Youth Development: Bridging Research to Practice

Out-of-school time programs play an important role in the development of children and youth. Through hands-on authentic activities, delivered in a supportive environment, youth explore their unique interests and practice critical life skills that have been shown to reduce the likelihood of risk behaviors and increase the likelihood of thriving across the lifespan. While these longer term gains can be daunting and expensive to measure, research can help us make the case that progress on shorter-term outcomes such as self-management, effective social skills, positive identity, strong social capital, academic self-efficacy, contribution, and interest exploration can move the needle on longer-term gains and promote a child's holistic development. The good news is that these effective practices and short-term outcomes are relatively easy to measure!

Algorhythm's Youth Development Impact Learning System (YD iLearning System) helps you measure the following outcomes and effective practices to gain immediate real-time insights:

Outcomes

Self-Management (α=.79)

Self-management encompasses a youth's ability to regulate their emotions and behavior, take positive risks, and persist through life's challenges. Self-management correlates with longer-term outcomes such as higher grade point averages and standardized test scores, fewer suspensions and expulsions, and improved social development (Bandy & Moore, 2010).

Social Skills (α=.75)

Youth's ability to take others' perspectives into account, develop a sense of caring, and empathy are essential to the development of social skills. Social skills are considered an important part of development because it supports positive social interactions and promotes positive youth <-> environment interactions (Payton, et al., 2008).

Positive Identity (α=.70)

Youth's positive identity is an internal sense of self-worth and self-efficacy. This is promoted through an intentional exploration of the various ways in which a youth identifies himself/herself. A positive identity is important for youth to feel empowered to make decisions for themselves and develop resiliency in the face of challenges. Positive identity is correlated with higher confidence and reduced behavioral problems (McLaughlin, 2000).

Social Capital (α=.79)

Social capital is a youth's positive bonds with people and institutions (e.g., school, community center, youth-serving organization). Social capital is considered important for building a youth's support network and sense of belonging within their environment (Benson, 2008; McLaughlin, 2000; Mishook, et al., 2012).

Academic Self-Efficacy (α=.76)

A youth's motivation and perceived mastery towards positive school performance (i.e., academic success) and their general sense of hope in their capacity to attain academic success lends itself to higher grade point averages and standardized test scores, fewer suspensions and expulsions, and longer-term gains in skills to identify, attain, and retain a career (Afterschool Alliance, 2009; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004).

Contribution (α=.74)

Contribution encompasses a youth's positive engagement with family, community, and society. Increases in contribution are key to developing an individual's positive purpose as well as positive societal movement. Contribution has been correlated with higher grade point averages and standardized test scores, fewer suspensions and expulsions, and improved social development (Lerner, et al., 2006).

Add-On Focus Areas

Youth who have a passion and several adults who know and support these passions are more likely to be physically healthy, develop a sense of purpose, have higher grade point averages, and contribute to others (Benson, 2008). Organizations may build youth's motivation, knowledge, skills, and support system to pursue their interests and passions in several focus areas, such as healthy habits, leadership, arts, media, STEM, and environmental/outdoor education. In the YD iLearning System, choose the add-on modules that are connected to your program goals.

🫒 Healthy Habits:
Youth's engagement in healthy eating and physical activity, the value they place on healthy behaviors, and the support they have to pursue health-related goals beyond the program.

🟨 Media:
Youth's motivation, confidence, perceived skills, and support to explore their interest in media beyond the program.

👥 Leadership:
Youth's interest, confidence, and perceived skills to take on leadership roles, in addition to the number of adults they have in their lives to support this pursuit beyond the program.

🧪 STEM:
Youth's motivation, confidence, perceived skills, and support to pursue an interest in the science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields beyond the program.

🎨 Arts:
Youth's motivation, confidence, perceived skills, and support to explore the visual and/or performing arts beyond the program.

🌍 Environmental/Outdoor Education:
Youth's motivation to explore the outdoors and environmental issues, their connection to nature, and the support they have to pursue outdoor/environmental interests beyond the program.

Why it Works

In order to create a validated tool, Algorhythm has undertaken a testing cycle that includes: reviewing current research in the youth development field to identify the core outcomes and effective practice areas, creating survey questions aligned with the research, and pilot testing the survey with youth to ensure comprehension and relevance in a wide range of community contexts.

Once the first round of testing was complete, Algorhythm used a statistical process known as exploratory factor analysis to determine alignment of the survey to the research framework. This process determined the links between the questions, and then grouped closely linked questions into factors (i.e., outcomes). Once the number of factors and the questions allotted to each factor were determined, Algorhythm confirmed the existence of the six outcome areas described here.

Effective Practices

Providing opportunities to develop a growth mindset

- Modeling adaptability, positive risk-taking, and persistence during program to ensure youth embrace challenges and see them as learning opportunities through persistent effort (Dweck, 2006)
- Using positive feedback about youth's effort and persistence towards goals to help foster a love of learning and motivate youth to continue pursuing goals and interests, even in the face of challenges (Dweck, 2006)

Providing opportunities to develop positive relationships and social capital

- Providing opportunities to work in groups to develop communication, teamwork, and conflict resolution skills (Anderson, et al., 2007)
- Connecting youth with social capital in the form of people and institutions outside of program as resources (Benson, et al., 2006)
- Developing consistent relationships over extended periods of time with youth (Larson & Dawes, in press)

Developing positive environments for and with youth

- Creating emotionally- and physically-safe environments that foster a sense of belonging (Hall, et al., 2002)
- Giving youth voice and choice within the program (Benson, et al., 2006)
- Setting aside time for youth to reflect on their actions and reactions to program activities, reflect upon challenges, and integrate these insights towards future behavior (Ginwright, 2003)
- Empowering youth to take on leadership roles in program (Rehm, 2014)

Motivating youth to explore their interests

- Exploring youth interests (Scales, et al., 2011)
- Engaging youth in developmentally- and culturally-appropriate practices (Moore, Bronte-Tinkew, & Collins, 2010)

Engaging youth in hands-on projects that allow them to practice specific competencies

- Creating opportunities for youth to practice goal-management skills (Catalano, et al., 2004)
- Engaging youth in activities towards skill development within program through hands-on projects (Sinclair, Sanzone, Russell, & Reisner, 2012)
- Informing (and if possible, engaging) youth about opportunities to practice learned skills outside of programs in activities, such as internships or apprenticeships (Lewis-Charp, et al., 2003)

Resources:

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