2 Young People Are Resources to Be Developed: Promoting Positive Youth Development through Adult–Youth Relations and Community Assets

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How do we know if American children and adolescents are doing well in life? What vocabulary do American parents, teachers, policy makers, and often young people themselves use to describe a young person—a person in the first two or so decades of life—who is showing successful development?

All too often in the United States we discuss positive development in regard to the absence of negative or undesirable behaviors. Typically, such descriptions are founded on the assumption that children are "broken" or in danger of becoming "broken" (Benson, 2003), and thus we regard young people as "problems to be managed" (Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray, & Foster, 1998). As such, when we describe a successful young person we speak about a youth whose problems have been managed or are, at best, absent. We might say, then, that a youth who is manifesting behavior indicative of positive development is someone who is *not* taking drugs or using alcohol, is *not* engaging in unsafe sex, and is *not* participating in crime or violence.

Benson (2003) explains that the focus in Americans' discussions of youth on their problems and the use by Americans of a vocabulary that stresses the risks and dangers of young people occur because we have

> a culture dominated by deficit and risk thinking, by pathology and its symptoms. This shapes our research, our policy, our practice. It fuels the creation of elaborate and expensive service and program delivery infrastructures, creates a dependence on professional experts, encourages an ethos of fear, and by consequence, derogates, ignores and interferes with the natural and inherent capacity of communities to be community. (p. 25)

The deficit model of youth that shapes our vocabulary about the behaviors prototypic of young people results, then, in an orientation in the United States to discuss positive youth development as the absence of negative behaviors. Unfortunately, even as recently as 1999, and even in programs purportedly focused on positive youth development, a predominant emphasis in the youth development field continued to be a reliance on this deficit model of youth and, as such, on defining positive youth development as the absence of adolescent problem behaviors. For instance, Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, and Hawkins (1999) noted that "currently, problem behaviors are tracked more often than positive ones and, while an increasing number of positive youth development interventions are choosing to measure both, this is still far from being the standard in the field" (p. vi).

The absence of an accepted vocabulary for the discussion of positive youth development is, then, a key obstacle to evaluating the effectiveness of programs or policies aimed at promoting such change. People do not measure what they cannot name, and they often do not name what they cannot measure (T. Gore, personal communication, December 13, 2002).

In short, characterizations of young people as problems to be managed or as primarily in need of fixing reflect both a deficit approach to human development and a belief that there is some shortcoming of character or personality that leads youth to become involved in risky or negative behaviors. Given the presence of such a deficit, the appropriate and humane actions to take in regard to young people are to prevent the actualization of the inevitable problems they will encounter. Indeed, policy makers and practitioners are pleased when their actions are associated with the reduction of such problem behaviors as teenage pregnancy and parenting, substance use and abuse, school failure and dropout, and delinquency and violence.

Everyone should, of course, be pleased when such behaviors diminish. However, it is very dispiriting for a young person to learn that he or she is regarded by adults as someone who is likely to be a problem for others as well as for him- or herself. It is very discouraging for a young person to try to make a positive life when he or she is confronted by the suspicion of substance abuse, sexual promiscuity, and a lack of commitment to supporting the laws of society. What sort of message are we sending our children when we speak of them as inevitably destined for trouble unless we take preventive steps? How do such messages affect the self-esteem of young people, and what is the impact of such messages on their spirit and motivation?

Some words for describing positive behaviors about youth exist, for example, pertaining to academic achievement and activities relating to current or potentially successful entrepreneurship. Nevertheless, the vocabulary for depicting youth as "resources to be developed" (Roth et al., 1998) is not as rich or nuanced as the one available for depicting the problematic propensities of young people.

As a society, we must do a better job of talking about the positive attributes of young people. We must talk to our youth about what they should and can become, and not only about what they must avoid being. We should then act on our

statements, and work with young people to promote their positive development. In the context of nurturing and healthy adult–youth relationships, we need to offer young people the opportunities to learn and use the skills involved in participating actively in their communities and in making productive and positive contributions to themselves and their families and society.

These "oughts" for social change for youth represent a formidable challenge involving nothing short of thorough systems change in the United States. The challenge is to provide for Americans a new vision and vocabulary about youth. This challenge is being met by a historically unique and significant convergence of efforts by scholars, practitioners, policy makers, and youth and families.

