A LITERATURE REVIEW FOR BEST PRACTICES FOR
YOUTH LEADERSHIP AND ACTIVISM INTERVENTIONS

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While fields such as criminology and criminal justice tend to focus on more serious crimes, such as hard drug use (Thornberry & Krohn, 1997) and gun crimes (McDowall, Loftin, & Wiersema, 1992), tobacco use among American youths retains its position as a social problem. In 2008, for example, the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) found that the highest rate of tobacco use (41.4%) came from young adults aged 18 to 25. Although this age group is composed of those able to legally purchase tobacco products, another more striking finding is that youths aged 12 to 17 had a rate of 11.4% in 2008, and 12.4% in the 2007 survey (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2009, p. 44). Youth aged 12 to 17 are not able to legally purchase tobacco products, yet tobacco use is reported. States and legislators across the country, therefore, remain supportive of local school and community efforts that create tobacco-free social norms among youths.

Previously, views that dominated youth and child development stemmed from the criminal justice model of punishment over prevention. Youths have historically been portrayed negatively. Instead of focusing on their attributes, society tended to focus on their deficits (Damon, 2004). Recently, however, society’s perceptions of youths have changed. Youths are now considered to be valuable resources in their respective communities. They are no longer seen as a societal problem. Through a new understanding in the importance of development, program goals have also shifted to focus on interventions that provide support and skills training, and that also strengthen youth connections to schools and their communities. Current programs have also moved away from being primarily drug and alcohol focused to being inclusive of multiple strategies, interventions, participation, and social interactions (Damon, 2004).

The ultimate goal of these newer and more promising programs is to promote healthy outcomes and prevent youths from engaging in risk-taking behavior. The Search Institute of
Minnesota has recognized 40 developmental assets that are deemed as highly influential in affecting positive youth outcomes. Studies by the Institute found that youths who possessed a higher number of the 40 developmental assets (31 or more) had stronger reported health outcomes. In other words, levels of tobacco, marijuana, and alcohol use among these youths were significantly lower than in youths who possessed 10 or fewer developmental assets (Benson, 2000, ¶ 3). In addition, another study found that developmental assets can also be a predictor in academic achievement. Specifically, greater numbers of developmental assets reported by students are correlated with higher GPAs (Scales, Benson, Roehlkepartain, Sesma, & Van Dulmen, 2006).

The Youth Empowerment Support Program is an example of the recent shift in the treatment of youths. This program was designed to strengthen connections to school environments in at-risk youths, and also to decrease drug use through community service, social skill development, school attachment, positive peer bonding, and mentor support. Youth evaluations of this program were overall positive and an increase in youth self-esteem was observed (Moody, Childs, & Sepples, 2003). The Youth Empowerment Strategies (YES!) project, at its core, stressed the importance and potential of youths as agents of social change. The project emphasized empowerment through positive youth development. The goal was to identify and build on youth abilities and, as a result, ultimately decrease risky behavior, including tobacco and drug use (Wilson, Minkler, Dasho, Wallerstein, & Martin, 2008). Marr-Lyon, Young, and Quintero (2008) also reported that active participation in tobacco prevention programs among New Mexico youths was correlated with empowerment efficacy and self-esteem. In their study, an increase in reported empowerment efficacy was associated with an
increase in active participation, which was, in turn, associated with an increase in the self-esteem of the participants (Marr-Lyon et al., 2008).

Travis Hirschi’s (1969) social bond theory asserts that social bonds are what keep individuals from committing deviant acts. Hirschi theorized that people were naturally deviant but having certain bonds held them back from acting on their innate and animalistic desires. When strong ties exist to conventional institutions or other people, it is less likely that an individual will deviate from social norms and become delinquent. However, weak ties release an individual from conventional restraints and place them in a position to deviate. Hirschi’s social bond theory is measured through the strength of four elements: attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief (Hirschi, 1969).

Studies attempting to apply Hirschi’s social bond theory to cigarette use found an important correlation between school attachment and smoking behavior among youths. Krohn, Massey, Skinner, and Laur (1983) found that school commitment consistently yielded the best results in regard to influencing smoking behavior in adolescents. Surprisingly, attachment to friends was seen to have a positive effect on smoking behavior while parental attachment had little effect (Krohn et al., 1983). Marcos, Bahr, and Johnson (1986) also found that a strong attachment to school was the one variable that seemed to slightly control cigarette use. They also observed that cigarette smoking among youths was unaffected by parental attachment, religious attachment, or conventional values (Marcos et al., 1986).

