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REVIEW ARTICLE

Youth Development Programs: Risk, Prevention and Policy

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Adolescence is a time of both great risk and opportunity. Buoyed by a belief that today's adolescents face more obstacles on the way to adulthood, from time-crunched parents, dangerous substances and behaviors, overburdened schools, and a more demanding job market, we as a nation no longer believe adolescents should fend for themselves during nonschool hours. In some communities, an array of school-based extracurricular activities (e.g., sports, music, art, community service) as well as community-based youth programs provide young people with ample choices for supervised activities outside of school. This is far from the norm. Availability, cost, transportation, and interest limit many youths' choices during nonschool hours. In a recent opinion poll, 62% of 14- to 17-year-olds agreed with the statement "Adults criticize teens for wasting time but adults don't realize there's not much for teens to do after school" [1]. Over half wished for more after-school activities in their neighborhood or community.

Growing public support, both ideological and financial, for more structured activities during nonschool hours stems, in part, from the view that these activities and programs do more than fill idle time and keep youth off the streets. They also can provide youth with enriching experiences that broaden their perspectives, improve their socialization, and enhance their skills. A shift in thinking about what youth need for successful (productive) adulthood is behind recent efforts to increase the supply of after-school activities, such as the federal government's funding of 21st Century Learning Centers. Over the past 10 years, the youth development movement's call for a paradigm shift from deterrence to development, captured by the phrase *problem free is not fully prepared*, has led to an increase in the acceptance of youth preparation and development, not just problem prevention and deterrence, as desirable goals requiring strategic action [2].

With the maturing of the youth development field, a consensus has emerged on the endpoints of positive (successful) youth development and the experiences and supports youths' need to get there [3]. Generally speaking, positive youth development encompasses all our hopes and aspirations for a nation of healthy, happy, and competent adolescents on their way to productive and satisfying adulthoods [3]. Lerner et al. [4] summarize the ingredients of positive youth development into the five Cs: (a) competence in academic, social, and vocational areas; (b) confidence or a positive self-identity; (c) connections to community, family, and peers; (d)

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character or positive values, integrity, and moral commitment; and (e) caring and compassion.

Resources in families, schools, communities, and the nation envelop youth with the experiences and supports they need to develop these qualities. The Search Institute delineated 40 internal and external assets, or universal building blocks of healthy development, based on literature reviews and survey data [5]. The four categories grouping the 20 external supports succinctly summarize the fundamental resources for positive development: support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time. Put another way, youth need access to safe places, challenging experiences, and caring people on a daily basis [6]. When circumstances prevent both economically affluent and disadvantaged families, schools, and communities from providing their youth with these fundamental resources, youth development programs offer one avenue for fulfilling these needs. Youth development programs can provide developmentally rich contexts where relationships form, opportunities for growth in multiple areas proliferate, and development occurs.

Programs vary in how they do this, making the definition of a youth development program elusive. At a general level, youth development programs help participants develop "competencies that will enable them to grow, develop their skills, and become healthy, responsible, and caring youth and adults" [7]. Programs incorporating, at least to some degree, the youth development philosophy range from small single-focus programs like sports teams or youth newspapers to affiliates of national youth-serving organizations such as Big Brother/Big Sisters and Boys and Girls Clubs. They are located in or sponsored by local schools, civic organizations, parks, museums, libraries, community organizations, and religious institutions. Approximately 500 national and 17,000 state and local organizations classify themselves as youth development programs [8].

Although we do not believe it is possible, or desirable, to design one blueprint for an effective youth development program, we take up the task laid out by the Youth Development Directions Project: The youth development field needs an agreed-upon set of principles, "something between the vagueness of *positive youth development* and the concreteness of *mentoring*" to maintain its momentum [9]. Such specificity is perhaps more critical given the recent explosion of interest, backed by funding and new programs, in after-school programs and mentoring as "fixes" to the problems facing American society and youth. Without a clearer picture of the mechanics and outcomes of youth development programs, we run the risk of creating a new set of programs that follow a youth development approach in name only.

In this article, we focus on the promise and reality of youth development programs. After a brief review of the available evidence about program effectiveness, we define the elements of youth development programs based on theoretical writings and ethnographic studies. We then investigate the reality in two ways. First, we map the defining principles of youth development to practice by looking at which elements are present in successful programs. Second, we investigate the relation between these elements and program outcomes. We conclude with directions for the future.

