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Non-profit organizations have the ability to positively impact youth development by offering programs that engage both parents and youth in the community. However, most fail to realize that positive outcomes cannot be achieved by organizations alone and instead depends on cooperation between everyone involved. The purpose of this study is to supplement the growing literature that supports the idea that positive youth development occurs through collaborative efforts from community service organizations that engage both parents and youth. This qualitative study will look critically at Mar Vista Family Center, a non-profit community organization located in the Mar Vista neighborhood in Los Angeles, California. Specifically, this study will focus on their shared responsibility model and explore different themes that emerge regarding youth's character development in their By Youth For Youth program. Through the use of critical theories used to frame youth development, this study's motivation is to understand if and how Mar Vista Family Center's model is impacting character development in youth and see if these themes align with the literature.

Background

Over the years, the focus on youth development has shifted from looking only at academic performance as a measure of positive outcomes to including mental, emotional, and physical health measures as well. Along with this shift came a call for the government to take on the responsibility of making sure students were prepared with the skills needed to be successful. The federal government has taken on this task by implementing programs in schools that focus on cultivating character strengths such as kindness, respect, and others associated with helping them become successful later in life. Recently, this has come to include teaching techniques to improve mental and emotional health.

In the past 20 years, the government has continued to focus on education reform to address inequalities and gaps in children's learning. This reform has included the implementation of character education programs due to the belief that a holistic approach to education leads to better outcomes. In 2001 President Bush's No Child Left Behind (NCLB) program emphasized the responsibility of schools to "promote strong character and citizenship among our nation's youth" (Strategic Plan 2002-2007). For the purpose of this study, character is defined as "the values and behaviors people exhibit when interacting with others and making choices every day" (Astin & Antonio, 2004). In recent years since NCLB, schools have adopted curriculums that focus on values associated with positive youth development outcomes. For example, the implementation of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum in schools to teach "self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making" (Smith, 2013) has led to research linking the values they promote to higher grades and graduation rates among their students. There is also evidence that these approaches help students build positive relationships and learn how to take accountability for their actions (Smith, 2013).

The Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), an organization that conducts research on the effectiveness of SEL curriculum in schools, notes that there is a correlation between these certain characteristics and success later on in life (Durlak, 2010). Yet there is still a consensus that not enough is being done to ensure that children are growing up with proper skills and values needed to be successful members of society. If you were to ask a random sample of adults about how they perceive children's behavior and attitudes now compared to when they were younger, most would respond that youth are behaving and acting worse than ever before. A national poll done in 2016 by the University of Michigan Health System found that adults perceive kids as having worse mental and emotional health

today than when they themselves were children (University of Michigan, 2016). However, research still struggles to find the best way to address these problems.

For this reason, studies continue to be done to inform new policies and programs dedicated to youth character development. Even though there are positive outcomes associated with character education in schools, there are still children at risk who are not getting the support they need. In 2010, recognizing the role communities play in children development, the government started awarding more grants to non-profit organizations dedicated to helping youth outside of school. Among many others, a program called Promise Neighborhoods was created to award federal grants to organizations that were dedicated to "significantly improve the educational and developmental outcomes of children and youth in our most distressed communities" which usually refers to communities where low-income people of color live (U.S Department of Education, 2010). As a result, a growing body of research has started looking outside of schools to see how after school programs are impacting children's development. However, there is still less emphasis on roles that community organizations play in teaching these values, and uncertainty about why some organizations engage students better than others.

Literature Review

There is a growing amount of literature that tracks the impact of after school programs on youth development. For the most part, the discussions have been positive, however there is no universally accepted set of guidelines that people agree make an organization successful in impacting youth, specifically youth between the ages 13 and 18. I first came across different theories that have helped shape my understanding of different ways positive youth development occurs.

