

Positive Youth Development: An Integration of the Developmental Assets Theory and the Socio-Ecological Model

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ABSTRACT

Background: Health problems such as sexually transmitted infections and diabetes continue to rise, especially among African American and Hispanic adolescents in low-income communities. Youth development programs are an effective public health response, benefiting participants, the programs that serve them, and their community. **Purpose:** To explore the efficacy of integrating the Developmental Assets (DA) and Socio-Ecological Model (SEM) in a pilot youth program, the Youth Health Action Board (YHAB). **Methods:** YHAB was created and implemented by youth. Its impact was examined through individual interviews to learn youth impressions of how their experience affected themselves and their community. **Results:** YHAB participants feel they personally grew through their experience of building external support in their community, increasing both internal and external DAs. Internal assets were dominant, however students benefited from external support and empowerment. **Discussion:** YHAB was a successful integration of the DA and SEM for youth development. Additional research could deepen findings and allow extrapolation to broader populations. **Translation to Health Education Practice:** YHAB program strength lies in its youth development process. Similar programs should look different in each community, as community and youth needs and resources shape program activities.

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BACKGROUND

Serious health problems such as sexually transmitted infections, obesity and diabetes continue to rise among adolescents, especially among African Americans and Hispanics in low-income communities.¹⁻³ As the percent of low-income households continues to rise in the current economic recession, families face worsening health outcomes.⁴ Other common trends in neighborhoods with populations living at and below poverty level include overcrowding in schools and high drop-out rates, conditions that perpetuate poor health behaviors due to limited education and resources.⁴ Youth

development programs are an effective public health response to these conditions. Such programs engage youth in identifying community needs and assets, and can address adolescent health through education, advocacy, and advisory roles.⁵

The Search Institute's Framework of Developmental Assets is one model of assessing healthy youth development. It has been comprehensively reviewed, and 40 internal and external assets have been identified as the building blocks for that development.⁶⁻¹² Overall, assets are the relationships, skills, opportunities, and values that help youth foster resilience

to high-risk environments, and promote thriving behaviors.¹³ These findings are

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consistent with other research, which suggests “resilience is derived from three primary sources: (1) within-child factors, e.g., cognitive ability, self-control and positive temperament; (2) within-home factors, e.g., consistent parenting and secure attachment; and (3) outside-home factors, e.g., school environments that encourage socially appropriate behavior.¹⁴ The more assets youth possess, the *less* likely they are to participate in high-risk behaviors and the *more* likely they are to demonstrate thriving behaviors.^{13,16-18}

The ability for youth to develop assets is found to be true across racial and ethnic groups and socioeconomic levels.^{6,10,15} As youth increase the number of assets, they also increase their maintenance of good health, value diversity and better their overall grade point averages.^{6,10,13,16-17} Studies of the developmental assets have shown youth who reported more assets are less likely to engage in risky behaviors such as use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs,⁸ participate in violence,⁷ be depressed or have suicidal thoughts¹² and delay sexual intercourse.¹⁰ Typically sixth to twelfth grade youth display less than half of the 40 assets. Furthermore, there is a strong correlation between low socioeconomic status and stressors that hinder healthy adolescent development.⁶ The more vulnerable youth are, however, the more they benefit from the protective impact of building developmental assets, and the more resilient they are to living in high-risk environments.¹⁸ This creates a strong argument for youth development programs in low-income areas.

The Socio-Ecological Model provides a framework to address the dynamic relationship between an individual and his or her environment as a determinant of health behavior.¹⁰ This behavior is shaped by a complex interplay of: (1) individual factors, (2) interpersonal relationships, (3) organizational entities, (4) community factors, and (5) systems and policy. Therefore, health outcomes are not simply a result of an individual’s chosen behaviors, but are also influenced by outside forces such as social norms and accessibility of resources.