Although we believe youth development programs hold great promise for improving the lives and futures of American youth, we caution against unrealistic expectations. One program, even an extraordinarily good program, cannot do it all. Young people do not grow up in programs, but in families, schools, and neighborhoods. Our best chance of positively influencing adolescent development through programs lies in increasing the web of options available to all youth in all communities, and ensuring that those options take an approach consistent with the youth development framework. In trying to further this goal, we focus on one category of options, those offered by youth development programs.

Before tackling the task of identifying the principles of youth development programs, we first briefly review the evidence that youth development programs are beneficial to youth. In our previous work we set out to determine if programs with more of a youth development bent, loosely defined as programs promoting positive behaviors by attempting to enhance competencies, led to better outcomes for youth [10]. Our efforts met with a number of methodological challenges, including the paucity of experimental or quasi-experimental evaluations of such programs and few measures other than beliefs and academic-related behaviors to tap positive outcomes. For the most part, positive outcomes were measured as the absence of negative outcomes. Despite these obstacles, we concluded that the available limited evidence pointed to the possible effectiveness of the youth development framework. These obstacles, however, led us to warn that although the basis of the youth development movement rests on sound and compelling theoretical thinking, the enthusiasm

for youth development programs far outstrips the empirical evidence of their effectiveness.

In the few years since then, a number of reports have been released that employed rigorous standards of evidence to identify programs successful in reducing specific negative outcomes, such as substance abuse [11], violence [12], and mental disorders [13], or promoting positive development [14]. Two highly visible companion efforts by the American Youth Policy Forum [15,16] profile large-scale programs aimed at improving the lives of youth, including school reform efforts, such as schools-within-schools and school-to-work programs. Rigorous standards of evidence, however, were not criteria in the selection of programs to highlight in these reports; many of the programs claim success without comparing participants to nonparticipants. In addition, although the number of documents and websites cataloging promising programs for youth has surged, these efforts typically fail to require any rigorous evaluation evidence for inclusion.

The findings from these five recent reports containing only programs with methodologically sound evaluations clearly demonstrate that programs can positively affect adolescents' development. Overlap exists in the model programs identified in each report, despite their focus on different outcomes. These reviews identify 48 soundly evaluated programs that succeed in producing positive outcomes for their nonadjudicated teenage participants (ages 10–18 years). We use the 48 effective programs identified in the five reports [10–14] as our database for examining similarities and differences in program content and structure to help us identify the most promising programmatic features for promoting positive youth development.

The growing body of evidence supports the effectiveness of programs for promoting positive youth development. The question of what constitutes a youth development program and how these programs promote positive youth development remains, however. This vagueness handicaps our efforts to determine the benefits of such programs, which in turn affects our ability to improve the supply of appropriate, helpful, and enjoyable programs for large numbers of diverse youth.

Defining the Elements of a Youth Development Program

In this section we seek to clarify the vagueness surrounding the actual workings of youth development programs by suggesting three defining characteristics: (a) program goals, (b) program atmosphere, and (c) program activities. We identified these characteristics from writings about the potential benefits of the positive youth development approach [2,3,17–21]. This literature builds a case for the effectiveness of the youth development approach using research on adolescent development and lessons learned from the failures of traditional prevention and intervention programs. In addition, we draw from the descriptions provided in two qualitative studies of a variety of youth-serving programs deemed "the best of their kind" by adolescents and leaders in the field to illustrate how these elements appear in actual programs [22,23].

The goals of youth development programs promote positive development, even when seeking to prevent problem behaviors. Youth development programs help youth navigate adolescence in healthy ways and prepare them for their future by fostering their positive development. Youth development programs can be distinguished from ameliorative services by their emphasis on promoting normal development and recognizing youths' need for both ongoing support and challenging opportunities.

Leaders and staff at youth development programs create and nourish an atmosphere of hope. The positive, youth-centered atmosphere, or tone, conveys the adults' belief in youth as resources to be developed rather than problems to be managed. Individual attention, cultural appropriateness, and the choice and responsibility given to adolescents set a positive youth development tone. The atmosphere in these programs resembles that in a caring family, where knowledgeable and supportive adults empower adolescents to develop their competencies. Like successful families, these programs create physically and psychologically safe places with a strong sense of membership, commitment, explicit rules and responsibilities, and expectations for adolescents' success. Sustained involvement over time also characterizes a commitment to creating an environment that nourishes youths' potential for positive development.

Program activities provide formal and informal opportunities for youth to nurture their interests and talents, practice new skills, and gain a sense of personal or group recognition. Regardless of the specific activity, the emphasis lies in providing real challenges and active participation. Program activities also broaden youths' exposure to new worlds. Activities can have both direct (i.e., homework sessions and tutoring) or indirect (i.e., encourage youth

to stay in school and try harder) links to education, but present information and learning opportunities in a way that is different from school. The activities at many youth development programs offer leadership development opportunities, academic supports, and health education information.

