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The Role of Afterschool Settings in Positive Youth Development

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The afterschool hours have become increasingly important in the United States: 6.6 million children are involved in afterschool programs and another 22 million families would desire programming if it were available (Afterschool Alliance, 2004). Public policy has also fueled the demand for afterschool programs with mandated funding through the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21CCLC). This is one mechanism for remediating student learning problems exhibited during the school day [1,2]. However, the afterschool context is meaningful for other reasons as well. In today's era of increased accountability, schools are focusing more on academics with less time for student enrichment. This sometimes means eliminating certain subjects, to make time for increasing performance on tests [3]. With the demands on the school day, it is possible that some of the work of prevention and promotion could be accomplished in the time afterschool.

Afterschool is an interesting setting to consider under the rubric of positive youth development (PYD). PYD emerged in the context of rethinking child and adolescent development [4,5]. Often when youth are studied in the social sciences and health, it is under the rubric of prevention, be it violence, aggression, substance abuse, or obesity. Positive youth development brings with it a recognition that development is not by definition problematic, fraught with psychopathology, substance abuse, and delinquency. PYD draws attention to the characteristics we would like to see develop in youth [6]. Yet, PYD as a construct is less useful to us if it becomes an enormous conceptual umbrella for everything positive among youth. The construct is much more helpful when we begin to define and specify what is meant by PYD.

Definitions of PYD are elusive and encompass many different aspects of youth development. Empirical efforts to operationalize PYD within the field of adolescent health have focused on the dimensions of social skills, constructive use of leisure time, caring adult relationships, and decision-making [7]. Another important and underlying characteristic of PYD is the idea of agency [6]. As one colleague has suggested, in a society that does so much *to* youth, it is important to emphasize doing activities *with* youth and even more so *led* by youth [8]. Agency, initiative, problem solving and social relationships are emerging as important components of PYD.

The quickly growing literature on PYD is examining various types of settings and the degree to which these settings foster PYD. In Larson's research on various settings and the degree to which they fostered PYD, school, peer, and community-based settings indeed varied [6]. In school settings, youth exhibited high levels of concentration but did not seem to demonstrate much intrinsic motivation for some of their tasks during school. On the other hand, peer activities seemed to foster more intrinsic motivation but did not seem to require

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much concentration and focus. Some of the activities found among youth that seemed to foster *both* deep attention and motivation included structured recreational opportunities and involvement in community-based learning opportunities [6]. In these types of activities, even the language of youth suggested more engagement, problem-solving (i.e. consideration of hypothetical situations) and more action on the part of the youth [9].

The issue is whether the atmosphere of afterschool encourages the type of initiative and agency implied by the PYD model. The structure of afterschool can vary greatly contingent upon the purpose and mission of the program. Some programs, particularly those with a mission of academic enrichment and remediation (typified by 21st CCLC's) are very "school-like" while others may be structured to foster more interest, exploration and engagement [10]. Thus, it is important to empirically evaluate afterschool programs to examine the degree to which they address both prevention and promotion.

Evaluations of afterschool to this point have been mixed [11], yet they suggest with adequate dosage, appropriate structure, and integration of effective curricula that afterschool programs can be successful in academic enrichment and problem prevention [12,13,14]. However, we have yet to address whether these programs that are effective in increasing academic performance and decreasing problematic behaviors are also the programs that foster PYD.

In this context, Tebes' et al.'s article, "Impact of a Positive Youth Development Program in Urban After-School Settings on the Prevention of Adolescent Substance Use" in current issue of the *Journal* is timely and warranted [15]. The article provides a quasiexperimental evaluation of an afterschool program designed to promote youth development and prevent adolescent substance abuse among adolescents participating in an afterschool program. In this study, youth participated in a "comprehensive program to promote well-being and prevent substance use among adolescents," with a focus on health education and cultural heritage. Here it would have been helpful to have more information on how the program activities mapped upon a PYD framework and the likely *effects* on PYD. The background could have also specified the expected processes through which culture and ethnicity might mediate substance abuse prevention efforts. For example, portions of the cultural heritage pieces in the curriculum were borrowed from the Aban Aya Youth Project [16]. Aban Aya is a good example in that it specifies in its underlying model and supported by data that cultural collectivism is related to empathy for others, and decreased aggression [17]. Both collectivism and empathy are characteristics that could be considered under both a cultural and PYD framework. Since the current authors invoke a cultural framework, serious consideration should be given to the processes by which culture, race, and ethnicity might influence substance abuse. This is especially important given that ethnic minority groups are often involved in substance abuse to a similar or even *lesser* degree than majority group youth [18] but are disproportionately arrested and jailed for drug involvement [19,20].

Notwithstanding, this study offers helpful empirical data on the effects of an afterschool-based substance abuse prevention effort. Though the data are not unequivocal, the most notable effects occur upon reduced marijuana and alcohol use. This study demonstrates the value of "science migration," that school-based curricula can be implemented in afterschool with beneficial effects. The degree to which these effects are obtained through a process of *increasing* positive youth development has yet to be demonstrated. In summary, both the research on afterschool settings and in positive youth development, are relatively new areas of exploration. These efforts, like the current study, can help us better understand how we can encourage youth to not only avoid problem behavior, but also grow up to be helpful, involved citizens of our communities.

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