Holistic Indicators *of* Youth Development

A youthprise Research Project Report

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About the authors

The Youth Research team at Youthprise works with clients in government and nonprofits to design and develop youth-led research and evaluation projects. The team utilizes design thinking, participatory theater, and action research approaches designed by and for young people to conduct research on issues of importance to young people's lives. Revenue from clients supports a team of youth researchers and provides small grants to marginalized and under-funded community groups of youth and adults seeking to use participatory action research (PAR) for transformation in their communities. The long-term vision is to create a network of youth researchers across the state to conduct studies like this one.

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Introduction

This study seeks to understand young people's perspectives on factors that make their lives healthy and whole, speaks to existing theories generated by adult researchers, and reports preliminary ideas garnered from numerous young people about how they conceptualize their own well-being.

Youthprise is a statewide intermediary established in 2010 by The McKnight Foundation to increase the quality, accessibility, sustainability, and innovation of expanded learning opportunities. Youthprise defines "expanded learning" broadly to include all programs that serve youth outside the traditional school classroom, from tutoring to STEM-based programs, experiential learning, and youth leadership. Youthprise is committed to addressing disparities in access to quality learning opportunities for disconnected youth who are often not reached by traditional programs.

In 2013, young people at Youthprise began to question ideas about achievement and success espoused by teachers and counselors. We (the young people) found that the academic skills and knowledge we gained as middle and high school students were valued by teachers and society more than skills and knowledge gained through other life experiences in our homes and communities. However, we felt these latter experiences were equal, if not more important to our lives. We wondered why these experiences were often missed, downplayed, or at worst, vilified by adult researchers, and what else these researchers might be missing about what made our lives happy and healthy.

These same young people began envisioning a research project designed to be insightful and just, valuing and supporting youth voices from data collection to publication. We became curious about the ways typical data collection methods like focus groups and interviews tended to exclude or marginalize voices of young people, even in research about their lives. When young people are included in the data collection process, they are rarely invited to participate in the data analysis and writing process, or the design of research projects of interest to them. This group laid groundwork for a youth-led research team at Youthprise, which seeks to provide research and design services through a relational approach that places people most impacted by an issue at the center of the work.

In initial discussions about this research project, our team identified ways adult assumptions about success have come to dominate the literature and practice around youth well-being. These assumptions, in part, sustain standardized academic evaluations, which often discriminate against marginalized youth, and lead to major investments in efforts to promote success on these evaluations. However, in our view, these efforts often disregard the ability and desire of young people to understand and define their own models for success and well-being. In response, we conducted a youth-centered study to understand ways young people experience and conceptualize their well-being and examine the extent to which these align or break with contemporary theories of youth well-being and success, including: social emotional learning, grit, and resilience.

What The Experts Say

Youth Well-Being and Success: A Contested Space. Evaluations of and responses to the health and well-being of children and youth have a long and contested history in the United States. Typically, such responses were spurred by a "moral panic",[1] a public response to a social problem deemed immoral or unacceptable. Some of the first responses to children and young people in the United States came from middle-class, white women who believed that some parents—because of their class and racial backgrounds—were raising their children to be deviant and remain poor.[2] This spawned various government and third sector responses, including orphan trains, boarding schools, and child welfare.[3] Today similar responses still struggle to manage the health and well-being of poor and minority children.

1. Goode, E. & Ben-Yehuda, N. (1994). *Moral panic: the social construction of deviance.* Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers.

2. Muncy, R. (1991). *Creating a female dominion in American reform*, 1890-1935. NY: Oxford University Press.

3. Trattner, W. I. (1999). *From poor law to welfare state: A history of social welfare in America* (6th ed.). New York: The Free Press. [May also use 1994, 5th ed.]Ladd-Taylor. M. (1994). *Mother-work: Women, child welfare and the state*: 1890-1930. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois.

More broadly, the development of a public education system extended the interest of governments and nonprofit organizations to the health and well-being of all children in the United States. From campaigns against child labor to the encouragement of youth employment opportunities and afterschool activities, moral panics drove the investment of money and research in shaping the upbringing of youth as members of American society. [4] Contemporary approaches to understanding and promoting youth well-being and success range from ensuring economic futures (often through the pursuit of education or job training) to more holistic approaches, like Positive Youth Development (PYD).[5]

In 2001, the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) committed the U.S. federal government to holding schools accountable for the success of young people, including closing the achievement gap between white students and students of color. This change supported a phenomenon teachers have come to call "teaching to the test," a curricular and pedagogical focus on helping students pass standardized exams. As an underfunded mandate, and due to significant negative response from teachers and families, NCLB has been regularly challenged since its enactment into law. [6] Additionally, the focus on standardized evaluations seems to some to undermine the deeper purpose of NCLB to address the achievement gap. Young people of color are often not represented in the form and format of these standardized evaluations [7] [8] [9] [10] and the needs of struggling students beyond the classroom are frequently not addressed.