Mapping the Elements of Youth Development Programs to Practice

These three principles of youth development programs describe their promise. In this section, we turn to assessing the reality. To what extent are these elements present in the diverse group of 48 programs promoting positive outcomes for youth? The first step in answering this question was to determine how to measure programs' goals, atmosphere, and activities from the program descriptions included in the evaluation literature.

Program Goals

We use the 5 Cs: competence, confidence, connections, character, and caring, to identify the specific goals for programs promoting positive youth development. We created the following operational definitions for the 5 Cs by extending efforts to develop national indicators of confidence, character, and caring [24] and adapting the operational definitions of the youth development objectives developed by Catalano et al. [14].

The promotion of competence, the first C, includes goals of enhancing participants' social, academic, cognitive, and vocational competencies. Social competence refers to interpersonal skills such as communication, assertiveness, refusal and resistance, and conflict-resolution skills. Cognitive competence describes cognitive abilities, including logical and analytic thinking, problem-solving, decision-making, planning, and goal-setting skills. School grades, attendance, test scores, and graduation rates are included under academic competence. Vocational competence pertains to work habits and career choice explorations.

Promoting adolescents' confidence, the second C, consists of goals relating to improving adolescents' self-esteem, self-concept, self-efficacy, identity, and belief in the future. Encouraging connections, the third C, involves building and strengthening adolescents' relationship with other people and institutions, such as school. The fourth C, character, is perhaps the most difficult to define. Program goals of increasing self-control, decreasing engagement in health-compromising (problem) behaviors, developing respect for cultural or societal rules and standards and a sense of right and wrong (morality), and spirituality describe character-building goals. Developing caring and compassion, the fifth C, implies goals of improving youths' empathy and identification with others.

Table 1 presents the goals of the 48 empirically evaluated programs serving as our database by the 5 Cs of positive youth development to better understand which specific aspects of positive youth development these programs address. The table indicates all program goals, not just the primary ones, as described in the details about the program provided in the evaluation. We were generous in imputing program goals from program descriptions to compensate for variations in the level of detail provided by the authors of the program evaluations. That is, if a program offered activities designed to alter adolescents' behavior or supports in a given area, we assumed it was a goal of the program even if not explicitly stated as such in the program description.

As shown in Table 1, all of the programs in the database espoused a positive youth development goal. The programs varied in which, and how many, aspects of youth development they sought to enhance. All of the programs held competency-enhancing goals. Goals to enhance participants' social (81%) and cognitive (79%) skills were the most common. Given the importance of academic competence for future success, it is surprising that only 27% of the programs embraced this goal. Fewer of the programs (21%) included the promotion of vocational competence as one of their goals. Only six programs (13%) took a broad view of competency building, striving to improve youths' social, academic, cognitive, and vocational competencies. The majority of programs saw their mission as promoting one (23%) or two (56%) types of competence.

Improving adolescents' character was the second most common youth development goal, endorsed by 81% of the programs. Typically, these programs sought to promote participants' character by improving their self-control, thereby reducing involvement in health-compromising risk behaviors. Almost three-quarters of the programs (73%) sought to improve adolescents' connections. Developing adolescents' connections with their family (40%) and peers (42%) were the most common connection goals for the programs. Fewer programs sought to augment adolescents' connections by encouraging a relationship with a nonfamilial adult such as a mentor (17%)

