

Determining the Positive Youth Development Scores of Ferguson College of Agriculture Students Based on Their Experience in School-Based Agricultural Education

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Introduction/Need for the Study

Teachers face a variety of growing challenges within the educational system (Carello & Butler, 2015; Easterly & Myers, 2019; Eck et al., 2019). These challenges are complex and multifaceted, requiring educators to continually adapt their approach to meet the needs of students and implement innovative strategies within the classroom setting. A growing challenge for Oklahoma teachers is that Oklahoma bears the moniker of the state with the highest prevalence of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs; 32%) among youth (Hays-Grudo & Morris, 2020). Educational strategies, whether instructional or managerial, are designed to create an inclusive and safe learning environment where students can thrive (Harris & Fallot, 2001). If classrooms, specifically school-based agricultural education (SBAE) classrooms, are considered an enabling environment, are SBAE teachers aware of the potential protective environment they create or the influence on positive youth development they build within their students? The research objective guiding this study was to determine the PYD score of Ferguson College of Agriculture (FCoA) students at Oklahoma State University (OSU) based on their experience in an SBAE program. As part of a larger study, determining the levels of PYD currently generated by SBAE programs will help lay the foundation for future research and implementation of protective strategies to enhance PYD in SBAE members.

Theoretical Framework

“Positive youth development (PYD) refers to a broad approach that aims to build the competencies, skills and abilities of youth that they need to grow and flourish throughout life” (Hinson et al., 2016, p. 15). For this study, Hinson et al.’s (2016) operational definition of PYD was synthesized from the works of Lerner (2004) and his work in developmental contextualism and developmental systems theory. Nested within the umbrella of developmental science, PYD works in concert with Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) ecological systems theory (EST). PYD is a strengths-based approach that emphasizes the promotion of essential skills, competencies, and resources for young people to thrive and become productive members of society (Lerner et al., 2005). Grounded in the belief that all individuals have inherent strengths and potential, and that supportive contexts can enhance these assets, leading to positive developmental trajectories (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003).

Methodology

Arnold et al.’s (2012) Positive Youth Development Inventory (PYDI) is a 55-item instrument designed to assess specific elements of youth development based on their participation in an educational or youth development program. This instrument was developed based on the 6Cs (or domains) of positive youth development: a) competence, b) confidence, c) character, d) connection, e) caring, and f) contribution (Arnold et al., 2012; Hinson et al., 2016; Lerner, 2016; Lerner et al., 2005). Quantitative data were collected via a Qualtrics link distributed to FCoA students in two separate recruitment emails. A modified version of Dillman et al.’s (2014) tailored-design method was used due to recruitment restriction established by OSU’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). FCoA students ($N = 3,126$) were asked to rank their level of agreeance based on the constructs provided as they pertain to the specific educational or youth development program being studied (i.e., SBAE). Participants were presented with the constructs and a four-

point, Likert-type scale; 1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 3 = *Agree*, and 4 = *Strongly Agree* (Arnold et al., 2012). The instrument was organized so that items 1 through 14 addressed the *competence* domain, items 15 through 23 addressed the *character* domain, items 24 through 31 speak to the *connection* domain, items 32 through 39 addressed the *caring* domain, items 40 through 48 addressed the *confidence* domain, and items 49 through 55 speak to the *contribution* domain (Arnold et al., 2012). In its original form, the PYDI carries a Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of .92 for the total measure (Arnold et al., 2012). SPSS Version 28 and Microsoft Excel were used for data analysis.

Findings

Participants' PYD ($n = 319$) score was calculated by generating a mean score for each of the 6Cs of PYD. Three hundred and nineteen FCoA students completed the PYD instrument on a four-point, Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 4 = *Strongly Agree* for each domain (Arnold et al., 2012). The data showed the *confidence* domain to have the lowest mean score ($M = 3.29$; $SD = 0.46$) while the *character* domain yielded the highest mean score ($M = 3.68$; $SD = 0.44$) of the six remaining domains. *Connection* was 3.42 ($SD = 0.54$), *competence* was 3.44 ($SD = 0.43$), *contribution* was 3.46 ($SD = 0.56$), and *caring* was 3.50 ($SD = 0.48$). An overall PYD average score was calculated across the 319 participants ($M = 3.45$; $SD = 0.45$).

Arnold et al. (2012) provides a ranking scale for the PYD instrument. The lower the PYD domain average, the greater the need for intervention. Conversely, the higher the PYD domain average, the more comfortable youth are within that PYD domain. *Character* was the only PYD domain in which FCoA students ranked *high* and *excels in this area* (Arnold et al., 2012). The remaining five PYD domains fell within the *medium* ranking showing that FCoA students *most likely are comfortable in this area* (Arnold et al., 2012).

Conclusions/Implications/Discussion

Two overarching conclusions were drawn from these findings: (1) SBAE programs served as a positive, nurturing environment of the development of all 6Cs of PYD for FCoA students, and (2) SBAE programs had the greatest influence on *Character* development. As part of a larger study, these conclusions were used to draw connections and implications between characteristics of SBAE programs, SBAE teachers, and trauma-informed pedagogy (TIP) practices. For SBAE teachers to create an inclusive and safe learning environment where students can thrive (Harris & Falot, 2001), TIP must continue to be created, developed, and implemented into the comprehensive SBAE program. Considering these conclusions, could it be that the vital influence of PYD does not revolve around the SBAE experience itself, but rather the driver of those experiences, the SBAE teacher? A recommendation for practice is SBAE teachers should utilize the PYDI to establish a baseline for their students as they enter the SBAE program. This will allow SBAE teachers to target programming throughout their time in SBAE and identify specific PYD domains in need of intervention (Hinson et al., 2016). A recommendation for research would be to enhance the findings within this study through qualitative interviews with participants. By applying a mixed-methods approach to collecting and analyzing the data presented, the true essence and impact of SBAE programs on PYD scores could be strengthened. Adding rich, thick narrative to the existing quantitative data could allow researchers to draw deeper conclusions, implications for SBAE programs and teachers, and inform a targeted research agenda moving forward.

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