

ThayGeMoo

Summary Themes from Interviews with Karen Students and Families

Overview

What is Wilder’s School-Based Mental Health Program?

Wilder’s School-Based Mental Health Services provide mental health and wellness support in partnering Saint Paul public and charter schools. The goal of the program is to provide culturally centered, trauma informed services for the whole family. Each program employs culturally and linguistically diverse staff to support the unique identities and experiences of students and their families in the school setting. Currently, there are four culturally specific programs serving Black/African American, Hmong, Karen, and Latinx families.

What is ThayGeMoo?

ThayGeMoo is translated as the living root. In the forest, there is this root that even though it doesn’t get soil, sun or water, it never dies. But if someone picks it up and puts it a vase with water, it will just start to grow. It represents our students. They have a lot of strength and resilience within themselves, and all they need is support from other people, parents, teachers, staff and therapy, and they will grow. This is how it came to be.¹

ThayGeMoo (pronounced as “they-gee-moo”) is a culturally focused school-based mental health program for Karen students and families. The program was started to address a disparity in referrals to mental health services for Karen students compared to other students. Karen immigration to Minnesota has increased in recent years,² yet there is a lack of programs and services that are specifically for the Karen community. Many Karen youth struggle with transitioning to life in the United States.

Karen families may not recognize when youth experience mental health challenges since it can be difficult to translate mental health symptoms in their language; any families are unfamiliar with these topics. ThayGeMoo provides an introduction to mental health services to the community. Wilder Foundation worked closely with a Karen cultural broker to create a program curriculum that honors Karen cultural practices.

ThayGeMoo officially launched in fall 2021. The purpose of this program is to help provide Karen students and families support, especially related to acculturation between both American and Karen culture. Wilder staff also work closely with teachers and school faculty to develop a stronger network of support for Karen families. With the growing Karen community, providing cultural services for youth was something many people in the community voiced. Most referrals are from the school, while some are self-referrals from students themselves.

Currently, ThayGeMoo focuses on providing mental health therapy to students in grades 6-12 at Washington Tech Magnet School. However, Karen students in other schools may participate in ThayGeMoo. While the current ThayGeMoo therapist is not Karen, they are closely aligned culturally and work with a Karen cultural broker.

¹ Amherst H. Wilder Foundation. (2022, December 12). *Living roots: How ThayGeMoo is supporting the mental health of Karen students in Saint Paul Public Schools*. <https://www.wilder.org/articles/living-roots-how-thaygemoo-supporting-mental-health-karen-students-saint-paul-public>

² Minnesota Compass. (2007-2021). *Burmese immigrants*. <https://www.mncompass.org/topics/demographics/immigration/burmese-immigrants>

Background, methods, and limitations

Wilder Research staff conducted nine 25-minute semi-structured interviews with five students and four parents participating in the ThayGeMoo program. According to parent reports, students had been in ThayGeMoo between 3 and 12 months at the time of the interview. Families were referred to the program via school staff, a Karen mental health professional, or through word of mouth from friends.

The purpose of this evaluation was to capture the impact ThayGeMoo has had on students and families in the program. Our evaluation activities focused on the following questions developed collaboratively between Wilder Research and ThayGeMoo program staff:

- How has ThayGeMoo impacted students' overall mental health and well-being?
- How has ThayGeMoo impacted how students relate with their cultural identities?
- How has ThayGeMoo impacted students' and parents' views about mental health and mental health services?

Wilder Research staff collaborated with ThayGeMoo program staff to develop interview guides that asked about the impact of the program from student and parent perspectives.

Parent interviews were conducted over the phone and student interviews were conducted in person at the student's school. Both types of interviews were conducted by Karen interviewers. The evaluation team was purposeful in providing a culturally matched interviewer to ensure connection, comfort, and flexibility with language and other cultural understandings. After completing an interview, parents were given a \$20 retail gift card for their time and participation.

Due to the low number of participants in this study, findings may not be representative of the whole program or Karen community.

Key findings

Students and parents reported improvements to the students' behavior and social-emotional well-being.

Both students and parents shared that ThayGeMoo has helped students improve their overall social-emotional well-being. **Students** noticed improvements in their overall mood, such as feeling more positive, less angry, and less depressed.

I'm less negative. – Student

I don't know. My emotions have improved. – Student

I haven't gotten angry in a while. I haven't been depressed. - Student

In addition, all of the **parents** noticed improvements in their children's emotional well-being since joining ThayGeMoo. They shared that their children were crying less, showing less anger, and were not fighting with siblings as often.

While most parents said that their children's behavior were getting better, they see room for improvement and growth in their youth. Two parents mentioned that, although days are getting better, there were times when their child was down, or was the same as before.