Table 1. Programs Goals and Duration for the 48 Evaluated Programs

Programs	Competence	Confidence	Connections	Character	Caring	Duration
Across Ages	•	•	•	•	•	9 months
ADEPT Project	•	•	•	•		9 months
Adolescent Transitions	•	•	•	•		12 weeks
Anger Coping Program	•	•		•		12 weeks
Bicultural Competence	•	•		•		10 sessions
Big Brother/Big Sisters	•	•	•	•	•	1 year[a]
Brainpower Program	•			•		6 weeks
Bullying Prevention	•		•	•		3 years
Child Development Project	•	•	•	•	•	9 months
Children of Divorce	•	•	•	•		10 sessions
Coping with Stress	•					15 sessions
C-Care	•	•	•			6 weeks
CLC	•	•	•	•		1 year
Earlscourt Social Skills	•		•	•		15 weeks
Family Bereavement	•		•			15 sessions
Friendly PEERsuasion	•		•	•		14 weeks
Girls Inc. (4 programs)	•	•	•	•		5 sessions[a]
GAPS	•	•		•		3 years
Growing Healthy	•	•		•		1 or 2 school yrs.
ISA-SPS	•		•	•		2 school years
Know Your Body	•	•		•		6 school years
LA's BEST	•	•	•			9 months[a]
Life Skills Training	•	•		•		15 lessons[b]
LSYOU	•			•		Summer
MACS	•	•	•	•		40 sessions[b]
MPP	•		•	•		10 sessions
Penn Prevention	•	•	•	•		12 weeks
Portland Peer Project	•	•	•	•	•	9 months[a]
PYD Program	•	•		•		15 weeks
Project ALERT	•	•		•		13 lessons[b]
Project Northland	•	•	•	•		3 years
QUOP	•	•	•	•	•	4 years
Queensland Project	•					10 weeks
Reducing the Risk	•	•	•	•		15 weeks
RIPP	•	•	•	•	•	9 months
School Trans. Env. Program	•		•			9 months
Seattle Social Dev. Project	•	•	•	•		2 school years
Social Competence Program	•	•	•	•		12 weeks
Social Relations Program	•		•	•		17 weeks
South Baltimore Youth Center	•	•	•	•		Drop-in
SMART Programs/FAN Club	•	•	•	•		10 sessions[a]
Stress Inoculation Training II	•					8 weeks
Suicide Prevention Program I	•		•			12 weeks
Suicide Prevention Program II	•		•			7 weeks
Summer T & E Program	•		•	•		Summer
Teen Outreach Program	•	•	•	•	•	9 months
Valued Youth Partnership	•	•	•	•	•	9 months
Woodrock	•	•	•	•	•	9 months

CLC = Creating Lasting Connections; GAPS = Greater Alliance of Prevention Systems; ISA-SPS = Improving Social Awareness-Social Problem Solving; LSYOU = Louisiana State Youth Opportunities Unlimited; MACS = Metropolitan Area Child Study; MPP = Midwestern Prevention Programs; QUOP = Quantum Opportunities Program; RIPP = Responding in Peaceful and Positive Ways.

[a] Youth can continue in the program for longer.

[b] Over multiple years.

or by improving their connection to school (17%). Improving adolescents' confidence was a program goal for 67% of the programs. Only a small number of programs (19%) held the promotion of caring and compassion as program goals.

Few programs (21%) endorsed a comprehensive mission of promoting all five ingredients of positive youth development. Even fewer (6%) held a limited mission of promoting only one facet of youth development. All three of these programs focused solely

on building adolescents' cognitive competencies, such as problem-solving and decision-making skills. Enhancing three of the Cs was more typical of the programs in the database of effective programs (38%).

Consistent with the defining characteristic of program goals, all of the programs endorsed positive goals even when attempting to prevent problem behavior. This analysis of the program goals for the 48 effective programs illustrates how programs put into practice the broad goal of promoting youth development. The goals for these programs focus more heavily on promoting competencies than other ingredients of positive youth development. Only a small number of programs sought to enhance the full range of positive outcomes.

Program Atmosphere

The second defining characteristic of youth development programs, the atmosphere, was more difficult to assess from the information provided in the program evaluations. Written program descriptions paint an incomplete picture of staffs' approach to youth. Many of the qualities that distinguish a positive, caring, youth-centered tone depend on the staff's demeanor and attitude towards the adolescent participants as well as the quality of relationships. Unfortunately, few studies measure the attitudes of the staff or the quality of the relationships. Although imperfect, we distinguish from the program descriptions five dimensions of program atmosphere referred to in the literature: (a) encourage the development of supportive relationships with adults and among peers, (b) empower youth, (c) communicate expectations for positive behavior, (d) provide opportunities for recognition, and (e) provide services that are stable and relatively long-lasting.

We drew on the definitions provided by Catalano et al. [14] and the National Research Council [25] to develop the operational definitions for the first four indicators of program atmosphere. Programs classified as providing a supportive atmosphere encourage youth to develop a supportive relationship with adults and/or peers through participation in the program. Because we were interested in capturing the atmosphere that participants experience when attending the program, we did not consider programs that provided parent training to improve parent-youth relationships as providing a supportive program atmosphere unless they also directly encouraged supportive relationships with program staff, mentors, or peers. Similarly, programs that work to improve youths' social skills, but do not specifically encourage a sense of belonging or bonding with other program participants, were not judged as offering a supportive program environment. An empowering atmosphere exists when program staff and activities encourage youth to engage in useful roles, practice self-determination, and develop or clarify their goals for the future. Programs convey a belief in adolescents as capable individuals when they communicate expectations for positive behavior by defining clear rules for behavior and consequences for infractions, fostering prosocial norms, and encouraging youth to practice healthy behaviors. They can provide opportunities for recognition by rewarding positive behaviors within the program or by structuring opportunities for public recognition of skills.

