after high school to receive job training and eventually obtained employment.

Throughout the process of conducting this case study I was often surprised by how flexible and adaptable the program staff seemed to be of students needs and requests. If students needed to work, they were accommodated. If they needed transportation, they received a bus pass. If they needed 3 extra credits so they could graduate, the staff provided them with extra work and opportunities to earn credits. My thanks to the hard working staff of ASSP for their cooperation in this project. I am hopeful that this work will develop further, and that others will take up the important challenge of researching programs such as ASSP, in order to further our collective understanding of the impact such programs have on the communities in which they operate.

Notes
1. All names of people and organizations are pseudonyms
2. All photos have been used with permission

References

1 Understanding Youth Development: Promoting Positive Pathways of Growth was developed by CSR, Incorporated, for the Family and Youth Services Bureau; Administration on Children, Youth and Families; Administration for Children and Families; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, under Contract No. 105-94-2017; Delivery Order No. 105-95-1735