Toward a New Vision and Vocabulary for Youth

In these early years of the 21st century, a new, positive, and strength-based vision and vocabulary for discussing America's young people are beginning to emerge. Propelled by the increasingly more collaborative contributions of scholars (e.g., Benson, 2003; Benson, Mannes, Pittman, & Ferber, 2004; Damon & Gregory, 2003; Lerner, 2004; Roth et al., 1998; Villarruel, Perkins, Borden, & Keith, 2003), practitioners (e.g., Pittman, Irby, & Ferber, 2001; Wheeler, 2000, 2003), and policy makers (e.g., Cummings, 2003; Engler & Binsfeld, 1998; Gore, 2003), youth are increasingly seen within numerous sectors of U.S. society as resources to be developed (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003a, 2003b). The new vocabulary about positive youth development emphasizes the strengths present within all young people and involves concepts such as developmental assets (Benson, 2003), moral development (Damon, 1988), noble purpose (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003), civic engagement (e.g., Sherrod, Flanagan, & Youniss, 2002a, 2002b), community youth development (e.g., Villarruel et al., 2003), well-being (Bornstein, Davidson, Keys, Moore, & the Center for Child Well-being, 2003), and thriving (Dowling, Gestsdottir, Anderson, von Eye, & Lerner, 2003; Dowling et al., 2004; Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000). All concepts are predicated on the ideas that *every* young person has the potential for successful, healthy development and that *all* youth possess the capacity for positive development.

This vision for and vocabulary about positive youth development have evolved over the course of a scientifically arduous path, given the historical precedence and continued wide subscription to the deficit model of youth. Complicating the acceptance of the new, positive conceptualization of the character of youth as resources for the healthy development of self, families, and communities, is that the antithetical deficit approach conceptualizes youth behaviors as deviations from normative development (see Hall, 1904). In this history of the study of youth development, understanding such deviations was not seen as being of direct relevance to scholarship aimed at discovering the principles of basic developmental processes. Accordingly, the characteristics of youth were regarded as issues of "only" applied concern—and thus of secondary scientific interest. Not only did this model separate basic science from application, it also disembedded the adolescent from the study of normal or healthy development.

In short, the deficit view of youth as problems to be managed split the study of young people from the study of healthy and positive development (Lerner, 2004; Lerner, Brentano, Dowling, & Anderson, 2002; Overton, 1998; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003a).

Scholars studying human development in general, and youth development in particular, used a theoretical model that was not useful in understanding the relational nature of development (Overton, 1998), the synthesis between basic and applied science, or how young people developed in normative, healthy, or positive ways. However, the integration of person and context, of basic and applied scholarship, and of young people with the potential for positive development was legitimated by the relational, developmental systems models that emerged as cutting-edge scholarship by the end of the 20th century (Damon, 1988; Lerner, 1998a, 1998b, 2002a).

Developmental systems theory eschews the reduction of individual and social behavior to fixed genetic influences and, in fact, contends that such a hereditarian conception is counterfactual (Gottlieb, 1997, 1998). Instead, developmental systems theory stresses the *relative plasticity* of human development. This concept means that there is always at least some potential for systematic change in behavior.

This potential exists as a consequence of mutually influential relationships between the developing person and his or her biology, psychological characteristics, family, community, culture, physical and designed ecology, and historical niche. The plasticity of development means that one may expect that ways may be found to improve human life.

Plasticity, then, legitimizes an optimistic view of the potential for promoting positive changes in humans. The presence of plasticity is an asset in attempts to enhance the human condition and, as such, plasticity directs interest to the strengths for positive development that are present within all people. It also directs both science and applications of science—for example, involving public policies and the programs of community-based organizations—to find ways to create optimal matches between individuals and their social worlds. Such fits may capitalize on the potential for positive change in people and for promoting such development.

The social policy implications of developmental systems theory counter negative formulations about human capacity, potential, and freedom. Developmental systems theory affords a means to pursue human development as it might ideally be (Benson, 2003; Bronfenbrenner, 1974): Developmental systems theory provides also a framework for developing a model of positive youth development. As explained by Lerner (2004), there are five sets of interrelated ideas in this theory of positive youth development. First, there is a universal structure for adaptive developmental regulations between people and their contexts. This structure involves mutually beneficial relations between people and their social worlds, and may be represented as individual ← → social context.

Second, these mutually beneficial, individual ← → social context relations have their historical roots in humans' integrated biological and cultural evolutionary heritage. Third, when instantiated in ideal ways, adaptive

developmental regulations involve reciprocally supportive relations between thriving individuals and social institutions supporting the freedom of individuals. Fourth, thriving youth have noble purposes; they have an integrated moral and civic sense of self that impels them to transcend their own interests and contribute to others and to society in ways that extend beyond them in time and place.

Finally, this idealized relation between individuals and society may be realized within diverse cultural systems. However, when universal structures of mutually beneficial person–context relations are coupled with behavioral and social characteristics consistent with the idea of America, then youth are maximally likely to thrive and, reciprocally, free society is most likely to flourish.

Promoting Positive Youth Development within the Developmental System

The plasticity of human development emphasized in developmental systems models means that we may always remain optimistic about finding some intervention to reduce problem behaviors. However, plasticity within the developmental system can be directed to the promotion of desired outcomes of change, and not only to the prevention of undesirable behaviors. Pittman (1996; Pittman et al., 2001) has emphasized that prevention is not the same as *provision*: Preventing a problem from occurring does not, in turn, guarantee that we are providing youth with the assets they need for developing in a positive manner.