Almost all of the programs conveyed expectations for positive behavior (92%). Two-thirds provided opportunities for recognition, either within the program or classroom or in the larger community. Fewer than half of the programs (46%) encouraged a supportive program atmosphere. An empowering atmosphere was the least common (38%) aspect among the programs in the database.

Almost half of the programs (46%) were short-term, lasting from 6 to 15 weeks (Table 1). All but two of these programs consisted of brief (1- to 2-h) weekly sessions or lessons. The two 8-week summer programs were more intensive. Over half of the programs engaged youth for the school year (21%) or longer (31%). Four of these programs, however, were really a series of short-term programs. For example, the Life Skills Training program, a drug prevention program, offers 2 years of booster sessions after the first year of programming. The duration of the program in the subsequent years is limited; students participate in 10 sessions in the second year and 5 in the third year.

These five dimensions serve as proxies of program atmosphere in lieu of direct measures of the atmosphere youth experience while participating in the program. These features may capture the type of atmosphere intended by the program developers and staff, rather than the actual environment created. Without observational data, or measures of the quality of relationships, these dimensions offer our best estimate on the atmosphere of effective programs. The majority of programs fall short of the promise described in the literature with regard to the atmosphere they create. Almost half of the programs fail to engage youth for more than a few months. During this time, most provided only a subset, two (38%) or

three (33%) of the features of a positive youth development atmosphere. Few programs (13%) intended to foster a truly positive environment where youth are supported, valued, and nourished.

Program Activities

Program activities are the vehicle through which most programs attract and engage participants. As noted above, the specific focus of the activity (e.g., sports, literacy) does not matter as much as the opportunities provided through participation. Consistent with this view, we identified three features of program activities to depict the types of opportunities afforded by the array of program activities and components. The three features of program activities that capture the youth development philosophy include the opportunity for adolescents to build skills, engage in real and challenging activities, and broaden their horizons. We also included a fourth dimension, increasing developmental supports in other contexts of adolescents' worlds, such as family, school, or community.

To classify the programs according to these features, we inferred opportunities from the components and activities described in the program descriptions. Some activities, such as community service, afford participants multiple opportunities to build skills, engage in real and challenging activities, and broaden their horizons. Other types of activities provide more limited opportunities. For example, academic instruction or homework help primarily build (school-related) skills. We judged programs that included a competency-building curriculum, life skills training, direct academic instruction, homework help, or community service to offer participants the opportunity to build skills.

Activities that allow youth to engage in real and challenging activities were harder to infer from the program descriptions without more information about the quality of the activities. For example, activities described as "educational" can be real, challenging, and authentic, such as designing, writing, and producing a newspaper; or they can be disconnected, mechanical, or rote, such as practicing spelling and grammar. Therefore, we included only employment, leadership opportunities (such as tutoring or peer mediation), and community service as activities that provide youth with the opportunity to engage in an authentic, real, and challenging activity.

The literature describes youth development programs as places where youths' horizons can be expanded by providing them with opportunities they might not otherwise have, such as visiting a museum or engaging in a recreational activity requiring equipment not readily available. We considered programs that arrange for field trips, cultural activities, community service, employment opportunities, recreation, and mentors to expand participants' horizons by exposing them to new people, places, and situations.

There is a question within the youth development literature of whether the primary focus of youth development programs should be to prepare adolescents for the world by ensuring that they possess the 5 Cs, or to shape a better world for youth by also increasing the supports available to them at home, school, and in their community. The fourth feature addresses this question by indicating if the program activities attempted to improve at least one context (e.g., family, school, or community) through parent activities (e.g., parenting classes), teacher training, modifying school climate or structure, or changing community attitudes or norms.

Consistent with the considerable focus on building competence, all but two of the programs provided adolescents with the opportunity to build their skills. Although both the specific skill-building activities and the type of skills promoted varied, 73% of the programs relied on a proscribed curriculum to build participants' skills. Only approximately one-third of the programs included activities affording youth the opportunity to engage in authentic activities, such as leadership experiences (21%), community service (8%), or employment (6%). Fewer programs (33%) provided opportunities for youth to broaden their horizons by attending cultural activities (13%), developing a relationship with an adult or peer mentor (15%), participating in recreational activities (8%), or performing community service (8%). Among the effective programs in the database, almost half (48%) attempted to improve adolescents' world by improving their parents' parenting skills (35%), changing school and teacher practices (15%), or affecting community norms and practices (13%). Promoting change in adolescents' families, schools, or communities, however, was not the sole purpose of any of the programs in the database.