[My child's] behaviors are better, but there are things to work on. He is less angry, but he has his moments.
- Parent

[Their mental health] is getting better, but sometimes [they] feel down. Now [they] are more active in social [activities] and sports. [They] don't cry as much and don't isolate [themselves] as much. - Parent

Students reported that their relationships with family and peers have improved.

All five students said that being in the program has impacted how they relate with family and peers. Half the students shared that their communication with family and friends has improved. Many of the students also reported greater feelings of closeness with family members.

Yes. All my family is good. My communication is better. I get along with my family better. – Student

I usually don't bad mouth my siblings anymore. – Student

It helps me get along with my family. I am closer to my siblings because I love them. – Student

Relationships with friends have changed. I realized that I was distant and wanted to be alone. Now I don't feel like that. I don't like being lonely now. - Student

Some parents noticed that their children had stronger interest in learning more about their culture.

Half of the parents shared that their child wanted to learn more about their cultural identity after joining ThayGeMoo. Two parents also shared that their children wanted to learn their native language, including reading and writing.

[My child] wants to learn more of Karen language. [They] want to read and write it.

[My child] wants to learn Karen language and take classes.

Students and parents did not have a strong preference on whether their therapist was Karen or not.

At the time of these interviews, students in ThayGeMoo were working with therapists who are not Karen, but of a similar cultural background. Most of the parents and students did not have a specific preference for whether the therapist was Karen or not. Instead, they valued a therapist who was able to help their child, was kind, able to understand them [students], and was knowledgeable about the students' bicultural identity (Karen and American). One parent shared that, although they feel okay with their child seeing a non-Karen therapist, they feel it would be better to have a therapist from within their culture who can better understand them.

[The therapist] was really kind. Just as similar to my therapist right now. They are good therapists and I like them both. - Student

It doesn't matter. There is no difference Karen or not. - Student

No preference. They're both okay at being my therapist. I understand that she doesn't speak Karen, so it's fine. – Student

[The therapist] isn't Karen, but I want them to be kind. But it would be better [if my child saw a therapist] who understands my culture and family situation – Parent

It doesn't matter as long as my kids are getting the help. – Parent

I like a therapist that knows both cultures. Therapists that know American and Asian culture since my kid is growing up in the U.S. - Parent

Students and parents noticed changes in how they thought about and talked about mental health.

Most of the students shared that they noticed changes in how they think and talk about mental health and seeking mental health. Some students shared that they were more able to open up about their emotions than before they started seeing their therapist. Some students also shared that they were viewing mental health in a more positive light than before they began seeing their therapist.

I don't know, but I talk more about my feelings and how frustrated I am about stuff. - Student

Before, I would sometimes talk about it [mental health], but I talk more often about it now. - Student

*Yes. I usually do not open up to people, but if I really open up, then people will understand me more.
- Student*

Before [ThayGeMoo] I thought therapy wasn't important to me. But now, I [have] started [to] think it is important to me now. - Student

Parents also shared that they value ThayGeMoo for their children and family. They shared that the program has been good for their child's mental health, and has helped them better understand their child.

It is good for my child, and that is good. - Parent

I have a better understanding of my son's behaviors. - Parent

It is good to talk to a therapist because sometimes family aren't the best people to talk to. I know I can't help her sometimes with how she feels. - Parent

Conclusion and next steps

ThayGeMoo appears to have a positive impact on the social, emotional, and cultural well-being of students it serves. Most students and parents reported improvements in the student's social and emotional well-being, interest in their cultural identities, and relationships with their peers and families. Students and parents also noticed changes in how they think and talk about mental health.

Based on the findings in this report, ThayGeMoo staff may want to consider the following next steps in growing and developing this program:

- **Continue to gather information about the needs of Karen students and families and ways the program can best support their social-emotional and cultural needs**

It may be beneficial for ThayGeMoo program staff to gather information about the needs of Karen families from various perspectives to better understand how to best serve and engage with Karen students (e.g. students, parents, school staff, program staff, Karen community leaders, etc.). It may also be beneficial to explore more culturally relevant ways to gather information from Karen students and families other than typical Western practices like surveys and interviews.

- **Continue to engage with the Karen community to promote ThayGeMoo and mental health awareness.**

Students and parents reported improvements in how they think and talk about mental health. However, some parents felt disconnected from their child's treatment in ThayGeMoo. These parents reported they didn't know what their child talked about in ThayGeMoo or how they felt about working with their therapist. It may be beneficial for ThayGeMoo staff to look for additional opportunities to share information about ThayGeMoo and ways to support mental health awareness. Parents shared that they learned about the program through word of mouth. It may be beneficial to maintain and build more relationships with organizations that serve the Karen community (e.g. Churches, social service agencies, cultural centers, etc.).

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