Ideally, programs that target youths will not only have an effect on individual behavior, but will also promote positive internal attitudes and beliefs, thereby affecting communities. Involving youths in tobacco advocacy is an important aspect of the effort to promote tobacco-free norms among youths. Historically, prevention programs have been one-sided by focusing
primarily on the individual and not the individual’s environment. However, motivating youths to become involved within the community on issues of public concern has been proven effective on impacting negative youth behavior. In addition, when organized, youths have proven successful in achieving local policy changes due to their uniquely influential voices (Hays & Scholla, 2003). Therefore, youths can make effective and persuasive advocates in many capacities, including tobacco control, prevention, and legislation. Given the opportunity to learn about tobacco advocacy, organized youths might be able to resist tobacco products themselves and also impress this knowledge upon others (Carver, Reinert, Range, & Campbell, 2003). Youths, however, express some uncertainty concerning their own activism abilities and possibly need outside influence, encouragement, and confidence building for their roles in community coalitions.

Data from the North Carolina Youth Empowerment Study (NC YES) concluded that youth involvement was extremely influential in changing school policies regarding tobacco use in some North Carolina school districts (Ribisl et al., 2004). Active participation in positive programs can have positive effects on youth. For example, youths feel more empowered within their community and can use these positive experiences to direct future behavior. NC YES also found that youths felt more comfortable advocating for tobacco policy change at the local level, in an environment that was more familiar to them. At higher levels of state government, however, youths reported being less comfortable with advocacy work. At that level, youths perceived themselves as having no voice or being generally powerless in relation to the more lucrative and highly influential tobacco industry (Ribisl et al., 2004).

The Teen Activists for Community Change and Leadership Education (TACCLE) was formed as an after-school intervention oriented program for ethnically diverse, low-income
youths in California. This program engaged teens in advocacy activities in order to change their attitudes and beliefs regarding individual alcohol, tobacco, and other drug (ATOD) use, to help them become active members of their community, and to help them become active in policy implementation. The youths partook in 90 minute meetings, 30 in total, over the course of one school year. At these meetings, each youth group chose one ATOD problem to focus on and then developed strategies and an action plan to combat that issue (Tencati, Kole, Feighery, Winkleby, & Altman, 2002, p. 20).

The TACCLE intervention was evaluated and found to be beneficial in that it promoted youth involvement, helped to develop leadership roles in the community for youths, and demonstrated the importance of youth involvement to community leaders. Youth participants stated that they felt as though they were making a difference and therefore were motivated to continue their involvement on into other activities. They felt positive about their own leadership abilities and their communication skills. Although not successful in reducing individual ATOD use, lasting effects of the program included an increased youth involvement that ultimately led to changes in policy in respective communities and schools (Tencati et al., 2002).

Having youths organized and involved in the policymaking and political process, especially when mobilized in large numbers, helps make available a wider array of views, accurately reflects the diversity of each particular state, and allows the youth to feel engaged and active in shaping their community (Ferber, Gaines, & Goodman, 2005). Holden, Crankshaw, Nimsch, Hinnant, and Hund (2004) found that an increase in the quality and intensity of youth participation resulted in both intrapersonal and interactive aspects of psychological empowerment. The roles that youths played in local efforts of participation governed whether they reported beliefs, attitudes, skills, or knowledge related to feelings of empowerment as
effective community-change agents. When allowed the opportunity to act in a leadership capacity and be active participants, for example, youths report a higher level of confidence in working effectively against the tobacco industry and in influencing others to not smoke. Youths, therefore, are able to benefit from being integrated in local tobacco control efforts (Holden et al., 2004).

Although the ultimate goal of influencing policy is important, targeting and affecting problem behavior in the individual is equally significant. Winkleby et al. (2004) studied 11th and 12th grade high school students from various schools in California. These students participated in advocacy activities to counter the environmental influences and use of tobacco in their communities. The objective of this study, depending on the individual’s prior tobacco use, was either to prevent or significantly reduce tobacco use among members of the treatment schools. A significant change was observed in the treatment group from the beginning of the intervention to the end of the semester. The significant change, however, was only seen in the group of students who were regular smokers, not in the groups that were light smokers or non-smokers (Winkleby et al., 2004). In the control schools, smoking levels among regular smokers increased 1.5 percent. On the other hand, the treatment schools showed a 3.8 percent decrease in regular smoking. Six months after the conclusion of the intervention, a decrease in regular smoking was still being realized in the treatment schools. This study was therefore able to conclude that engaging students in community-based advocacy activities related to environmental influences of cigarette smoking can significantly decrease smoking among youths who were regular smokers (Winkleby et al., 2004, p. 269).