Simply, problem free is not prepared (Pittman, 1996). Not having behavioral problems (e.g., not using drugs and alcohol, not engaging in crime or unsafe sex) is not equivalent to possessing the skills requisite to productively engage in a valued job or other role in society. Preventing negative behaviors is, then, not the same as promoting in youth the attributes of positive, healthy development. Accordingly, as noted by several scholars working within a developmental systems framework (e.g., Lerner, 2004; Lerner, Sparks, & McCubbin, 1999; Roth et al., 1998), to ensure the development of prepared and productive youth, communities need proactively to provide resources to young people so that they develop in positive ways, for example, in regard to what have been termed the "five Cs" of positive youth development (Lerner, Fisher, & Weinberg, 2000).

That is, as have others (e.g., Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Lerner, 2004; Lerner et al., 2000; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003a, 2003b), we suggest that "five Cs" may be used to represent the key features of positive youth development: competence, character, confidence, connection, and compassion. Together, these five characteristics enable an adolescent to make an optimal, or idealized, transition to the adult world. When these five characteristics place the young person on a life path toward a hopeful future, the youth is manifesting exemplary positive development: He or she may be said to be thriving (Lerner, 2004). Such a youth will become a generative adult, a person who makes simultaneously productive contributions to him- or herself, to family and community, and to civic life. The individual will develop, then, a "sixth C," contribution.

The theory of positive youth development that we propose specifies that if young people are engaged in adaptive regulations with their context, if mutually beneficial individual ← → context relations exist, then young people will be on the way to a hopeful future marked by positive contributions to self, family, community, and civil society. Young people will be thriving. As a result of such relations, youth will manifest several functionally valued behaviors, which in American society can be summarized by the five Cs (competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring). A thriving youth will be on a developmental trajectory toward an ideal adulthood status; that is, the person will develop behaviors that are valued by society because they act to structurally maintain it. Such behaviors reflect, then, contribution and, consistent with the mutually beneficial individual ← → context relations that comprise adaptive developmental regulations, such contributions should support the health and positive development of self, others, and the institutions of civil society.

The Contributions of William Damon

What is required for the promotion of exemplary positive development—or thriving—among young people interacting with the institutions of civil society in mutually beneficial ways? Damon (1997; Damon & Gregory, 2003) has envisioned the creation of a "youth charter" in each community in our nation and world. The charter consists of a set of rules, guidelines, and plans of action that each community can adopt to provide its youth with a framework for development in a healthy manner. Damon (1997) describes how youth and significant adults in their community (for example, parents, teachers, clergy, coaches, police, and government and business leaders) can create partnerships to pursue a common ideal of positive moral development and intellectual achievement.

To illustrate, Damon (1997) explains how a youth charter can be developed to maximize the positive experiences and long-term desired developmental outcomes of youth in community sports activities. Damon points out that there may be important benefits of such participation. Young people enhance their physical fitness, learn athletic and physical skills, and, through sports, experience lessons pertinent to the development of their character (for example, they learn about the importance of diligence, motivation, teamwork, balancing cooperation and competition, balancing winning and losing, and the importance of fair play). Moreover, sports can be a context for positive parent–child relations, and such interactions can further the adolescent's successful involvement in sports. For instance, parental support of their male and female adolescents' participation in tennis is associated with the enjoyment of the sport by the youth and with an objective measure of performance (Hoyle & Leff, 1997).

As illustrated by the youth charter in regard to sports participation, embedding youth in a caring and developmentally facilitative community can promote their ability to develop morally and to contribute to civil society. In a study of about 130 African American parochial high school juniors, working

at a soup kitchen for the homeless as part of a school-based community service program was associated with identity development and with the ability to reflect on society's political organization and moral order (Yates & Youniss, 1996).

In a study of more than 3,100 high school seniors (Youniss, Yates, & Su, 1997), the activities youth engaged in were categorized into (a) school-based, adult-endorsed norms; or (b) peer fun activities that excluded adults. Youth were then placed into groups that reflected orientations to (1) school–adult norms, but not peer fun (the "School" group); (2) peer fun but not school–adult norms (the "Party" group); or (3) both "1" and "2" (the "All-around" group). The School and the All-around seniors were both high in community service, religious orientation, and political awareness. In turn, the Party group seniors were more likely to use marijuana than were the School group (but not the All-around group) seniors (Youniss et al., 1997).

Furthermore, African American and Latino adolescents who were nominated by community leaders for having shown unusual commitments to caring for others or for contributions to the community were labeled "care exemplars" and compared to a matched group of youth not committed to the community (Hart & Fegley, 1995). The care exemplars were more likely than the comparison youth to describe themselves in terms reflective of moral characteristics, to show commitment to both their heritage and to the future of their community, to see themselves as reflecting the ideals of both themselves and their parents, and to stress the importance of personal philosophies and beliefs for their self-definitions (Hart & Fegley, 1995).