Research also asserts that, “the most effective school-based prevention and youth development approaches, are those that enhance students’ personal and social assets and improve the school-community environment.”¹³ The more youth participate in school activities the greater they feel connected to the school, and therefore more likely to succeed and engage in healthy behaviors.^{13,20-22} “The ecological approach is a natural fit for research involving urban adolescents because it recognizes disparities in health status associated with poverty, lack of opportunity, racism and powerlessness.”²³ Actively engaging youth in the process of identifying issues and resources in their community and giving them an opportunity to work for environmental change effectively builds resilience to risk and improves health outcomes.^{12,16,24}

PURPOSE

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the efficacy of integrating the Developmental Assets (DA) and Socio-Ecological Model (SEM) in a pilot youth development program, the Youth Health Action Board (YHAB). This study examines youth participant impressions of the effect of their participation on themselves and their community within the context of these two models. Researchers report on the increase in internal and external developmental assets, and document the efficacy of integrating these two models in this small-scale program. Authors discuss the implications of their preliminary findings for future research and youth health programs.

METHODS

Program Overview

The Youth Health Action Board program (YHAB) was created by high school students and staff of a school-based health center at a public high school in South Central Los Angeles. The most recent Los Angeles Unified School District data from the 2008-2009 school year, report the following demographic information: The high school is a year-round school. It includes grades nine through twelve, and has a student popula-

tion that is 80% Hispanic, 19% African American and 1% other. The school has Title I status with 82% of students eligible for free and reduced price meals. Over 39% of students are identified as English Language Learners.²⁵ Approximately half of enrolled 9th grade students drop out before entering the 12th grade. The school draws students primarily from the surrounding neighborhood, where residents have limited access to healthcare, and high rates of chronic disease, obesity, unplanned teen pregnancy, unemployment and violence.²⁶ The school-based health center provides students easy access to medical care and health education in a teen-friendly environment at a crucial time – when adolescents are rapidly growing physically, psychologically and socially.

The YHAB program was developed from two existing health promotion projects, one focusing on teen pregnancy prevention and the other on obesity prevention and nutrition. Each focused on issue-specific education through curricula, discussion groups and special events. Staff included a manager for each project, both holding an MPH degree, and a shared team consisting of one health educator and one youth advocate. Each project began with twelve self-selected participants, who learned of the projects through classroom presentations and staff outreach to teachers and students.

Participants of each project were learning a great deal about their topics and teaching other students what they learned, however they saw duplication and an opportunity to make a more significant impact by integrating into one program. They lobbied staff for this change, resulting in YHAB, which took the existing projects a step farther. The YHAB was formed to empower youth to create a healthy school community that provides students with the education, support and resources they need to make healthy decisions. In time, the program goals were further widened to include the parents of some participants.

Eleven youth completed the program over the course of one school year, and comprise this study’s participants. The participants were diverse in their level of academic



achievement. Nine participants were Hispanic and two multi-racial, all coming from a variety of cultures throughout Mexico and Central America. Six participants were seniors and five were juniors. All five juniors returned to the program for the second year. The 50% attrition rate mostly occurred within the first month of the program, and is typical of past program experience at this health center. Students who left the project cited competing priorities, including sports and other extracurricular activities, school workload and family obligations.

The YHAB initially met as two separate groups—teen pregnancy prevention and nutrition and food education—one time each week for thirty to sixty minutes. Each month the group met altogether for “Grand Rounds,” which covered topics of interest to both groups and included personal and professional skills development. Meetings lasted two hours and were facilitated by youth participants. At the end of each meeting, two students volunteered to co-facilitate the next one, and worked with staff to prepare the upcoming agenda and practice facilitation skills. The YHAB also regularly organized and held special events on campus, some of which are described below.

Utilizing a youth development approach, YHAB participants began by assessing their school community and identifying needs and assets. They identified students, teachers and administrators who would support the program, and implemented surveys among their peers to discover what is known on teen pregnancy and nutrition and what problems exist from a student perspective. Results were assessed and education and advocacy projects were implemented at the high school, in the City of Los Angeles, and even at the state level to address student concerns. Through the process of assessing needs and implementing responsive projects, participants learned and developed leadership and personal skills in a safe and supportive environment.