4.   Schneider, E. (1993). *In the web of class: delinquents and reformers in Boston, 1810s-1930s.* New York: New York University Press.

5.   Catalano, R. F., Berglund, . L., Ryan, J. A. M., Lonczak, H. S., & Hawkins, J. D. (n.d.). Positive youth development in the united states: Research findings on evaluations of positive youth development programs. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 591*(1), 98-124.

6.   Ravitch, D. (2010). *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education.* New York: Basic Books.

7.   Reese, R. (2013, Feb 21). Minority Test Bias Persists. *huffingtonpost.com/ronnie-reese/test-bias-minorities_b_2734149.html*

8.   Schellenberg, S. J. (2004). Test Bias or Cultural Bias: Have We Really Learned Anything? *datacenter.spps.org/uploads/Test_Bias_Paper.pdf*

9.   Jaschik, S. (2010, Jun 21). New Evidence of Racial Bias on SAT. *insidehighered.com/news/2010/06/21/sat*

10. Bronx Leadership Academy 2, BLA2 teachers Shannon O'Grady and Kristin Ferrales, and Kathleen Cushman. (2008). *SAT Bronx: Do you know what Bronx kids know?* Providence, RI: Next Generation Press.

This leaves a significant need for models that understand and enable intervention in other arenas of students' lives. [11] This has inspired perspectives like social emotional learning, which look at seemingly intangible traits like resilience and grit. These models bring a focus on the psychological, physical, and cultural well-being of young people, as well as their future prospects and possibilities. They consider skills around conflict resolution, building and maintaining relationships, emotional intelligence, time management skills, and other attributes commonly seen as necessary to succeed as an adult. We refer to these as approaches to promoting well-being, and see them as interventions more likely to succeed in creating holistic responses to youth needs. In this case, success in school (and economic success) is a subset of overall well-being.

Social Emotional Learning (SEL). While precise agreement on what constitutes SEL is under discussion, one model defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning organizes SEL through five interrelated competencies--areas of youth development that holistically measure the ability to live a healthy life and participate in society. ***Self-Awareness*** includes reflection on emotional experience and behavioral responses, knowledge of strengths and weaknesses, and self-confidence. ***Social Awareness*** reflects an individual's ability to notice and understand interactions with others. ***Relationship Skills*** build upon an individual's social awareness to include the development and maintenance of healthy and rich relationships, as well as clear and consistent communication. ***Self-Management*** is the capacity to manage and regulate thoughts, and emotional and behavioral responses. It also includes "managing stress, controlling impulses, motivating oneself, and setting and working toward achieving personal and academic goals". [12] Finally, ***Responsible Decision Making*** involves making choices about behavior based upon personal, cultural, and societal values. While these domains are organized and labeled differently in their respective literature, the purpose is similar: to name a holistic set of skills and abilities that enable both academic learning and broader personal and social well-being. These skills can be promoted through specific in-class and extracurricular activities.

11. National Research Council (2011). Incentives and Test-Based Accountability in Education. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

12. Social emotional learning core competencies. Chicago, IL: Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning. Retrieved from: *www.casel.org/social-and-emotional-learning/core-competencies*

Resilience. Resiliency theories posit that some young people "bounce back" from difficult circumstances while others develop social and emotional challenges. These difficult circumstances are called "risks" and the factors that help youth rebound, are called "protective factors". [13] These scientists study ways to promote resilience by reducing risks and improving protective factors, especially in youth deemed most at-risk. Resilience factors include positive attachments and relationships with caregivers and adults, self-regulation skills, and connections to pro-social organizations. These factors are typically encouraged by what researcher Ann Masten calls "ordinary magic," or everyday characteristics of many people's lives. Developing parental and institutional supports and healthy relationships with young people can encourage additional resilience/protective factors. [14]

Grit. Grit originally began as a psychological theory studied by notable University of Pennsylvania psychologist Angela Duckworth and colleagues. Grit measures perseverance toward long-term goals [15] and has been found predictive of many factors for success, including grade point average. [16] However, in everyday use, this concept combines ideas like SEL and resilience, along with other motivational and mind-set theories, [17] to articulate a shift from discussing curricular standards alone to a return to debates about the promotion of "character". [18] Grit now acts as a coordinating concept for a broad range of theories and models that promote positive, healthy, and pro-social character for all children, but especially those facing adverse situations. [19]

These models bring a focus on the psychological, physical, and cultural well-being of young people, as well as their future prospects and possibilities.