In sum, then, Damon (1997) envisions that by embedding youth in a community where service and responsible leadership are possible, the creation of community-specific youth charters can enable adolescents and adults to, together, systematically promote positive youth development. Youth charters can create opportunities to actualize both individual and community goals to eliminate risk behaviors among adolescents and promote in them the ability to contribute to high-quality individual and community life. Through community youth charters, youth and adults may work together to create a system wherein civil society is maintained and perpetuated (Damon, 1997; Damon & Gregory, 2003).

The Contributions of Search Institute

What, precisely, must be brought together by communities to ensure the promotion of positive youth development? Researchers at Search Institute in Minneapolis, Minnesota, believe that what is needed is the application of "assets" (Benson, 1997; Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998; Leffert et al., 1998; Scales & Leffert, 1999). That is, they stress that positive youth development is furthered when actions are taken to enhance the strengths of a person (e.g., a commitment to learning, a healthy sense of identity), a family (e.g., caring attitudes toward children, rearing styles that both empower youth and set boundaries

and provide expectations for positive growth), and a community (e.g., social support, programs that provide access to the resources for education, safety, and mentorship available in a community) (Benson, 1997).

Accordingly, researchers at Search Institute, led by its president, Peter L. Benson, believe there are both internal and external attributes that comprise the developmental assets needed by youth. Through their research they have identified 40 such assets, 20 internal ones and 20 external ones. Benson and his colleagues have found that the more developmental assets possessed by an adolescent, the greater is his or her likelihood of positive, healthy development.

For instance, in a study of 99,462 youth in grades 6 through 12 in public and/or alternative schools from 213 U.S. cities and towns who were assessed during the 1996–1997 academic year for their possession of the 40 assets, Leffert et al. (1998) found that the more assets present among youth, the lower the likelihood of alcohol use, depression/suicide risk, and violence. Consistent with Benson's (1997) view of the salience of developmental assets for promoting healthy behavior among young people, Leffert et al. (1998) illustrate the importance of the asset approach in work aimed at promoting positive development in our nation's children and adolescents. This congruence strengthens the argument for the critical significance of a focus on developmental assets in the promotion of positive youth development and, as such, in the enhancement of the capacity and commitment of young people to contribute to civil society.

Other data gathered by Benson and his colleagues provide direct support for this argument. Scales et al. (2000) measured thriving among 6,000 youth in grades 6 to 12, evenly divided across six ethnic groups (American Indian, African American, Asian American, Latino, European American, and Multiracial). Thriving was defined as involving seven attributes: school success, leadership, valuing diversity, physical health, helping others, delay of gratification, and overcoming adversity. Most, if not all, of these attributes are linked to the presence of prosocial behavior (e.g., helping others, delay of gratification) and to the behaviors requisite for competently contributing to civil society (e.g., valuing diversity, leadership, overcoming adversity). The greater the number of developmental assets possessed by youth, the more likely they were to possess the attributes of thriving.

Other data support the importance of focusing on developmental assets in both understanding the bases of positive youth development and in using that knowledge to further civil society. Luster and McAdoo (1994) sought to identify the factors that contribute to individual differences in the cognitive competence of African American children in early elementary grades. Consistent with an asset-based approach to promoting the positive development of youth (Benson, 1997; Scales & Leffert, 1999), they found that favorable outcomes in cognitive and socioemotional development were associated with high scores on an advantage index. This index was formed by scoring children on the basis of the absence of risk factors (e.g., pertaining to poverty or problems in the quality of the home environment) and the presence of more favorable circumstances in their lives.

Luster and McAdoo (1994) reported that, whereas only 4% of the children in their sample who scored low on the advantage index had high scores on a measure of vocabulary, 44% of the children who had high scores on the advantage index had high vocabulary scores. Similar contrasts between low and high scorers on the advantage index were found in regard to measures of math achievement (14% versus 37%, respectively), word recognition (0% versus 35%, respectively), and word meaning (7% versus 46%, respectively).

Luster and McAdoo (1996) extended the findings of their 1994 research. Seeking to identify the factors that contribute to individual differences in the educational attainment of African American young adults of low socioeconomic status, Luster and McAdoo (1996) found that assets linked with the individual (cognitive competence, academic motivation, and personal adjustment in kindergarten) and the context (parental involvement in school) were associated longitudinally with academic achievement and educational attainment.