One such advocacy project was YHAB participants’ response to learning that in order for their education campaign about continued increases in unplanned teen

pregnancies to have a broad impact they had to go beyond their current reach of school stakeholders and into the community. Students planned an open house at the school health center during Teen Pregnancy Prevention Month, where the local district council member addressed community advocates and the school community to honor the program with a City Certificate of Appreciation. Students also developed a teen pregnancy prevention awareness resolution and presented it to the local school board, where it was adopted. This process engaged local policy makers and health advocates, school parents, teachers, principal and staff. All of these stakeholders are now educated about the issue, and are ready to address specific requests from YHAB as the youth identify next steps in their campaign.

Another example resulted from YHAB participants determining that they didn’t have access on campus to the foods they wanted. They conducted a survey of their peers in order to determine food preferences, and organized a meeting with the senior nutritionist of the school district’s food services branch to report the results. She let YHAB know that the lack of funding is due to lack of participation in the school lunch program, so YHAB began a campaign to encourage more students to use the cafeteria, linking increased participation to increased funding for better food. The campaign also included free tastings of school food in the courtyard where students congregate during lunchtime. Not only has participation in the lunch program increased, but many concerned teachers became active in shifting the school food culture by raising awareness among their students. YHAB also organized the planting of a school orchard that is maintained by health classes, and one small learning community of the school has made their focus food and gardening.

Instrument—Structured Interviews

YHAB participants who completed the first program year were asked to take part in individual structured interviews, and responses were recorded as qualitative data. From these responses, researchers’ determined which internal and external develop-

mental assets students felt they built through YHAB by examining their perceptions of: (1) the impact of program participation on themselves, and (2) the impact of program activities on their school. The results were examined within the Socio-Ecological Model and the implications for these results on health behaviors are discussed. The research organization’s Institutional Review Board approved this study and granted a waiver of informed consent.

Two trained interviewers conducted 60-to-90 minute interviews with each of the 11 YHAB participants. Though the two primary authors on this paper are YHAB staff, they did not conduct the interviews in order to minimize respondent bias resulting from participants wanting to report what they thought the staff would want to hear. Students received a \$15 gift card as an incentive for the interview.

Structured interviews were used to make more precise comparisons within participant groups. They were based on an exploratory qualitative research method for community settings, developed by Gery Ryan of the RAND Corporation.²⁷ This method was chosen to minimize common pitfalls of qualitative research, such as seemingly arbitrary data analysis that can result from too many subjective decisions made by the research team.²⁷

The interview guide of open-ended questions was set up in a grid format that allowed interviewers to keep a natural conversational flow while ensuring that they covered key program areas. Forty interview questions covered six areas: (1) participants’ overall experience; (2) historical context (*What was your level of involvement in school and extra-curricular programs before joining YHAB?*); (3) triggers for program involvement (*What was your interest in joining YHAB?*); (4) experience of various program components (*Did meetings such as ‘Grand Rounds’ help you in the program? How?*); (5) immediate reaction to their involvement (*How do you feel about having been involved in YHAB?*); and (6) participants’ perceived long-term impact of their involvement (*Have you changed based upon your experience in YHAB? How?*). Inter-



viewers asked these broad questions, which brought forth more detailed responses from participants. As these details addressed other questions on the grid, interviewers checked off those questions as well. Answers were tracked across the entire grid to ensure all program topics were covered, without having to ask each participant each question.

Data Analyses

With permission from each participant, the interviews were audio taped. Tapes were transcribed and personal references were removed for confidentiality. The study authors used classic content analysis, a code-based technique commonly used in the analysis of free-flowing text like the YHAB participant interviews. Researchers developed a codebook based on the forty internal and external assets from the Developmental Assets Profile. The transcripts were then reviewed and coded for each individual participant. Three of the 11 transcripts were double-coded to ensure themes were being applied uniformly. Interrater reliability tests varied between 80% and 90%. Researchers further refined those themes with a large number of responses into more specific categories derived from an overview of participants' responses.