A fundamental difference separates the SEL model from the others: SEL primarily focuses on positive learning, while resilience and grit models look for factors that enable youth to survive in the face of adversity. However, the three models carry many similarities. Each attempts to name a set of skills, attitudes, behaviors, and social factors that can bolster young people's positive adaptations in the face of struggle and difficulty. They identify a broad range of factors beyond academic success that promote the well-being of youth. Additionally, they focus on young people's strengths, rather than emphasizing weaknesses or deficits.

They also share some limitations. These models tend to favor "pro-social" decision-making—a trait that serves well in an equal and just society, but which may encourage young people to become, in the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., "well adjusted to injustice and well adapted to indifference." Each model reflects a history of research studies that often involve primarily white youth, but which are often applied in interventions to youth of color. [20] Additionally, each puts the focus on preparing young people to experience and survive inequality and oppression, a move that limits political engagement with social injustice. Finally, and leading to the purpose of this study, these theories are typically generated through research and interviews conducted **on** young people, but without significant attention to involving their voices or participation in collecting data, analyzing results, or writing about outcomes. [21]

Each model reflects a history of research studies that often involve primarily white youth, but which are often applied in interventions to youth of color

13. Masten, A. S. (2009). Ordinary magic: Lessons from research on resilience in human development. *Education Canada,* 49(3), 28-32.

14. (Ibid.)

15. Duckworth, A. L., Peterson, C., Matthews, M. D., & Kelly, D. R. (2007). Grit: Perseverance and passion for long-term goals. *J Pers Soc Psychol,* 92(6), 1087-101.

16. Duckworth, A. L., & Quinn, P. D. (2009). Development and validation of the short grit scale (grit-s). J Pers Assess, 91(2), 166-74.

17. Dweck, C. (2007). Mindset: The new psychology of success. New York, Ballantine.

18. Tough, P. (2012). How children succeed: Grit, curiosity, and the hidden power of character. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

19. Roberts, Y. (2009). Grit: The skills for success and how they are grown. London, UK: The Young Foundation.

20. Lee, J. H., Nam, S. K., Kim, A. -R., Kim, B., Lee, M. Y., & Lee, S. M. (2013). Resilience: A meta-analytic approach. *Journal of Counseling & Development,* 91(3), 269-279.

21. Spyrou, S. (2013). How single-parent children speak about poverty and social exclusion: Policy implications from a comparative, qualitative, cross-national Project. Child & Youth Services, 34(1), 64-84.

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Youth Participatory Action Research *in Practice:*
Our Methodology

The theories of social emotional learning, resilience, and grit offer ways to conceptualize youth well-being beyond the classroom as well as student success in the classroom. However, these theories are fundamentally adult-generated, with data collected and interpreted by adults. [22] This project is our attempt to understand young people's well-being through the voices of youth themselves with data collected and interpreted by young people.

Doing youth-centered research required approaching the process through a different paradigm than traditional research. Traditional qualitative research methodologies were blended with indigenous methodologies. [23]
Our commitment to research for social justice dictated a values-first approach, wherein we developed a team vision and set of values before determining a research method and design. Research team values were derived from Michael Anthony Hart and included control over research by the people impacted, respect for individuals and community, reciprocity and responsibility, safety, non-intrusive observation, deep listening, non-judgment, honoring what is shared, a mindfulness for the mind and heart, self-awareness, and open subjectivity. [24] It was important to our team to approach the project with openness in terms of method so that these values could remain at the center, guiding the project.

Our methodology also draws from Participatory Action Research (PAR), which involves the people most affected by a particular issue in conducting the research and analysis, and developing solutions for social, cultural, and/or political transformation. As Greg Dimitriadis writes, "PAR opens up a space for a critical, multi-generational dialogue about research itself—one that looks beyond rarified university walls. This is a fundamental challenge to the ways that research is traditionally conducted and knowledge is traditionally stratified." [25]

22. (Ibid.)
23. Smith, L. T. (2012). Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples. London: Zed Books. Hart, M. A. (2010). Indigenous Worldviews, Knowledge, and Research: The Development of an Indigenous Research Paradigm. Journal of Indigenous Voices in Social Work, 1(1), Retrieved from *hawaii.edu/sswork/jivsw*
24. Hart, M. A. (2010). Indigenous Worldviews, Knowledge, and Research: The Development of an Indigenous Research Paradigm. Journal of Indigenous Voices in Social Work, 1(1), Retrieved from *hawaii.edu/sswork/jivsw*
25. Dimitriadis, G. (2008). *Revolutionizing education: Youth participatory action research in motion.* New York, NY: Routledge.