The majority of programs fostered skill-building opportunities through a curriculum, or series of lesson on problem-solving, decision-making, or social skills, rather than actual experiences (e.g., community service, employment). This runs counter to the promise of youth development programs to provide both formal and informal opportunities for youth to develop and nurture new skills in real and

challenging ways. Similarly, fewer than half of the programs afforded opportunities for youth to broaden their horizons.

Using Program Goals, Atmosphere, and Activities to Define Youth Development Programs

This description of the programs in the database in terms of program goals, atmosphere, and activities illustrates the variety of programmatic approaches that successfully improve, at least to some degree, the lives of youth. Additionally, this exercise suggests ways to define what exactly constitutes a youth development program. If, as suggested by the literature, youth development programs are those with youth-centered, knowledge-centered, and care-centered goals, atmosphere, and activities, then only some of the programs in the database can be considered youth development programs.

Which programs are regarded as youth development programs depends on how the criteria are set. Using the most stringent requirements, programs would have to: (a) hold broad developmental goals, striving to promote their adolescent participants' competence, confidence, connections, character, and caring; (b) last for at least a school year to create a supportive, empowering atmosphere in which youth are expected to behave in prosocial ways and are recognized for their contributions; and (c) consist of activities that afford youth the opportunity to build their skills, engage in authentic activities, and broaden their worlds. Owing to the debate in the literature surrounding the question of improving the world for adolescents, we leave this feature out of our most stringent criteria. Only two programs, Quantum Opportunities Program and Woodrock Youth Development Program, meet this most stringent definition of a youth development program, based on written program descriptions.

Relaxing the criteria would allow more of the programs to be called youth development programs. Questions remain, however, about which of the features could be dropped, or which features should carry more weight in creating an unambiguous definition of a youth development program. Evidence of which features, or combination of features, produce the positive changes in adolescents' lives is needed to further refine the definitional criteria. In the next section, we investigate program outcomes to address this question.

Examining the Findings From the Evaluation Literature

In this section we move beyond the question of whether or not programs can promote positive youth development to the question of *how* they do. Ideally, synthesizing the findings from these empirical evaluations would allow us to identify which programmatic elements work best for improving the lives of youth. Then, we could provide a blueprint of the necessary and optional elements for a successful youth development program. Such a list would create a clearer definition of a youth development program and be an invaluable tool for program designers.

As a field, however, we are far from this ideal. Few studies systematically varied elements of program design to determine which, or what mix, are critical to program success [10,25]. In addition, the general lack of theory predicting expected outcomes based on specific programmatic approaches and activities limits our ability to draw conclusions about *why* the program did, or did not, alter adolescents' development, as does the lack of measures of program implementation and fidelity and appropriate adolescent outcomes. Keeping these issues in mind, how do the programs' goals, atmospheres, and activities relate to the outcomes for youth? Do the empirical findings corroborate the conclusions from the qualitative studies of successful programs discussed earlier? Are there critical elements responsible for program success?

Table 2 presents the program outcomes in relationship to the five Cs. The evaluations varied not only in which of the outcomes they measured, but in how they assessed them as well. That is, the studies differed in both the specific measures and the number of measures used to assess the same construct. To take these discrepancies in measurement into account, we assigned a rating of success to programs when participants scored significantly ($p < .05$) better on at least one measure of the construct than youth who did not attend the program. The evaluations also differed in the depth of their analyses; some investigated outcomes for specific subgroups of participants, such as males and females or more and less at-risk participants, whereas others did not. We assigned a rating of success when participation in the program led to positive outcomes for at least some subgroup of the youth to compensate for these differences in detail. We footnoted those successes that varied depending on the measure used or the subgroup of participants investigated.

