Integrating Social Capital Into Positive Youth Development

I Pour Life
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TITLE
Integrating social capital into positive youth development

SUBTITLE
Foster youth are at risk of slipping through the cracks during the pandemic

ABSTRACT
Social capital is an often under-utilized yet powerful tool in positive youth development. Social capital promotes self-sufficiency and sustainable change in an individual, and the outcomes can contribute to increased financial stability, housing stability, mental health stability, employment opportunities, and even higher pay. Creating and strengthening a network of support is especially important for foster youth, a population that experiences far more inconsistencies than their peers. I Pour Life’s positive youth development system, LifeStrengths, uses social capital and strengths-based coaching as key components of a specialized curriculum that effectively advances at-risk youth into self-sufficiency.

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INTRODUCTION
Older foster youth are socially isolated with the majority of them having spent three years in the cycle of government care. They experience high rates of incarceration, high school incompletion, teenage pregnancies, and increased reliance on government subsidies. Social isolation prohibits youth from advancing by limiting their social opportunities. As older youth enter adulthood, many lack the understanding and experience to transition from government subsidies to economic self-sufficiency. With limited opportunities to mature from entry level positions to career choices and to transition from government subsidies to economic self-sufficiency, youth often resort to negative behaviors that lead to incarceration. Providing positive development programs that focus on advancing self-sufficiently can minimize the negative outcomes of social isolation and can provide economic mobility.

Social capital refers to connections, networks, and relationships among people and the value that arises from human interaction. "It produces information, emotional, or financial support, and/or other resources. Social capital can be with people who are like us (‘bonding’), with people different from us (‘bridging’), or
with institutions or individuals in positions of power (‘linking’). Many human
services strategies may leverage social capital, such as partnering with
faith-based organizations, mentoring, peer support groups (e.g., peer mentors,
peer navigators, peer support groups), family strengthening (e.g., healthy
marriage/relationship education, fatherhood, parenting supports), and more

BACKGROUND
Social capital is associated with many types of economic outcomes. For example, social
contacts may provide job referrals, and evidence suggests that candidates with referrals are
more likely to be hired and to remain in their positions longer. Even weak social networks can
provide opportunities for lateral mobility, which help to avoid unemployment. A study
investigating the influence of social capital on job productivity found that it was an essential
component because a network helps with teamwork-based projects and the acquisition of
professional knowledge (Greve, Benassi, and Sti, 2010). While this study strengthens the notion
that social capital is important in job productivity, findings regarding the impact of social capital
on wages are mixed. Some studies suggest that social capital has no impact on wages.
However, McDonald (2015) analyzed data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth and
found that workers who used their social networks to search for jobs experienced significant
wage returns compared to workers who found jobs through other means.

While social capital broadens employment opportunities and increased wages, the lack of a
network can damage one’s ability to meet pre-existing financial obligations. For example,
low-income, noncustodial fathers may be unemployed because they are unable to learn about
job opportunities from social contacts. If they are unable to pay child support, they can possibly
be incarcerated. Research also suggests that the strength of social ties are important. The
quality of one’s social network is essential, considering that informal job searching is the most
common strategy for workers seeking blue collar occupations. Kramarz and Skans (2014) found
that strong social ties are essential to young workers. Two types of social capital contribute to
social wealth for young people. “Bonding” social capital refers to strong ties between family
members and friends. “Bridging” social capital refers to weaker ties throughout the community.

PROBLEM
Older foster youth often lack the social opportunities or positive development needed for
adulthood. Foster youth who have been in the system for three plus years experience many
setbacks that hinder development. Frequent transfers between foster or group homes,
inconsistency in high school education, and the lack of economic preparedness come at a great
cost to the youth, the local community, and the State budget. Without consistent social
development and support, youth face continued disruption in relationships with friends, siblings,
and other relatives, coaches, teachers, classmates, religious leaders, etc. Children may move
from their original schools multiple times during the school year. Frequent changes in
caseworkers, judges, and legal representation also interfere with children’s well-being and their
ability to find permanent homes.

The effects of these inconsistent patterns create long-term post-traumatic disorders. In 2005,
researchers from Harvard Medical School, the University of Michigan, and Seattle-based Casey
Family Programs interviewed nearly 500 former foster kids and found that 25 percent suffered post traumatic stress disorders, outpacing the 20 percent suffered by veterans of the war in Iraq and more than double the 11 percent suffered by veterans of the war in Afghanistan (Pecora, 2005).

The lack of consistent development in social capital and economic mobility for older youth will continue the cycles of poverty, incarceration, and PTSD.

**SOLUTION**

Studies show that intentional, pro-social approaches engage youth within their communities, schools, organizations, peer groups, and families in a way that is both productive and constructive. These approaches recognize, utilize, and enhance young people’s strengths and promote positive outcomes by providing opportunities, fostering positive relationships, and furnishing the support needed to build leadership strengths.

A positive youth development perspective views an adolescent as full of potential rather than rife with problems to be solved. Instead of merely encouraging adolescents to avoid risky behaviors, positive youth development provides that enhance strong qualities that adolescents already possess. Adults with this attitude can make a significant and positive difference in young peoples’ lives. They can build on youths’ strengths and provide support and opportunities to achieve their goals and successfully transition to adulthood (Dworsky, 2005).

Individuals with high levels of social capital are happier and healthier, find better jobs, and live longer, and communities with high levels of social capital have higher educational achievement, faster economic growth, and less crime (“How Human Services Programs Can Use Social Capital,” n.d.).

Key features of our approach are the specialized LifeStrengths curriculum, Positive Youth Development method, emphasis on social capital, and qualifications of a LifeCoach. The LifeStrengths curriculum is an innovative approach to coaching at-risk youth through proven techniques that reinforce self-awareness, future focused thinking, and goal achievement. The curriculum was developed by I Pour Life staff, coaches, and consultants, and it focuses on sharing positive Life Lessons, Life Skills, and establishing Life Connections imperative to a youth’s advancement into a self-sufficient adulthood. The first version of the curriculum focused on the topics of workforce readiness, education progress, healthy living, stable housing, and financial literacy. After the initial pilot, an addition was made to include the impact of existing relationships on a youth’s advancement toward self-sufficiency and the need for social capital development. The curriculum is in the beginning stages of an external review and audit.

In 2019, the LifeStrengths program was recognized by the United States Children's Bureau as being one of only two organizations in the United States that provides an evidenced-based approach to positive youth development with an emphasis on building social capital. This indicates an immediate comparative advantage over other services being provided to at-risk youth in Missouri. Another comparative advantage focuses on the methodology of service delivery. Other state programs focus on mentorship, but LifeStrengths’ approach focuses on strengths-based coaching and uses proven techniques by trained coaches. These techniques
and training have been established by a Gallup Certified Strengths Coach on staff and outcomes are monitored through evidence based metrics. LifeStrengths use of evidence-based coaching techniques results in a distinct advantage.
REFERENCES