Research reported by Search Institute, as well as data provided by other scholars (e.g., Furrow, Wagener, Leffert, & Benson, 2003), indicate clearly that individual and contextual assets of youth are linked to their positive development. These data legitimate the idea that the enhancement of such assets—the provision of such developmental "nutrients" (Benson, 2003)—will be associated with the promotion of positive youth development. Importantly, Benson and his colleagues (e.g., Scales et al., 2000) link these assets for positive youth development to effective, community-based programs:

> Time spent in youth programs [was the developmental asset that] appeared to have the most pervasive positive influence in [being a]...predictor of...thriving outcomes...Good youth programs...provide young people with access to caring adults and responsible peers, as well as skill-building activities than can reinforce the values and skills that are associated with doing well in school and maintaining good physical skills. (Scales et al., 2000, p. 43)

Accordingly, policies must be directed to designing, bringing to scale, evaluating, and sustaining programs effective in the provision of developmental assets and in using those assets to promote positive development and, ideally, thriving (Lerner, 2002a, 2002b). As such, it is important to understand the principles behind, and characteristics of, such programs.

Designing Programs That Promote Positive Youth Development

Programs promote positive youth development when they instill in youth attributes of competence, such as self-efficacy, resilience, or social, cognitive, behavioral, and moral competence; attributes of confidence, such as self-determination and a clear and positive identity; attributes of social connection, such as bonding; and attributes of character, such as spirituality and a belief in the future (Catalano et al., 1999). In addition, programs promote positive youth development when they promote ecological assets related to empowerment, such as recognition for a young person's positive behaviors, provision

of opportunities for prosocial involvement, and support of prosocial norms or standards for healthy behavior (Catalano et al., 1999). In this regard, Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2003a) compare programs that seek to promote the five Cs—that is, programs that are aimed at youth *development*—with programs that just have a youth focus but are not developmental in orientation and, in particular, are not aimed at the promotion of positive development. Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2003a) note that the former, youth development programs, are "more successful in improving participants' competence, confidence, and connections" (p. 217).

The "Big Three" Components of Effective Youth Development Programs

What are the specific actions taken by youth development programs that make them effective in promoting the five Cs? Catalano et al. (1999) found that the preponderant majority (about 75%) of effective positive youth development programs focus on the "Big Three" design features of effective positive youth development programs (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003a, 2003b). That is, the program provides (1) opportunities for youth participation in and leadership of activities; that (2) emphasize the development of life skills; within the context of (3) a sustained and caring adult–youth relationship.

For instance, Catalano et al. (1999) note that effective positive youth development programs "targeted healthy bonds between youth and adults, increased opportunities for youth participation in positive social activities, . . . [involved] recognition and reinforcement for that participation" (p. vi), and often used skills training as a youth competency strategy. These characteristics of effective positive youth development programs are similar to those identified by Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2003b), who noted that such programs transcend an exclusive focus on the prevention of health-compromising behaviors to include attempts to inculcate behaviors that stress youth competencies and abilities through "increasing participants' exposure to supportive and empowering environments where activities create multiple opportunities for a range of skill-building and horizon-broadening experiences" (p. 94). In addition, Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2003a) indicate that the activities found in these programs offer both "formal and informal opportunities for youth to nurture their interests and talents, practice new skills, and gain a sense of personal and group recognition. Regardless of the specific activity, the emphasis lies in providing real challenges and active participation" (p. 204).

In this regard, Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2003a) note that when these activities are coupled with an environment that creates an atmosphere of hope for a positive future among youth, when the program "conveys the adults' beliefs in youth as resources to be developed rather than as problems to be managed" (p. 204), then the goals of promoting positive youth development are likely to be reached. In other words, when activities that integrate skill-building opportunities and active participation occur in the presence of positive and supportive adult ← → youth relations, positive development will occur.

Blum (2003) agrees. He notes that effective youth programs offer to youth activities through which to form relationships with caring adults, relations that elicit hope in young people. When these programs provide as well the opportunity for youth to participate in community development activities, positive youth development occurs (Blum, 2003).

The role of positive adult ← → youth relationships has been underscored as well by Rhodes (2002; Rhodes & Roffman, 2003). Focusing on volunteer mentoring relationships, for instance, Rhodes and Roffman (2003) note that these non-parental "relationships can positively influence a range of outcomes, including improvements in peer and parental relationships, academic achievement, and self-concept; lower recidivism rates among juvenile delinquents; and reductions in substance abuse" (p. 227).

However, Rhodes and Roffman (2003) also note that there is a developmental course to these effects of volunteer mentoring on youth. When young people are in relationships that last a year or longer, they are most likely to experience improvements in academic, psychological, social, and behavioral characteristics. On the other hand, when youth are in relationships that last only between 6 and 12 months, fewer positive outcomes of mentoring are evident. When young people are in mentoring relationships that end relatively quickly, it appears that mentoring may actually be detrimental. Decrements in positive functioning have been reported in such circumstances (Rhodes, 2002; Rhodes & Roffman, 2003).