RESULTS

Study results illuminate that YHAB youth participants feel they *personally* grew through their experience of building *external* support structures in their school and community, increasing both internal and external developmental assets through program involvement. Internal assets were dominant; however students felt they benefited from external support and empowerment. Student interviews, detailed below, are organized by internal and external developmental assets, through each of the five levels of the Socio-Ecological Model (SEM). Results are also outlined in Figures 1 and 2, of internal and external assets respectively.

Internal Developmental Assets

Individual Level of the Socio-ecological Model. Within the internal assets is Level 1 of the SEM, the individual level. Reported

here are participant impressions of how they have personally grown through their participation in YHAB (Figure 1).

Almost all YHAB participants demonstrated an increased **commitment to learning (A)** through increased academic motivation and school engagement. Based on self-report, when the program began five of the eleven participants were already high achievers, describing their grades as "mostly A's and B's." Just over half of participants (6 of 11) improved their academic achievement, most often citing "turning homework in on time" as their means of improvement. Three of the eleven students saw their grades improve from C-level to a B-level overall. Participants' comments include, "I went from [low] grades to now working hard to get caught up and now I am passing every class with good marks," and "[School] was boring, I felt like I was getting nowhere...I always thought that maybe I would probably be like one of those statistics, those teen mothers that drop out and stuff. Now it's like I don't feel that way."

Participants reported that as a result of participation, they also developed **positive values (B)**, including a greater sense of caring for their community, taking personal responsibility to improve it, and helping others stand up for what they believe. For example, participants decided to address the quality of school cafeteria food. They surveyed their peers on food preferences, presented results to the cafeteria manager, and interviewed her to understand her challenges. This information was published in a youth magazine, which was distributed on campus to educate and empower all readers to make positive food choices from the options available and to participate to improve those options.

Some of the participants noted having "grown up" through their YHAB experiences. They learned that long-term commitment is necessary for organizational, community and systems-level change and reported feeling more responsible. This included, "not being able to slack off knowing that there are things to get done and meetings to attend."

Another development that participants reported, was taking responsibility for their own health through education and action, and felt that YHAB was encouraging the broader school community to do the same. They regularly attended educational lunch discussions about nutrition or reproductive health, and in interviews commented, "I have so much more knowledge about food, and I have changed to better eating habits" and "I see a great impact at the lunch meetings because...we have full classrooms of students. I have seen a greater majority of these students now also using the health clinic."

Participants reported gaining **social competencies (C)** such as knowledge about others' cultures, making new friends, and learning professionalism. Participants also cited that they built the important and widely applicable skills of conflict resolution, public speaking, job interviewing, and building social and professional networks. They demonstrated learned life skills such as, "Instead of getting angry, I am able to stay calm when people disagree with me" and "I am more professional, I know how to make a tie and dress for success and notice a difference even in the way that I speak."

Having limited social interactions between Latino and African American students at their school, and also among the Latino population there were prejudices against students from different countries of origin, as well as between those born in the United States and those born in other countries. YHAB broke those barriers as a participant noted, "I learned to be around people I don't normally interact with."

Participants reported that through their involvement in YHAB they gained a **positive identity (D)**, which they defined as 'personal power'—a sense of control over things that happen to them. Some reported an increased sense of purpose, "When I started school here I never liked it and I would ditch. And then in my junior year when I joined YHAB I realized I have to get my act together and change my ways so that I can graduate." Also reported were increased self-esteem, "I want to be more involved and volunteer more, join clubs when I am in college so that I can speak



