Empowerment-Focused Positive Youth Development Programming for Underprivileged Youth in the Southern U.S.: A Qualitative Evaluation

"… disadvantaged youth … can be empowered through out-of-school time empowerment programming by developing their life skills and deepening their social competence, thereby reducing the likelihood of negative outcomes and promoting societal participation" (p. 7).

1. WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

Due to experiences of marginalization and discrimination, racialized youth are more likely to experience lower achievement levels and negative educational outcomes than their white peers, which can limit their social mobility and community involvement. Evidence suggests that *empowerment programs* (i.e., programs that build life skills and engage youth in service-learning projects that promote youth voice, develop skills, and foster lifelong community engagement) can contribute to a number of positive outcomes in youth; however, there is a lack of literature on the impacts of such programs on racialized youth living in underserved communities. This study examines whether racialized youth who participate in empowerment programs show evidence of outcomes that are consistent with two Positive Youth Development frameworks (the Five Cs and the Big Three, as outlined below).

2. WHERE DID THE RESEARCH TAKE PLACE?

This study took place in an unnamed school district in the Southern region of the United States, in which 80% of students are racialized.

3. WHO IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research is about racialized youth who participated in three empowerment programs and their caregivers. Youth participants were aged 7-19 and qualified for free or reduced-price school meals (a requirement to enroll in the programs).

4. HOW WAS THE RESEARCH DONE?

The researchers conducted focus groups with youth and their caregivers to evaluate whether program participants demonstrated evidence of outcomes associated with two Positive Youth Development frameworks: the Five Cs (competence, confidence, connection, character, and confidence), including a potential Sixth C (contribution), and the Big Three (positive adult relationships, life skill development, and participation in community-based activities). Competence, one of the Five Cs, was broken down into social, emotional, behavioural, moral, and cognitive competence.

A total of 48 youth and 34 caregivers participated in the focus groups. Researchers recruited youth who participated in at least one empowerment program in the school district between 2017 and 2019, as well as one caregiver of each youth participant. Participants were recruited using *stratified sampling*, a method in which a population is divided into homogenous groups and random samples are drawn from each group.

The researchers conducted 13 focus groups with youth and 11 focus groups with caregivers. Each group lasted 30–60 minutes. Focus groups centered on young people's and caregivers' experiences, perceptions, and perceived benefits of the program; they aimed to understand whether these reflected the concepts of the Big Three and Five Cs frameworks. Each family (youth participant and caregiver) received a $25 gift card for participation.

5. WHAT ARE THE KEY FINDINGS?

i) Social Competence:

Although there was evidence of increases in all types of competence, **social competence** emerged as the most reported area of growth. As a result of their participation in programming, youth were more comfortable speaking up in social and school settings and making new friends; their communication skills improved, as well as their confidence in their social skills.

ii) Life Skill Development:

Youth and caregivers identified **life skill development** as the second highest area of growth. The most mentioned life skills included skills to prepare for the future, the ability to overcome challenges, as well as the ability to work on a team and get along with others.

iii) Participation and Leadership in Community Activities:

Programming also provided youth with opportunities for **participation and leadership in community activities**, such as volunteering at the local library and organizing community events. Caregivers reported that program staff kept youth accountable, which motivated them to fulfill their responsibilities.

iv) Positive Relationships with Adults:

Youth also developed **positive relationships with adults**, especially program facilitators, who were seen as "accountable hands-on mentors, who provide social support to youth" (p. 7).

6. WHY DOES THIS RESEARCH MATTER FOR YOUTH WORK?

This study suggests that empowerment programs informed by Positive Youth Development frameworks can support youth in underserved communities by building their social competence and life skills.

This type of programming might be especially impactful in communities experiencing marginalization, as some caregivers emphasized that they would not be able to provide their children with the same experiences and skills due to work demands and limited resources. This was especially true for single-parent families.

The researchers emphasized that organizations considering youth empowerment programming in disadvantaged communities must maintain strong communication with caregivers to ensure program success.

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