Of course, parents may also serve as the adults in positive adult ← → youth relations. Bornstein (2003) notes that the positive influences of parents on their children's healthy development may be enhanced when parents have several "tools" to facilitate their effective parenting behaviors. These tools include possessing accurate knowledge about child and adolescent development, being skilled at observing their children, possessing strategies for discipline and for problem prevention, and being able to provide to their children effective supports for their emotional, social, cognitive, and language development. Another resource for positive parenting is for adults to have their own sources of social support (Bornstein, 2003).

In addition to the "Big Three" components of programs that effectively support positive youth development, there are, of course, other important characteristics of programs that are effective in promoting such development. Among these are the presence of clear goals; attention to the diversity of youth and of their family, community, and culture; assurance that the program represents a safe space for youth and that it is accessible to them; integration of the developmental assets within the community into the program; a collaborative approach to other youth-serving organizations and programs; contributing to the provision of a "seamless" social support across the community; engagement in program evaluation; and advocacy for youth (Dryfoos, 1990, 1998; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Lerner, 1995; Little, 1993; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003a; Schorr, 1988, 1997).

However, youth participation, adult mentorship, and skill building are the bedrocks upon which effective programs must be built. As we noted earlier,

Scales et al. (2000), in their survey of thriving—of exemplary positive youth development—among 6,000 youth participating in the 1999–2000 Search Institute survey of developmental assets, found that spending time in youth programs was the key developmental asset that promoted thriving.

In sum, the promotion of positive youth development has at its core the enhancement—through the civic engagement of young people—of the active contribution of the young person to both self and context, of the individual as an active producer of his or her own positive development (Lerner, 1982; Lerner & Busch-Rossnagel, 1981; Lerner, Theokas, & Jelicic, 2005; Lerner & Walls, 1999). As such, among the "Big Three" characteristics of effective youth programs, youth participation and leadership would seem to be most critical for fostering such active contributions. When such participation engages the young person in taking actions that serve both self and context (i.e., when the young person behaves to both enhance his or own life and to be positively civically engaged), positive youth development (thriving) in the direction of an ideal adulthood should be seen. This linkage between youth participation and civic engagement is becoming a prominent part of the youth development field. For instance, as noted by Wheeler (2003):

> The rediscovery of youth leadership development as a core component of positive youth development (PYD) strategies and programs, however, has an even more significant impact: It validates a growing recognition within the philanthropic community and among leadership theorists that personal development and social development are essential conditions for strengthening a community's capacity to respond to its problems and build its future. (p. 491)

She goes on to indicate that "a complementary strategy is civic activism, which has reemerged as a viable means for young people to develop and exercise leadership while effecting concrete changes in their communities" (p. 492).

Consistent with the vision of Wheeler (2003), Kirshner, O'Donoghue, and McLaughlin (2002) define youth participation as "a constellation of activities that empower adolescents to take part in and influence decision making that affects their lives and to take action on issues they care about" (p. 5). However, when youth participation occurs in and is enabled by either community-based organizations or the institutions of civil society, it should involve actions pertinent to both self and context. In other words, when youth participation reflects the adaptive individual ← → context relations indicative of thriving and predicated on the synthesis of moral and civic identity within a young person, it may be characterized as civic engagement.

As such, we may extend Kirschner et al.'s (2002) definition of youth participation by linking it to the conception of youth participation presented more than a quarter century earlier by the National Commission on Resources for Youth (1975), wherein youth participation was seen as "involving youth in responsible, challenging action, that meets genuine needs, with opportunity for planning and/or decision making affecting others, in an activity whose impact or consequences extend to others, i.e., outside or beyond the youth themselves" (p. 25). In the context of this conception, youth participation is a core component of civil society (Camino & Zeldin, 2002). As Wheeler (2003) stresses, "Participating as

civic activists often becomes the path or gateway to a lifetime of public service" (p. 495).

Skelton, Boyte, and Leonard (2002) agree. They point out that beginning in the mid 1990s there has been a growing awareness "of the need to stress more public and political dimensions of youth civic engagement" (p. 9). Skelton et al. (2002) note that there are four indicators of this emerging stress on the civic contributions made through youth participation. These dimensions of youth civic engagement include (1) the recognition that youth are not future citizens but are citizens in the here and now; (2) the idea that young people do not just engage in individual volunteering but, instead, are collaborators within a diverse community of engaged citizens; (3) youth engagement in the actual work of contributing to the enhancement of society; and (4) the development within a young person not only of civic values but also of skills and capacities pertinent to contributing to civil society.