No program has been found to stand above the rest and no organizational standard has been proven as the most effective in creating successful outcomes for the youth involved.
Research indicates, however, that the difference might be the availability of, and the participation in, high quality youth programs (Ferber et al., 2005). Therefore, a compilation of encompassing strategies is used by Ferber et al. (2005) that link together aspects of constructive social development, family involvement, active involvement, and participation in various group activities that build on strengths and interests. Research finds that youth programs that promote the behaviors that one would want youths to exhibit, rather than those that focus on simply fixing or preventing problems, appear to be the most successful. Therefore, promoting positive outcomes alone should, in effect, prevent the negative behaviors we want youths to avoid. Overall, the quality of the program appears to be what matters, not the number of youths it services (Ferber et al., 2005).

Little (2007) found that regular attendance by school-age children in a quality after-school program was associated with a high range of positive developmental outcomes. These positive outcomes included improved feelings and attitudes, improved school performance, improved work habits and study skills, and task persistence. According to Little (2007), future high quality programs should contain: “(1) appropriate supervision and program structure; an environment that fosters positive youth-adult relationships; (2) programming with opportunities for autonomy and choice; and (3) good relationships among the various settings in which program participants spend their day—schools, after-school programs, and families” (p. 2). These programs specifically are found to greatly benefit youths in the community, give youths the skills needed to succeed, and result in positive developmental outcomes for the youths involved (Little, 2007).

The National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) indicated that youths who participate in any afterschool activity, whether it be school-based, community-based, or religion-
based, are more likely to have reduced rates of substance abuse and higher self-esteem. NSDUH statistics showed that youths (aged 12 to 17) who did not participate in any activities, had higher rates of past month cigarette and illicit drug use when compared to youths who participated in four or more activities. A pattern of decreasing rates for past month cigarette, alcohol, and illicit drug use was also seen more consistently in youths of higher income families who participated in a higher number of activities (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2007).

Schaps and Solomon’s (2003) research suggests that the most significant and enduring effects on youth drug use can be accomplished through the implementation of more comprehensive and long-lasting programs that also encompass entire school environments. Unfortunately, these types of studies are not prevalent because of the obvious difficulties associated with implementing them, including time and consistency issues. There are, however, a few studies mentioned by Schaps and Solomon (2003) that test this effect. The Child Development Project and the Seattle Social Development Project are two examples that resulted in long-term positive outcomes for those students who had experienced the intervention the longest (in this case, throughout elementary school) (Schaps & Solomon, 2003).

The Child Development Project found that students were positively influenced in areas of social problem-solving, social adjustment, self-esteem, prosocial attitudes, drug use, participation, peer groups, and seeing their classroom more as a community setting. These positive outcomes were seen initially and only persisted in the youths who had experienced the program throughout elementary school (Schaps & Solomon, 2003). Similarly, in the Seattle Social Development Project, students were positively affected in areas of school attachment, school achievement, social competency, drug use, and delinquency. As with the Child
Development Project, long-term effects from the Seattle Social Development Project were seen only in the group that had received a “full intervention,” one that had lasted from 1st to 6th grade (Schaps & Solomon, 2003).

The Storytelling for Empowerment Program was implemented in Phoenix, Arizona to decrease drug use and marijuana use among high-risk middle school students, aged 11 to 15, over a two year period. Throughout this two year period, youths in the treatment group were involved in a program that combined cultural empowerment, cognitive skills, storytelling, and the arts for emotional expression (Nelson & Arthur, 2003, pp. 169, 171). A comparison was then made between participant responses to drug use before and after the intervention. This study found that in participating schools, a higher amount of contact hours (between the participant and the program) yielded significant decreases in both individual alcohol and marijuana use. Therefore, the intervention was shown to have a significant effect when increased contact hours were practiced (this study found a minimum of 20 hours to be significant). This study, however, also found that the use of other drugs and cigarettes increased in this two year period. For this reason, the authors noted that future programs should be revised to be inclusive of all substances, and not so focused on specific ones (i.e., alcohol and marijuana) (Nelson & Arthur, 2003, pp. 177, 179).

In the past, researchers have devoted a great deal of time, energy, and resources to the more serious crimes that effect America’s youth. Therefore, more information is available on these crimes and a sizable amount of policy and legislation has already been developed to address them. As a consequence, the actual impact that anti-tobacco efforts could have on youths and the community as a whole has yet to be fully realized. Tobacco use among youths remains an important social policy issue that requires further research and development.
References