The research team held a total of six focus groups involving approximately 70 youth. These occurred between May 7 and September 6, 2013, all on the topic of Non-Academic Indicators, or as we called them, *holistic indicators.* We also conducted more in-depth interviews with 19 youth and youth workers.

We believe the responses we obtained from young people were unique when compared to other research in this area for three reasons: 1) our integration of relationship building and games in focus groups led to more relaxed settings and candid responses, 2) the recruitment of young people through existing peer networks in addition to organizational networks solidified the participatory and accessible nature of our team, and 3) our proximity to the youth participants in terms of age and experience removed many of the traditional power dynamics between researchers and subjects.

We prioritized relationship building in our approach. Good, healthy food was provided at each focus group as hospitality and to help young people break down feelings of formality and restriction. Thirty to forty percent of the time in focus groups was focused on games and activities designed to bring participants into a more comfortable and open space. This was a critical portion of the session; laughing and having fun together created a positive environment for discussion and made the experience life-giving for all participants. Over time, we discovered that the ability to have fun together led to increased levels of trust and cooperation, which are imperative in PAR projects. We thanked participants for their time with gift cards. After each focus group, all research team members were expected to write their own reflections of the event as a record of what happened, how it went, and what we needed to adapt going forward.

Many participants were contacted through previously existing peer networks, forming new networks through these gatherings. The close proximity of our age as researchers to that of our participants was critical: we felt as though our shared experiences, as well as our diverse backgrounds, allowed us to develop close, trusting, respectful relationships and to receive more honest and authentic responses. One year later, we are still in contact with multiple participants. Two are contracted researchers for our team on a short-term project. For us, this is a first step, but our goal is to maintain relationships with a majority of participants, and to deepen these relationships through successive projects.

Our research questions evolved in response to answers given by youth and youth workers. For example, we began with, "What are the key indicators of a healthy young person?" As the project went on, we shifted this question as we learned how young people interpreted it and responded. In some situations, we had to adapt language during the focus group or interview so that the question was understandable to the participant(s). It became apparent that this was a key strength of our research team—we were able to communicate informally and honestly with our participants. This differs from many of our past experiences with "expert" adult researchers we have witnessed engaging with youth in academic language, which can be inappropriate and hard to understand. Delivery and sentence structure seriously affect the quality of answers, as do the setting and emotive state of the group. Research on young people may be most honest when responses are solicited by researchers who are youth themselves.

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Study Findings

Several preliminary themes emerged from our research. While not definitive, these themes offer unique perspectives on youth well-being and serve as the beginning of a new set of indicators derived from the voices of young people. Our preliminary findings identified the following six factors contributing to youth well-being:

we conducted a youth-centered study to understand ways young people experience and conceptualize their well-being

1 *Young people making contributions to their own growth and the growth and benefit of others.*
One of the primary ways young people indicated feeling well or seeing other youth as being well was by making contributions to themselves and others. This surfaced in many ways: having a job, volunteering, learning new things, and giving back to their families or community. This also involved doing things to support their own health and the health of those around them. Thought of broadly, these contributions included activities that are fun, engaging, and relaxing, like dancing and listening to music. Also included are young people's aspirations for the future: young people with positive aspirations for jobs, families, and contributions to their community were seen as more likely to be healthy. This theme sometimes emerged in direct contrast to traditional schooling, including standardized testing and other measures of normative success. As one young person stated, you can tell a young person is healthy when you can see their "commitment, dedication, and perseverance *through* all the measuring and evaluation, beyond what is being asked of them."

2 *Family and community members are supportive of and involved in promoting youth well-being.*
Contrary to common stereotypes that youth fail to value their elders, many young people indicated the value of supportive people—specifically their elders—in their lives. Sometimes "elder" meant the "old lady who watches the kids", sometimes elder siblings who "take us out and hang out with us", and even sometimes a Big Brother or Big Sister. Additionally, young people felt their well-being was supported when adults and other people involved in their lives had high expectations of them, communicated those expectations, and consistently supported them in reaching toward those expectations.

3 *Having opportunities to value and develop cultural identity.* While the close and positive involvement of families, elders, and community was present across all groups, many participants expressed a longing for a connection to elders and other adults from their own cultural community. This culturally-specific mentorship was tied to a desire to understand their identity, roots, and ancestors. It was contrasted to teachers, parents, or other adults who did not understand them, did not actively support them, or were even outright racist or derogatory toward them. In order to be holistically well, these participants articulated the need for a strong sense of self that is tied to culture, ceremony, spirituality and community. This desire to know their

own cultural identities did not conflict with interacting with others; indeed, young people often saw cross-cultural interactions as important to their own development and health.