Skelton et al. (2002) indicate that these skills and capacities include "taking responsibility for decisions and choices; learning to speak publicly; the capacity to thoughtfully listen; and working as a team with a diverse group" (p. 9). Skelton and colleagues also contend that when a young person develops such skills, he or she will "discover how he or she fits into and shapes a flourishing democratic society" (p. 9). Camino and Zeldin (2002) explain that the effectiveness for positive youth development of the pathways that exist for becoming civically engaged may be enhanced in several ways. These enhancements occur (1) when youth take "ownership" of their participation (that is, when—consistent with the developmental systems theory notion that individuals are producers of their own development—the young person shapes his or her role, instead of having it "given to" or imposed on him or her; Lerner, 1982; Lerner et al., 2005); (2) when civic engagement occurs within the context of healthy and sustained youth–adult partnerships (i.e., when, as in the 4-H model of youth programming, this instance of the "Big Three" design features of effective youth programs occurs); and (3) when youth civic engagement is facilitated by supportive social and institutional polices.

From Programs to Policies Promoting Positive Youth Development

If programs are to be successful in addressing the combined individual and contextual influences on youth, and, in turn, if they are to be associated with positive youth development, it is reasonable to believe that they must engage all levels within the developmental system (Benson, 1997, 2003; Benson et al., 2004; Lerner, 1995; Pittman, 1996; Pittman & Irby, 1995; Pittman, Irby, & Cahill, 1995; Trickett, Barone, & Buchanan, 1996). In other words, effective programs engage the system of individual and contextual variables affecting youth development.

By involving multiple characteristics of the young person—for instance, his or her developmental level, knowledge of risk taking, intrapersonal resources (e.g., self-esteem, self-competence, beliefs, and values), interpersonal management skills (e.g., being able to engage useful social support and prosocial

behaviors from peers)—successful risk prevention programs may be developed (Levitt, Selman, & Richmond, 1991). However, as emphasized by the positive youth development perspectives, programs must do more than diminish risk. They must emphasize the strengths and assets of young people, that is, their capacities for positive development, their possession of attributes—*strengths*—that keep them moving forward in a positive developmental path.

Such strengths involve individual attributes, such as self-esteem, spirituality, religiosity, knowledge, skills, and motivation to do well (e.g., Benson, 1997, 2003). In addition, these strengths are constituted by contextual characteristics such as relations with parents, with other adults, with friends, and with community organizations that are marked by providing models for positive values, providing boundaries and expectations, promoting health and encouraging positive growth, instilling a climate of love and caring and providing youth with a sense of hope for the future, offering positive links to the community, providing opportunities for the constructive use of time, and providing a safe environment that is free of prejudice and discrimination. These individual and contextual strengths are, in essence, the assets for healthy development that are described by Search Institute (e.g., Benson, 1997, 2003; Scales & Leffert, 1999) and others (e.g., Blum, 2003; Bornstein, 2003; Catalano et al., 1999; Damon, 1997; Damon et al., 2003; Damon & Gregory, 2003; King & Furrow, 2004; Lerner et al., 2000; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003a). Focus on these assets provides a means to envision the key features of successful youth programs, ones associated with healthy adolescent development.

How might this knowledge of program components be more effectively used to devise social policy changes that would maximize the fit between the idealized developmental pathways depicted in the theory of exemplary positive youth development—thriving—and the actual life courses of young people? Policies reflect what a people value, what they believe is right; policies tell people where resources will be invested and what actions will be taken in support of beliefs and values. What is the action agenda that may be derived legitimately from the positive youth development theory we present, of the ideas and research evidence linking moral and civic identity and thriving?

A useful developmental theory is not just a means for integrating data about what "is" in human life. As suggested by Bronfenbrenner (1974), the idealization of the course of life represented in a useful developmental theory provides a means for the scientist to generate data about what "might be" in human life. Such an approach also has import for social action and public policy. The key to ensuring the positive development of youth—development marked by the emergence of an integrated moral and civic identity that results in contributions to self, family, community, and ultimately civil society—rests on developing policies that strengthen in diverse communities the capacities of families to raise healthy, thriving children. We will describe a set of policy principles and policy recommendations that support such family-centered community building for youth (Gore, 2003; Gore & Gore, 2002).

There are three key principles within the theory of positive youth development we suggest (Lerner, 2004). The first two principles are that any policy

pertinent to young people must be based on the presence of strengths among *all* young people and the potential to enhance these strengths through supporting their healthy development. In other words, policies must be developmental and positive in their orientation to young people. Accordingly, deficits and their prevention should be placed on the back burner of the policy-making agenda, and focus should be given to how we can, at each point in the young person's life, find age-appropriate ways to support positive development by building on his or her specific set of strengths.

Benson et al. (2004) agree with this perspective, noting that public policies for youth need to be sensitive to the development status and pathways of youth, and that policies must reflect the tenets of theory and practice defining the positive youth development perspective. For example, policies that are useful for building skills in elementary school age children (e.g., regarding basic literacy abilities in language, science, civics, mathematics, and health) may not be appropriate for youth in the midst of adolescence (who may need to possess advanced skills in the above-named domains and, as well, who may be actively using these skills in interpersonal, for instance, dating, situations, in part-time employment positions, and in service in their communities) or for older youth who are contemplating the transition from high school to work or military service (e.g., see Hamilton & Hamilton, 2004).

