

Evaluating the Ecological Impact of a Youth Program

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Abstract: Youth are the weakest population within the workforce and long-term unemployment leaves them unable to develop work skills, reaches into their future prospects, and can weaken the economy, education systems, and overall social structure. Through ecological qualitative methodology, the reported research gathered in-depth accounts of experiences of ten urban youth who participated in a federally-funded Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP). To develop an understanding of aspects of the youth's lives, individual interviews were conducted and ecomaps were completed with participants. Personal narratives support the premises that documenting the ecosystems of individuals provides insights into daily lives, histories, and lived experiences in a way that provides a window into how services and prevention efforts can be targeted. Results concluded that for these participants, the SYEP made a difference in their lives in terms of helping them make connections to positive role models, learning workplace communication, and providing an entrance into the workforce on varying levels consistent with their barriers. This research can be applied to inform practitioners, teachers, and decision makers with a better understanding of the social, emotional, educational, and workforce realities of adolescents. The research advances the conversation about federally funded youth employment programs creating opportunities for marginalized youth to learn skills for succeeding in the mainstream economy.

Introduction

The economic downturn the United States faced during the recession of 2008-2009 has had considerable impact on youth employment, training, and education programs (Elsby, Hobjin, & Sahin, 2010; Johnson, Oliff, & Koulisch, 2008). Recessions exert the greatest amount of force on the weakest groups in the labor market (Choudhry, Marelli, & Signorelli, 2010). Youth, by far, have been more affected by this most recent unemployment crisis than their elders (Verick, 2009). Long-term unemployment for young people may have adverse effects that reach beyond the timeline of the recession and into the prospects for their futures. The costs of undeveloped work skills are not only individual; they become collective and weaken the overall economy, educational systems, and social structure (Choudhry, et al., 2010). Research has suggested that when youth successfully participate in activities that promote bonding with the world around them, they are more likely to comply with family rules and school policies and conform to society's norms (Hawkins, Catalano, Barnard, Gottfredson, Holmes, & Miller, 1992). When they become detached from those activities, adolescents are more likely to become discouraged with the educational systems and labor force, suffer from lowered lifetime earnings, and experience less stable work histories due to social exclusion than their peers who stayed in school, secured jobs, or both (Brown, 1996; Choudhry, et al., 2010). The ability to gain competitiveness in the workforce or pursue higher education diminishes if the environment does not support the adolescents' growth. The recession has intensified these issues for youth.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 provided over a billion dollars to state workforce investment systems for creating employment opportunities for disadvantaged youth. Every state was responsible for developing structured programs to connect youth to employers who would not only provide income for the youth, but also aid in their occupational skill development (Library of Congress, 2009). This represented a major federal commitment to summer youth programs for the first time in about ten years.

Workforce Alliance systems implemented the Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP), which was designed not only to provide work experience but also to foster the development of work behaviors and effective communication with supervisors and people of influence. Another aim was to increase the likelihood that the youth would be more prepared to enter the workforce or further their education after high school graduation or GED completion. SYEP was individually tailored to work with youth according to their unique circumstances, including their interests and needs (Bellotti, Rosenberg, Sattar, Esposito, Ziegler, 2010).

This study examined how the SYEP fostered meaningful connections to employment and occupational skill development for youth involved in the program. By looking at the ecological systems of the participants, the impact of outside systems on a youth's ability to gain knowledge, skills, and resources from the SYEP was examined. To develop a fuller understanding of these aspects of the youth's lives, individual interviews were conducted and ecomaps were completed with each participant. The research asked the following questions.

Research Questions

1. Do out-of-school and community experiences through SYEP assist with occupational communication and relationship building? (Direct impact)

2. In what ways have experiences of participants influenced their attitudes and perceptions about their own ability to impact change in their environmental systems, with specific regard to career/work and education? (Indirect impact)