4 ***Differentiating between social emotional well-being and academic success.*** Young people associated many factors with well-being, primarily involving what the literature refers to as social emotional skills. These included conflict resolution, self-critique and self-affirmation, the ability to "be there for" and "pour into" another person, and emotional stability. Rather than social emotional learning as indicators of or promoting academic "success," young people saw these as keys to their holistic well-being. Many defined success as separate, identifying academic performance as an indicator of success or future success. While connected, it was determined that success and well-being were not ***necessarily*** interrelated - success could come without well-being and vice versa.

This included critiques of the ways young people are viewed by adults and even other youth as being fit or misfit as an "ideal social young person." The definition of an ideal young person included being both socially "healthy"—having strong relationships and families, good career aspirations—and being academically successful. However, many felt that social emotional health should be defined more broadly, allowing for a wide range of personalities and mental/emotional constitutions. For example, being an extrovert should not be a standard of excellence; introverts need to be equally valued.

5 ***Experiencing media and informal learning as a major force in life experience and development.*** Young people experienced media—whether traditional or new/digital—as a major force in their development and even learning, perhaps as much or more than school. One young person claimed that, "Education is 60% at school and 40% at home." Virtually all participants discussed digital mass

media—TV, Internet, video games, etc.—and the influence they have on their beliefs and values. Though all used media, many participants believed that media are "brainwashing," sending the wrong messages, feeding people lies for profits, and glorifying negative role models.

In contrast, participants described how non-formal learning outside of the classroom generated critical self-growth that was often more profound and lasting than that generated ***inside*** the classroom. This self-education was usually conducted in pursuit of content, people and spaces that were socially, politically and culturally relevant to them. This sentiment was particularly voiced by marginalized youth whose experiences with conventional, in-class education were described as negative, traumatic and in many cases utterly meaningless.

6 ***Experiencing standardized and school measurements as negative and narrow in focus.*** Young people wanted to know the purpose of the regular standardized assessments they are required to take. While overall not averse to assessments of their learning, they were concerned about the ways they were measured and the subject of these measurements. Many participants articulated struggling through evaluations, including the stress involved and the ways they perceived some people being better at taking tests than others. They suggested that evaluation be ***qualitative, relationship-based, and self-defined.*** While adults might be worried about whether they were successfully learning a particular academic subject, young people were more concerned about how adults encouraged and related to them. They wanted to be asked, "What are you feeling? How is this affecting you?" They wanted to set their own goals and measure their own progress against them. Some firmly stated they simply do not want to be measured. As one young person poignantly stated, "We don't have to measure them—we're all ***striving for something***; they should determine what growth looks like."

Next Steps & Conclusions

While some of our findings resonate with the research literature on social emotional learning, resilience, and grit, they also **indicate** that young people have **different perspectives, understandings, experiences**, and ways of talking about their healthy **development, well-being, and success** than do some adult researchers. *We think this area deserves significant further exploration by and with young people.*

This preliminary study raised many questions. We wondered: What are the critical characteristics and behaviors of elders that young people we engaged with identified as positive forces? How do the many elements of cultural identity contribute to well-being in the lives of young people? How do mass media impact the well-being of young people? How do current school standards and measurements impact the well-being of young people? What does the separation young people saw between social/emotional well-being and school success mean for them and their relationships to adults in school and elsewhere? Though significant scholarly literature is investigating many of these questions, these studies have been completed by adults. We therefore suggest these questions about holistic indicators of well-being, and many more like them, be investigated by young people, from the perspective of young people.

We suggest that youth-serving organizations, including schools and expanded learning programs, begin involving young people seriously in research about them and their lives. As we discovered, involving young people in research yields results that sometimes affirm, sometimes provide nuance, and sometimes upend traditional research. While involving young people in research like this is not especially more challenging than other kinds of research (although it can be), it does necessitate that adults examine and change their preconceptions, biases, and commitments toward research, science, knowledge, and especially, who legitimately makes contributions to these fields of study. This report highlights the opportunities for youth and adults to collaborate to advance this new research approach.

As young researchers, we believe our evolving research process is extremely valuable. Over the last year, we have continued growing as a research team. This has involved improving our methodology, developing new tools, and learning to articulate ways our approach differs from that of other research groups. Stay tuned to the Youthprise website (*www.youthprise.org*) for updates or to find ways to partner with us!

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Thank You!