Accordingly, Benson et al. (2004) indicate that if policies for youth are to be both developmentally appropriate and embrace the cutting edge of science and practice of the field of positive youth development, then first, policies must move beyond negative outcomes and academic success; they must encompass both positive and nonacademic outcomes. Second, public policies should involve both children and adolescents, and view more integratively the development of young people across the first two decades of life. Third, policies must provide a broad range of services, supports, and opportunities to young people. Fourth, Benson et al. note that young people must be regarded as agents of positive change: Their voices and actions should contribute centrally to developmental policy.

A third principle of policy design associated with the theory of positive youth development under discussion here is to focus policy on the dynamic relation between the developing youth and his or her context, on the individual $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ context relation, and not on person or context per se. If adaptive human development involves reciprocal links between the engaged and active individual and his or her supportive and changing context, then policies should be focused on strengthening these relations. Put simply, to produce and further the thriving youth $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ civil society relations upon which liberty is predicated, policies must be directed to these relations.

Focusing just on the young person without attending to development within a specific family, community, and cultural context will fail to improve development; such focus will not be sensitive to the specific individual $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ context relations elicited by the person's and the setting's characteristics of individuality. Focusing on just the context without attention to the developmental attributes of the growing individual also will fail to improve his or her development; such focus

is not likely to have a better than random chance of attaining a goodness of fit with the individual's characteristics of individuality and developmental status.

While it is of course the case that a particular policy may seem to be situated logically at the level of either individual or context, this third principle indicates that this focus may be more apparent than real. The education of children and adolescents may serve as an example. Enhancing the knowledge or literacy skills of youth per se is not really the goal of education, especially education financed by public dollars. Rather, the goal of education is to enhance the probability that our young people will become more competent and confident individuals, that they will use their knowledge to become people able to make valued contributions to their lives and to the lives of others. Education serves active citizenship, and, in turn, education for active citizenship should become a core ubiquitous feature of all of American education. In other words, the goal of education is *not* to make a child competent for the sake of possessing a competency; rather, it is to enable the child to be engaged with society in the exercise of his or her competency. Through education we should seek to increase the probability that individuals will become contributing members of society, productive agents within the thriving youth ← → civil society relation.

In sum, there are at least three essential principles for policy design legitimated by the present theory of positive development: Policies must take a strength-based approach to youth; policies should be developmental in nature; and policies should focus on (have as their target or unit of analysis) the individual ← → context relation.

When these three principles are translated into ideas for specific policies, they result in the formulation of a set of ideas that engage the breadth of the developmental system involved in promoting positive youth development. They integrate the developing young person, his or her family, the community, and all facets of civil society in the active promotion of positive youth development and, ideally, in producing the thriving youth ← → civil society relation.

Conclusions

The present theory of dynamic, person ← → context relations provides a model for the general structure of policies that would promote both positive youth development and civil society, that is, the thriving youth ← → civil society relation. The model is founded on the idea that the plasticity of youth development constitutes a basic strength in all young people; plasticity constitutes a potential for systematic change, and by appropriately supporting the strengths of young people, they may develop in positive directions. The model suggests as well that appropriate support for youth involves providing the developmental assets needed for furthering their healthy—indeed, exemplary—development. Developmental assets, in short, are the nutrients for positive development, and providing them to young people fosters youth thriving. As previously stated, these assets may be developed through three "big" actions associated with programs that are effective in promoting positive youth development: providing

youth with positive and supportive relationships with adults; affording youth opportunities to build the skills needed to make productive contributions to self, family, community, and civil society; and supplying youth with opportunities to be civically engaged and to take leadership roles in enacting skills and in making contributions to their communities. Moreover, when youth develop within families and communities that ensure these important assets for their positive development, they will thrive during their adolescence: They will be on a developmental path toward an ideal adult status, a status marked by making productive contributions to self and others and to the institutions of civil society.

The five Cs of positive youth development may be best thought of as clusters of individual attributes, for example, intellectual ability and social and behavioral skills (competence); positive bonds with people and institutions (connection); integrity, moral centeredness, and spirituality (character); positive self-regard, a sense of self-efficacy, and courage (confidence); and humane values, empathy, and a sense of social justice (caring/compassion) (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003a). When these five sets of outcomes are developed, civil society is enhanced as a consequence of young people becoming adults morally and civically committed to providing the assets they received to succeeding generations.

How does one develop and implement a youth policy? At least four interrelated sets of actions need to be taken:

- First, we need to articulate the principles that should guide our specification of the particular policies that will be derived from our vision of positive youth development and, more concretely, from our theoretical model;
- Second, we need to develop a set or sets of specific policies that may be derived from our model;
- Third, we need to devise strategies for translating our vision and specific policy ideas into effective actions; and
- Finally, we need to take action; we need to become active participants in the political process within our democracy.

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