Figure 1. Internal DAs on SEM Level 1 Identified by YHAB Participants

		Internal Developmental Assets			
		Commitment to Learning (A)	Positive Values (B)	Social Competency (C)	Positive Identity (D)
		Participants' view of the program's impact on themselves.			
Level of the Socio-ecological Model	I Individual	Improve grades.	Care for community.	Gain knowledge about other cultures.	Gain personal power/sense of control over oneself.
		Engage in and bond to school.	Take responsibility to improve oneself.	Make new friends.	Make conscious, healthy decisions.
		Motivate to apply to college.	Help others stand up for what they believe.	Acquire public speaking skills.	Volunteer time for groups and those in need.
			Take personal responsibility for one's health.	Learn conflict resolution.	Increase self-esteem and become more outgoing.
			Feel more responsible and grown-up.	Become less shy and more talkative.	Improve understanding of personal goals and life direction.
			Reinforce knowledge and responsibility to peers.	Gain professional skills.	
				Restrain from high-risk behaviors.	

out. I am no longer afraid to say what I feel.” And a positive view of their future, “Because of them [the program staff] and the doctor too, I got influenced. I want to be just like that. Actually, I want to be a registered nurse now, but help teens.”

External Developmental Assets

Environmental Levels of the Socio-ecological Model. Within the external assets are levels two through five of SEM – interpersonal, organizational, community and systems/policy levels. Reported here are participant impressions of how they interacted with their environment and the impact they had (Figure 2).

YHAB is a forum for youth to make friends across their usual cliques, and they

reported feeling support (E) on the interpersonal level in friendships that reached outside of the program’s boundaries. Those new friendships—with others who also value health, and teach those values and skills to friends and family—reinforced healthy behaviors among all participants. One participant noted, “I have learned things I guess I didn’t know about myself. There has [sic] always been people that support you, who push you to strive to be something else. Everybody feels like they’re all family.”

Youth participants also reported feeling support (E) on the organizational level from program staff and even guest speakers. Participants recognized the support saying, “I could talk to them about anything, like

they were not judgmental or anything...I trust them. They were always there supporting me. They were always pushing us saying, ‘you can do it.’” And “Not only do these professionals provide skills; they also broaden students’ worldview through exposure to a variety of professions. Some [other] students have even told me that they would like to pursue a career, let’s say as a psychologist, from a result of work that some of the presenters have shown. It has had an impact.”

Participants felt support (E) on the community level by understanding the larger context, that they are not isolated in their caring about their community’s health, and alone in working to improve it. They were



Figure 2. External DAs on SEM Levels 2–5 Identified by YHAB Participants and How Each Supports Internal DAs

		External Developmental Assets			
		Support (E)	Empowerment (F)	Boundaries and Expectations (G)	Constructive Use of Time (H)
		Participants' view of the program's impact on themselves. <i>How that impact reinforces Internal Developmental Assets.</i>			
Levels of the Socio- Ecological Model	5 Systems		Exposure to state lawmakers. <i>Reinforces positive identity through self-efficacy.</i>		
			Work directly with local policymakers. <i>Increases social competency.</i>		
	4 Community	Contribute to a larger movement. <i>Youth experience success beyond community impact and feel connected.</i>	Celebrate accomplishments. <i>Develops commitment to learning and positive identity.</i>		Be a resource to the school and larger community. <i>Promotes commitment to learning, positive values and social competencies that further positive identity.</i>
			Recognize youth have the power to change their community. <i>Develops positive identity through belief in self-efficacy.</i>		
	3 Organizational	Work with supportive, teen friendly staff who are non judgmental and consistent. <i>Healthy adult/youth relationships support behavior change.</i>	Learn professional skills to help build a bright future. <i>Promotes commitment to learning, social competency, and positive identity.</i>	Staff holds youth to high standards. <i>Promotes commitment to learning, positive values and social competencies.</i>	
		Adults support youth in their success. <i>Youth develop commitment to learning, positive values and positive identity.</i>	Determine potential community allies. <i>Provides a web of support for internal assets.</i>		
		Gain exposure to a variety of professions. <i>Broadening youth world-view helps positive identity.</i>			
	2 Inter-personal	Engage family and friends in increasing healthy behaviors. <i>Youth normalize healthy behaviors, which provides further support of positive values.</i>	Serve as a health resource to friends and family. <i>Youth further their commitment to learning and develop a positive identity, which reinforces healthy behaviors.</i>		



motivated by knowing they are actually a part of a larger movement, “[It] was really cool. The presenters [at Grand Rounds] were talking about the history of LA and all these youth-led movements. It was kind of like a history class. It was just crazy, like mind-blowing things that they would tell you.”