The theories I used to inform my research are asset-based approaches that measure youth development through the presence of children's strengths and not through what they are lacking. Community youth development emphasizes communities as resources and encourages youth to become active and engaged participants both in their communities and their own lives (Small & Memmo, 2013). Similarly, empowerment-based theory focuses on cultivating a sense of agency in youth to "make a difference in the world, learn critical thinking skills, become independent decision makers, and practice their skills in real-life contexts" (Zimmerman, 2000). Outcomes associated with this model are increased self-esteem and confidence, awareness of support systems and an increased assurance that one is in control of their own life and environment. Finally, resiliency theory is a framework that shows youth can have positive outcomes even after being exposed to risk or high stress and aims to identify behaviors that help youth cope with those situations (Small & Memmo, 2013). In the case of most youth at Mar Vista Family Center, this would apply to how youth who are predominantly first generation and who come from low income families are able to overcome obstacles and experience positive outcomes such as going to college. These theories helped me shape my interview questions and informed the analysis of the data collected from Mar Vista Family Center.

In reviewing the literature, I came across three themes relevant to positive youth development. The first theme is that community organizations that engage with parents and the greater community help create a safe space for youth in their programs. The second theme is that organizations that include youth in the decision-making process see more engagement and better outcomes. The final theme is every youth has strengths that can be developed when given the resources to do so.

First, community organizations help create a safe place within communities that allow for greater involvement from parents and positively impacts youth. "Character Strengths and Positive Youth Development" (Park, 2004) states that character can be influenced by contextual factors such as culture, religion, or political persuasion. A child's community can have as much an impact on them as school does especially if they view their community as unsafe.

A case study conducted by Dr. Ishimaru, a professor at the University of Washington, explores the ways in which community organizations can positively impact communities by encouraging parental involvement in their children's learning. Through her case study, she introduced the role that community organizations play in empowering parents to get involved in their children's learning. In her findings, she concludes that a shared vision and understanding amongst community members and school leaders is essential to tackle the systemic problems that arise in preventing a child's academic success (Ishimaru, 2014). Ishimaru's study highlights the ineffectiveness that occurs when programs designed for youth fail to include parents in aspects of the program. When there is not a shared goal between parents, youth, and community organization staff, then programs cannot retain active participation because parents and students do not feel their needs are being met.

The second theme was that organizations that involve youth in the decision-making process have better outcomes. "Youth-Adult Partnerships in Work with Youth: An Overview" (Ramey et. al, 2017) states that programs that promote youth led activities and youth-adult partnerships are beneficial for both the development of the youth and for the organization as a whole. Although the level and extent of youth participation can vary, the study emphasizes that youth experience more benefits when adults relinquish some of their power. Some of these

benefits include youth reporting feeling more empathetic and more eager to engage in opportunities to give back to their communities.

Finally, the third theme was that every youth has strengths that can be developed when given resources and opportunities for growth. "Frontiers in Theory-Predicated Research in Youth Development: A Commentary" (Lerner, 2019) states that every person has the potential to experience positive change by focusing on individual strengths and taking advantage of contextual resources. They use a more holistic approach when discussing youth development and believe that each youth's experience is unique based on their biology, psychology, and cultural contexts. They offer an optimistic view that systemic activities that target youth's strengths have the potential to positively impact youth over time.

The literature review was conducted before I began my data collection and was used to look critically at Mar Vista Family Centers own model of shared responsibility.

Research Question

How does Mar Vista Family Center's Shared Responsibility Model contribute to students' character development in the By Youth For Youth Program?

Methods and Literature

This qualitative research study of Mar Vista Family Center's By Youth For Youth (BYFY) program was conducted through in-person interviews that were audio-recorded then later transcribed and coded. This was supplemented by observations, and 2018 post-evaluation data of the BYFY program that was collected by Mar Vista Family Center. There was a total of eight interviews conducted. Three of the By Youth For Youth adult coordinators were

interviewed as well as one other staff member who is in charge of analyzing the evaluations given to the youth at the beginning and end of the academic year. These are adults who help guide the students and who also have different roles to support the youth. I asked the adults questions about what the shared responsibility model was and how they implement it in the BYFY program to understand what the intention of the program was. They also gave me background on their own experiences throughout the program.