Table 2. Summary of Outcomes from the 48 Evaluated Programs

Programs	Competence	Confidence	Connections	Character	Caring
Across Ages	+	+	+	T	+
ADEPT Project	+[a]	−		−	
Adolescent Transitions	+[a]		+	+[a]	
Anger Coping Program				+	
Bicultural Competence	+	+		+	
Big Brother/Big Sisters	+	+	+[a]	+[a]	+[a]
Brainpower Program	+			+	
Bullying Prevention				+	+
Child Development Project		+	+	+[a]	
Children of Divorce	+	+	+	+	
Coping with Stress		+			
C-Care	+	+		+	
CLC			+	+[a]	
Earlscourt Social Skills				+	
Family Bereavement	+	+	+	+	
Friendly PEERsuasion	+			+	
Girls Inc. (4 programs)				+	
GAPS	+	+		+	
Growing Healthy				+	+
ISA-SPS		+		+	
Know Your Body				+	
LA's BEST	+	+			
Life Skills Training	+			+	
LSYOU	+				
MACS				+[a]	
MPP				+[a]	
Penn Prevention		+		+	
Portland Peer Project	+		+		+
PYD Program	+		+	+[a]	
Project ALERT	+			+[a]	
Project Northland	+	+[a]	+	+	
QUOP	+[a]	+[a]	+	+[a]	+
Queensland Project		+			
Reducing the Risk	+		+	+[a]	
RIPP	+		+	+[a]	
School Trans. Env. Program	+	+	+	+	
Seattle Social Dev. Project	+		+	+[a]	
Social Competence Program	+		+	+	
Social Relations Program		+	+	+	+[a]
South Baltimore Youth Center				+	−
SMART Programs/FAN Club	+			+[a]	
Stress Inoculation Training II		+			
Suicide Prevention Program I		+[a]			+
Suicide Prevention Program II	+	+[a]			
Summer T & E Program	+			T	
Teen Outreach Program	+			+	
Valued Youth Partnership	+	+	+		
Woodrock	+[a]	T	+	+[a]	+[a]

+ Positive findings for program participants ($p < .05$). −No significant findings. T = Trend ($p < .10$) towards positive findings for program participants.

[a] Findings varied with measure used or subgroup investigated.

Too often youth programs are held to unreasonable expectations to alter a whole range of adolescent behaviors and attitudes, even those not addressed by the program. To avoid this pitfall, we discuss the program outcomes in light of their goals. More programs held goals of promoting adolescents' competency, confidence, and connections than actually measured these characteristics in the evaluation. We

Table 3. Comparison of Youth Programs and Youth Development Programs

	Youth Development Programs		Youth Programs	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Outcomes[a]				
Competence	19	90	11	41
Confidence	13	72	8	57
Connections	18	100	1	6
Character	18	95	18	90
Caring	6	75	3	100
Program Elements				
Atmosphere				
Supportive	13	62	9	33
Empowering	10	48	8	30
Expecting	18	86	26	96
Rewarding	13	62	19	70
Lasted at least 9 months	11	52	14	52
Activities				
Build skills	20	95	27	100
Authentic activities	8	38	8	30
Broaden horizons	7	33	8	30
Other contexts	14	67	9	33

[a] Percentages based on the number of programs holding this outcome as a goal.

have no way of knowing if failures in these areas were not reported, or simply not measured. Although all 48 of the programs sought to strengthen participants' social, cognitive, academic, or vocational competence, only 63% of the evaluations report outcome measures of youths' competence. All of these found increases in participating youths' competency when compared with youth who did not participate in the program. Only 23 of the 31 programs possessing confidence-building goals report comparisons of youths' confidence. All but two (68%) successfully improved some aspect of participating youths' confidence. Nineteen of the 35 programs (54%) seeking to enhance youths' connections to other people or institutions reported measures of connection. All of these were successful in this goal. All of the programs embracing character-building goals met with success. The same was true of programs endorsing a caring goal.

As discussed above, not all of the programs included in the database can be considered youth development programs when we appraise their goals, atmosphere, and activities for adherence to the promise of youth development programs. Here we use the outcome findings in two ways to test the role these elements have on program outcomes. First, we searched for critical element(s) of empirically successful programs to determine if they match those portrayed in the literature. We identified 17 programs that met all, or more, of their goals. We then reviewed their ratings on the five features of program atmosphere (supportive, empowering, expecting, rewarding, and duration) and four features of program activities (build skills, authentic activities, broaden horizons, and other contexts). No pattern emerged. We conclude from this that a variety of programmatic approaches can promote positive youth development.

Not surprisingly, programs with more modest goals were generally more likely to achieve success. Programs that seek to enhance only one or two areas of development, although worthwhile, do not really match the spirit of the youth development programs described in the literature. Thus, our second tactic for uncovering critical elements of empirically successful youth development programs involved looking more closely at those programs with broader goals for youth. Twenty-one of the programs in the database endeavored and succeeded in altering at least three of the ingredients of positive youth development, and thus can be considered successful youth development programs. The other 27 programs should more aptly be called simply successful youth programs. Table 3 displays the program elements and outcomes for each type of program.