Many of these youth also gained skills and knowledge around health issues and became resources for information and materials to their friends and families. This **empowerment (F)** on the interpersonal level was reported as their friends coming to them to find out about safe sexual practices and nutrition, and some impacted their homes by guiding their families to purchase healthier foods. The teaching of these values to their friends and families reinforced their own behaviors, consistent with positive values shared among participants.

Being empowered (F) on the organizational level, students were also able to impact their environment. This was made clear through comments such as, “You are given experience to a lot of new things. So, it’s like your doors have been open and you don’t lose anything; you only gain. You have the power to change something in your community or just maybe something in your class or something at your school. It’s really up to you, and if you want to make a big difference like that – then this is the program that you want to be in.”

Participant interactions with policy makers empowered (F) them on the systems level. It gave them a strong sense that their perspectives are valued and that they can affect large-scale change. “When we presented to [the senior nutritionist from the school district’s food services branch] it gave me an opportunity to give someone else my voice that this is how I felt. This is what we needed and what needs to be changed. And then getting her presentation back, there was information that I could use.”

The **boundaries and expectations (G)** set on the organizational level led participants to cite that working together with adults to address the health environment built trust, which led them to uphold a higher standard for themselves.

Many of the participants noted that being part of YHAB motivated them to engage in the broader school community, and make **constructive use of their time (H)** on the community level. “I wasn’t really involved in school. I just went to my classes and then I would just go home. In my junior year I wanted to get more involved and do more things, so I got involved in YHAB and then it showed me that I can do more than just school work. So after I joined YHAB, I joined two other groups.”

One student eloquently summed up his/her YHAB experience:

“Me personally, I have learned so much. I have worked with a lot of different people. I have gotten to travel. I see a different world. It helped me see the need for healthcare and I think that I am going to be a strong advocate from now on in the future for school-based health centers, and I want to continue advocating. And one day, I want to run for a position in the Assembly. I want to end up as an Assemblyman, if not more, and I will make sure that more funds are allocated into our healthcare. I just want to see more money invested in health and healthcare. That’s where I see myself in the future.”