After the adult interviews, four youth interviews were conducted to gain their perspectives on how the program has impacted them. Youth were chosen based on availability for interviews. Two of the youth had leadership positions on the BYFY leadership board and the other two were youth who had regularly attended the program throughout the year. All students interviewed had been in the program for at least one year and lived in the Mar Vista community. Youth were asked questions about what interests and motivates them, as well as about their goals for the future.

To further supplement my understanding of the BYFY program, I observed two leadership board meetings and a regular BYFY meeting. These meetings occur every Tuesday around 4pm and consist of 6 youth leadership officers and at least one of the adult coordinators. In these meetings they choose which activities and topics to focus on for the week. This is also a time for adult coordinators to get feedback on previous activities and the overall feelings of the BYFY participants. Anyone in the BYFY program can attend these meetings and give input regardless of whether they have positions or not. The regular BYFY meeting I attended was on a Friday, and all the youth sat in a circle to discuss a 'real' topic that was chosen by the BYFY leadership board the Tuesday before. Real topics refer to discussion of issues such as pregnancy, drugs, etc.

There were several limitations in this study including time constraints, and a small sample size that is not representative of the population. Time was the biggest constraint in this study as I was unable to do the amount of student interviews that were supposed to be conducted due to conflict with youth's schedules. This also led to my sample size being smaller than anticipated, and I was unable to gain more insight into youth's perspective of their time in the program. However, the hope is that in light of these limitations, future studies may be able to conduct a longitudinal study that may be able to utilize the research I conducted while addressing the problems I faced.

By Youth For Youth Program

BYFY has four Main Objectives: provide information to parents about A-G requirements and other college related information, improve confidence in communication skills in relation to conflict resolution and self-advocacy, improve communication and public speaking skills, and have 80% of graduating high school youth attending college or technical school the following year. I coded these as focus on confidence, improving communication skills, involving parents, and goals for future. These are skills that the center believes are key to the success of the youth, and I searched for similar codes after transcribing my interviews.

The By Youth For Youth program currently has a total enrollment of around sixty students and most students have been in the program for multiple years. It uses a youth-adult partnership model in which the adult coordinators encourage youth to lead discussions and take part in decision making for the program alongside adults. This approach is executed through Mar Vista Family Center's shared responsibility model which relies on mutual agreement from staff, youth, and parents to engage and participate in the organization. This idea is integrated into all the programs at MVFC, from the preschool to BYFY and even parent workshops.

Research Findings

The BYFY objectives focus on skills that promote leadership and self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to learners' own belief that they can achieve a goal or complete a difficult task (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007). This was my initial finding after conducting interviews with Mar Vista Family Center's staff and adult BYFY coordinators. Adults emphasized that giving students the support and room to take on a leadership role in the organization in some small way or another is what contributes to youth development. Their focus is on encouraging students to be engaged and to lead activities that are important to them. They also talked about their own experiences in the BYFY program when they were younger. Interestingly, all the adult staff interviewed had been involved in BYFY, and they highlighted leadership experiences that impacted their own development and goals in life. It was obvious that they felt strongly about creating the same opportunities for the current students in the program that they had when they were enrolled in it.

At the end of the data collection process, my key findings were:

a) BYFY objectives focus on values associated with promoting self-efficacy in youth.
b) Youth who have been in the program longer feel more of a responsibility to give back to their community.
c) Youth see shared struggles amongst community members as a key motivator to work together toward a shared goal..

"Overall the goals of the program are to show them leadership skills, show them that they can be involved in the community. I want them to see that they can make a difference."

The first finding (a) emerged as staff discussed the intentions of the program. When asked about what they hoped youth would gain from the program, all of the staff members stressed the importance of youth taking on leadership roles throughout their time in the program. They

believed that this leads to more investment and meaningful participation from students. Taking on leadership roles is seen as the key way to promote self-efficacy in youth. It is something that staff try to enforce but is not included in the objectives. Instead the objectives focus on strengths such as good communication, conflict resolution skills, confidence, and public speaking skills. It became evident that these were what the program associates with good leadership qualities. By actively encouraging youth to lead activities within the program, adults give up some of their power which yields high benefits in terms of positive youth development.