The first question we addressed was whether or not this distinction mattered in terms of outcomes for youth. As before, we judged success based on the ingredients of positive youth development the programs sought to improve. As shown in Table 3, the

outcomes reported in the evaluations show that considerably more youth development programs succeeded in enhancing participants' competency than did the youth programs. The evaluation outcomes find youth development programs more successful at improving adolescents' confidence and connections, but little difference in their success at promoting character. Surprisingly, youth programs reported more success at promoting caring than did the youth development programs. Thus, youth development programs were more successful in improving participants' competency, confidence, and connections.

Next we sought to better understand *how* youth development programs achieve this success. When we reviewed the atmosphere and activities of the programs in each category, we found differences between the percentages of youth development programs incorporating four of the nine dimensions, compared with youth programs. More of the youth development programs structured a supportive and empowering program atmosphere. Fewer conveyed expectations for positive behavior or prosocial norms. The length of program engagement did not differ. Only one feature of the program activities differed between the two groups of programs. More youth development programs offered activities aimed at improving some other context of adolescents' lives. Similar numbers of programs in each category offered youth the opportunity to build their skills, engage in authentic activities, or broaden their horizons.

The findings from the evaluation literature provide guidance for refining the definition of youth development programs. The findings suggest that *the atmosphere, rather than the opportunities provided by program activities, differentiates successful youth development programs from other successful programs for youth.* In particular, youth development programs provide youth with a supportive and empowering environment. The findings also support the assertion that youth development programs aim not only to improve youth, but to enhance their experiences in other contexts as well. Contrary to the literature, few programs of either type provided real and challenging activities or broadened participants' horizons.

Conclusions

To move the definition of youth development programs beyond the vagueness inherent in defining them as programs that help youth develop, we identified three features, program goals, atmosphere, and activities, that distinguish youth development programs from other types of youth programs in the literature. We then used the findings from the best of the empirical program evaluation literature to see if these three features differentiate successful programs.

At a minimum, program goals and atmosphere characterize youth development programs. Youth development programs see their mission as more than building youths' specific competencies; they hold broader developmental goals. Program atmosphere also seems to be important. *Thus, youth development programs seek to enhance not only adolescents' skills, but also their confidence in themselves and their future, their character, and their connections to other people and institutions by creating environments, both at and away from the program, where youth can feel supported and empowered.*

Future Directions

The operational definitions we created to determine program goals, atmosphere, and activities can serve as the basis for the development of survey or observational measures for use in program evaluations. Program descriptions tell us only so much about how the program works. Our understanding of why some programs are better at promoting youth development than others would be vastly improved by the development and inclusion in evaluation studies of measures of the quality of the atmosphere programs create and the types of opportunities they provide. Too often this process information is not collected or reported in outcome studies.

A few additional questions on survey measures used to determine program outcomes could provide at least some basic information about the types of supports and opportunities youths experience while participating in the program. For example, Gambone and Arbreton [26] collected information on the frequency with which youth in three prominent voluntary youth-serving organizations experienced positive youth development supports and opportunities through participant surveys. Survey items measured youths' sense of safety, sense of belonging, participation in challenging and interesting activities, perceived social support from adults, input and decision-making opportunities, leadership opportunities, and participation in volunteer and community service. These seven measures capture both program atmosphere and activities.

Direct observation offers a more extensive, but expensive, option for collecting information on the quality of program atmosphere and activities. Standardized observational measures used in early childhood research (such as the Early Childhood Classroom Observation Measure) were created to measure the instruction, management, social climate, cultural sensitivity, and resources of early childhood classrooms, based on research and recommendations for what defines an early childhood classroom. The development of a similar type of instrument for use in youth programs, including after-school programs, would help push both the youth development field and the after-school program field forward in their ability to develop and measure quality programs for youth. In addition to the program components described in this paper, many of the items in the National School-Age Care Alliance's standards for program accreditation (see www.nsaca.org/standards_glance.htm) can serve as a starting point for the development of such a measure.

We also need to measure a broader array of program outcomes. Measures of the ingredients of youth development (competence, confidence, connections, character, and caring) need to be included in evaluation efforts in addition to the more traditional measures of risky behaviors. We are encouraged by recent, although still preliminary, efforts to create such measures [27].

The recent burgeoning in attention to the after-school hours, and with it a general acceptance of the principals of the youth development movement, needs to be met with an increase in funding and willpower to create and include these new measures as part of program evaluation efforts. Without these improvements in program evaluations, the ability to provide guidance to program developers on how best to create a true youth development program is limited.

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