DISCUSSION

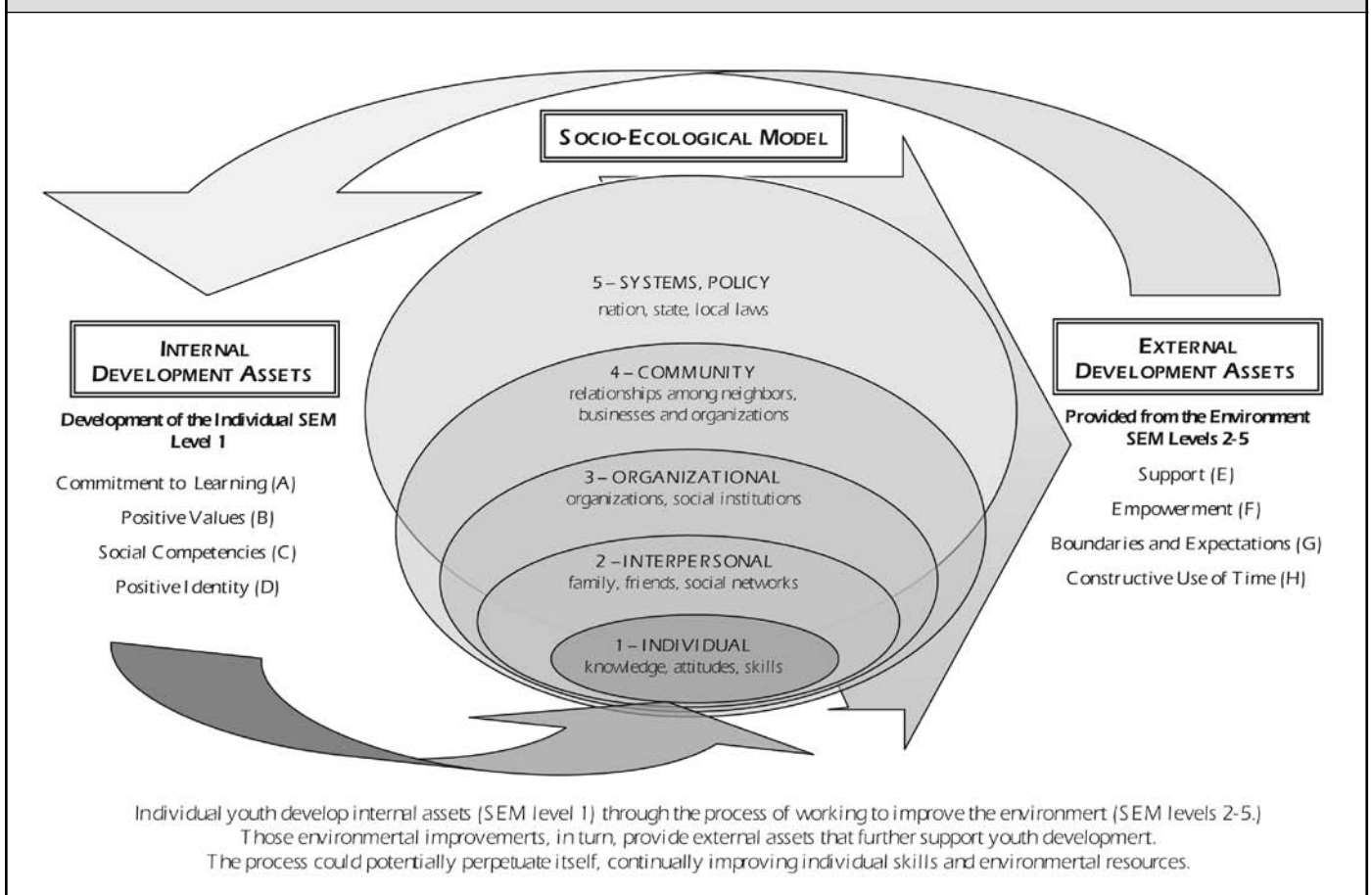
The purpose of the study was to explore the efficacy of integrating the Developmental Assets (DA) and Socio-Ecological Model (SEM) for a successful youth development program. The integration of these two models did prove to be an effective platform for YHAB for positive youth development. YHAB youth personally grew (internal DAs) through their experience of working towards building student support structures in the school and community (external DAs.) Where research shows that typically sixth to twelfth grade youth display only half of the forty identified assets, YHAB participants identified at least eight DAs in just one year. This is significant to participants’ health as DAs are positively associated with maintenance of healthy behaviors, reduced participation in high-risk activities and increased thriving behaviors.

The positive findings of YHAB participation in the study cohort support the need for further study of the integration of these two frameworks. The authors believe that a larger group of student participants could result in wider change. There could be both more students to carry out environmental improvements, and a larger resulting support network. Additionally, because each YHAB youth expressed influencing their friends and family, the impact of participant education could reach a larger proportion of the community with the potential to shape new social norms that support improving health. Figure 3 describes the dynamic relationship between these two frameworks and the potential to be self-sustaining and growing.

There are some limitations to this study in the validity of extrapolating these findings across populations. One includes the small number of participants in this pilot program and the fact that they are all from just one community limits the broad applicability of the results. The program should be repeated on a larger scale with urban, suburban and rural high school students.

Another limitation is that program participants were self-selected volunteers, implying that there was already a willingness among participants to create change. At least one participant though admitted that he initially came to meetings for the food provided but after becoming more engaged in the topic, was motivated to be an active participant. To control for self-selection bias, future research could be done within a classroom setting or with a long-standing youth program. One possibility would be to design a class for students who are required to complete a service-learning project in order to graduate from high school. Or work with an existing class that fulfills this requirement to control for self-selection bias.