The second finding (b) drew off the experiences of both the adult coordinators and current BYFY youth. As opposed to adults, who viewed taking on leadership roles as the most beneficial to children, youth talked more about the impact participating in community events had on them. All of the youth, when asked about what they enjoy most about the program, mentioned their participation in community events in which they were able to help plan activities for the community and younger children. Such activities included helping at a haunted house for children on Halloween or helping at the Mar Vista Family Center Christmas party for the community. However, when asked about why they enjoyed those activities, a common theme kept emerging. Youth described wanting to make the events enjoyable for the younger kids like the older kids had done for them when they were younger. Ultimately, involvement in community activities in their early childhood increased youths desire to give back to their community when they were older and make the program better for the next generation.

The third finding (c) was touched on by the adults, and yet more emphasized by the youth. During the interviews, discussion about the struggles they battle within their community was often brought up in reasons why they enjoy participating at the center. Mar Vista Family Center was referred to as a place where they could discuss those struggles and take control over them. In

interviews and my observations of BYFY meetings, adults gave the youth opportunities to talk about issues bothering them regarding anything happening in the world or within their own community. These interactions, along with youth bringing up the struggles they see within their community during interviews, show how youth benefit when adults give them a safe space to talk about these struggles. One student noted how people are supportive of each other in the community because they have all experienced similar struggles and have similar cultural beliefs. She stated, "We have been through similar situations ... and with that in mind a lot of people understand and are trying to help each other out." Participating in the community center is more meaningful because everyone is working toward a common goal.

"We have been through similar situations in terms of we're low income and were trying to strive to go into college and we're trying to help our family once we get out, and with that in mind a lot of people understand and are trying to help each other out."

Recommendations and Implications for the Field

The implications of my findings are that Mar Vista Family Center positively impacts youth character development by providing access to activities that are meaningful to them and by having a common goal in which all youth feel supported. Mar Vista Family Center's shared responsibility model achieves this by including all members of the community in their activities and different levels of decision making. In the By Youth For Youth program youth are more invested because they view their participation as a way to better their own futures as well as the futures for children younger than them.

I highly recommend conducting a longitudinal study to get a better sample of youth who represent the entire population within the program to see if there are similar findings like the ones from this study. It would also be beneficial to do an analysis that looks at how the program impacts boys versus girls, especially considering that most of the center is ran by an all-female staff, most of whom were involved in the program for many years as youth. Doing so has the potential to reaffirm the impact that community organizations have on children development, and more importantly, will show how youth who are involved in these organizations can positively impact the community.

Conclusion

Youth are adaptable and resilient when given the right settings to learn and grow. At Mar Vista Family Center, youth are aware of the struggles they face, but they are empowered to address those struggles because Mar Vista Family Center offers a safe space that gives them tools and skills needed to address real world problems. Staff and youth alike understand that there is a common goal amongst everyone in Mar Vista and everyone supports each other to reach those goals because of the shared background they all have.

Shared responsibility is not an explicit set of rules and guidelines for people to follow but is reflected in adult's expectations that the youth will advocate for themselves and their ideas. This is seen in the By Youth For Youth program where youth are given opportunities to lead discussions, plan events, and voice their opinions about mature topics. By Youth For Youth adult coordinators require each youth to take on a leadership role throughout their time in the program and to be involved in decision making in one way or another. The objectives of the program emphasize strengths such as confidence, good communication, self-advocacy, and ability to resolve conflict, skills that they associate with effective leadership and self-efficacy.

The literature is optimistic that youth are not getting worse over time and have the ability to thrive despite hardships they may face. The youth in the BYFY program are representative of the fact that youth benefit from a model, in this case Mar Vista Family Center's shared responsibility model, that has clear expectations that all members will make an effort to better their own lives and the lives of others within the community. This model confirms that there are positive impacts on youth character development when they are given opportunities to take part in decision making processes alongside adults and when they feel supported by the community.

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