This study also did not examine behavior change of participating students so conclusions about increased positive health outcomes, including maintenance of good health, reduced risk behaviors, and increased thriving behaviors, can only be speculated on by extrapolating from previous studies.

Figure 3. The Dynamic Relationship between Developmental Assets and the Socio-Ecological Model


By studying behavior change, researchers could better understand the direct impact of participation in such a program on participant's resilience to risk. The authors also recognize that in the substantial body of literature linking increased developmental assets with positive health outcomes the majority of published research is from the Search Institute, the organization that created the Developmental Assets Profile. More research is needed by third parties to further validate their studies connecting DAs and positive health outcomes. Ideally this research would be conducted over time to measure maintenance of healthy behaviors.

This study did not examine the environmental changes that were actually created on the organization, community and systems/policy levels of the SEM, but participants' impressions of the en-

vironmental change. Program staff has experiential knowledge of resources that were directly created as a result of the work of YHAB; however, a thorough survey of both the direct and indirect impacts of program activities on community resources is needed. A longer-term program and study could better identify the potential impact on these levels, as systems change takes significant time to develop and implement. For example, advocacy groups have been working with the Los Angeles Unified School District's Food Services Branch for over ten years to improve the health of the food served in school cafeterias across the district, but small successes come in stages. Organization, systems and policy change are essential components to affect secondary and tertiary audiences, including non-participating students at the same school and the surrounding community.

TRANSLATION TO HEALTH EDUCATION PRACTICE

Despite the limitations of the pilot YHAB study, certain themes emerged that may prove useful in future research. Youth interviews indicate that the strength of the YHAB program model lies not in its components but in its youth development process. Youth development programs based on the integration of the Developmental Assets and Socio-Ecological Model should look different in each community they are implemented in, as the needs and resources of each community shape program activities.

The process most integral to program success is to engage youth in a meaningful way as program partners. The responses of YHAB youth to interview questions demonstrate that the external assets that were made available to them (support, empowerment, setting of boundaries and



expectations and constructive use of time) inspired them in their internal development. Though the definition of meaningful engagement is not explored here it is clearly demonstrated through the creation of YHAB itself, which was the suggestion of a project participant. It also manifests in youth themselves conducting the needs and resources assessment and developing the program based on their findings.

Another important process is to ask participants to identify and capitalize on their own and their community's resources, rather than focusing on deficits. As participants build skills, identify their values and develop a belief in their ability to create a positive future, they develop healthier behaviors. Practicing and having such values and skills reinforced in the safety of the program environment supports participants in making healthy decisions daily, despite the array of risks they are exposed to. YHAB youth responses also indicate that recognizing the resources already in their community helps motivate them to be a part of the solution.

Study results also indicate that YHAB success is partially due to addressing youth development across the Socio-Ecological levels. On an individual level, youth developed internal assets through their experiences building external assets on organization, community and systems levels, such as collaborating with peers and adults, teaching other students, presenting at conferences, and meeting with policy makers.

Finally, the process of youth reflecting on their experience and recognizing their impact reinforced students' positive identity. YHAB members recognize the work they are doing as important to both their own success and that of their community, a realization that was brought about and reinforced through reflection activities at social gatherings and celebration dinners.

The first year of the YHAB program was a pilot study, and further research should be conducted with a more broad-scale application of its methods. However, this study makes a compelling case for future research to explore the integration of the Development Assets and Socio-Ecological Model as

a platform on which to build youth development programs that effectively increase healthy behaviors across socio-economic factors, and ultimately improve the health status of individuals and communities. The public health community could greatly benefit from studies that examine what the long-term impact of the application of these two frameworks can have on community development and health outcomes. It calls for the examination of whether investing in youth can begin to change social norms around health behaviors, and if this integration can lead to a self-sustaining cycle of positive community development beyond the life of the original program.

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