Related Literature

Youth Workforce Programming

Youth programs, often designed to help disadvantaged youth, offer a structured environment to bring youth together with adults in the community or with other organizations and foster the meaningful relationships where youth can gain knowledge and experience (Bogenschneider, 1996; Brown & Thakur, 2005). Particularly, youth who have opportunities to build workforce knowledge have a greater awareness of potential careers, have had opportunity to foster skills in the workplace, experience earning income, and have improved school outcomes (Carter, Trainor, Ditchman, & Owens, 2011; Staff & Schulenberg, 2010). The federal government has had a long-standing commitment to funding opportunities for youth, specifically through summer work experiences (Social Policy Research Associates, 2004). Policy makers recognize that disadvantaged youth may benefit from government-funded workforce initiatives. Workforce programs for youth not only provide knowledge of job skills but also help them to become accustomed to the climate of the workplace, perform according to the expectations of their employer and develop a sense of professional responsibilities. Work experiences for youth have the potential to contribute to youth building knowledge and connections with adults who substantially improve their career development skills as well as the aspirations that hold for themselves (Carter, et al., 2011). The assumption of the federal government is that youth who receive job training and knowledge of institutions will be productive members of society, rather than relying on public assistance, moving into the criminal justice system, or otherwise not contributing to society (Brown & Thakur, 2005; Castellano, Stringfield, & Stone, 2003, Kao, 2004). Carter, et al (2011) stresses that the employment opportunities in this age group are critical, especially as they are moving from dependence in the high school years to independence in the adult world. While summer youth employment programs have had a long standing federal commitment, today's political and economic climate have impacted the availability of employment and workforce development for youth.

Ecological Systems Theory

All humans function within a personal and unique environment, or ecosystem. Human ecology is essentially an interdisciplinary study of human existence and the relationships people have with the surrounding world (Bronfenbrenner, 1951, 1979). Social scientists use ecological systems theory to bridge and describe interactions and communication patterns between humans and their respective environments (Arum, 2000; Bogenschneider, 1996; Bookchin, 2005). Ecological systems theory is a general system framework that can inform practice by incorporating human development theories and applying them to a systems analysis of a community or social context (Bogenschneider, 1996). According to Bronfenbrenner (1951), the individual, family, school, and greater community nest in one another to make up the environment, and this connected whole must be understood in order to explain one part in relation to the other. He described how examining the systems of relationships that form a child's environment was essential for understanding the context of their social, emotional, psychological, and academic growth. Bronfenbrenner (1979) generated three assumptions used to describe the Ecological Systems theory as applied to youth: (a) the developing person is a growing, dynamic entity who progressively moves into and restructures the environment in which he/she resides. (b) Since

the environment also exerts its influence, there is a mutual accommodating process. Interaction between person and environment is multi-directional whereas each level of the environment interacts with all of the others. (c) Environment relevant to developmental process is not limited to a single setting. It incorporates interconnections between settings as well as external influences from larger surroundings. These assumptions frame the researcher's lens.

Ecomapping

As ecology is the study of the interaction of people with their environment, the ecomap is a tool for describing an individual or family's ecology graphically (Kennedy, 2010). The idea is not only to conduct research that is ecologically sound, but to show the adolescents a tool for visualizing patterns in their lives related to the many relationships they must balance on a daily basis. Ecomaps are useful for gaining insight into complex lives and encouraging empathetic understanding by depicting individuals or families in their life space, identifying the various people and places that influence them and vice versa (Hartman, 1995). The ecomap is a graphic representation that helps the youth and the researcher better understand how those connections influence attitudes and perceptions. The ecomap construction, for this study, guided the researcher's questions and assisted the participants in producing their narratives.

Research Design

The qualitative research tradition, which has been described as naturalistic, interpretive, and ecological, is rich in description of people, places, and circumstances and serves multiple data gathering strategies concerned more with *process* than outcomes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merriam, 2002). This study used a narrative inquiry qualitative methodology (Fritz, 1990; Thompson, 2000) to gather perceptions from ten urban youth who had participated in a federally funded Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP). The use of in-depth interviews can help reconstruct an experience or reality (Grele, 1998) and encourages interaction between the researcher and the subjects by creating the possibility of going beyond conventional stories (Gluck & Patai, 1991). Oral narratives further give voice to those who have sometimes been overlooked or remain voiceless in the research process (Perks & Thomson, 1998).

The research focused on how the youth described their life systems and discussed their feelings about, motivation toward, and preparedness for entering the workforce and for furthering their education. This study examined how the SYEP fostered meaningful connections to employment and occupational skill development for youth involved in the program. By looking at the ecological systems of the participants, the impact of outside systems on a youth's ability to gain knowledge, skills, and resources from the SYEP was examined. To develop a fuller understanding of these aspects of the youth's lives, individual interviews were conducted and ecomaps were completed with each participant.

Participant Selection

The researcher secured written approval to conduct research and view participant files from the ethics committee at the Workforce Alliance, as well as the University Institutional Review Board. Both required an application to be viewed by an ethics committee, and the Executive Director of the Alliance provided written permission to access SYEP information. Adolescent participants, all over 18, were provided with a consent form and pseudonyms were used for each participant.

American Recovery and Reinvestment Act guidelines for SYEP participants stated that youth needed at least one barrier to employment to participate, meaning that at least one aspect in their lives could possibly interfere with a positive experience in school or in the work place. All SYEP participants had low incomes and were required to have at least one of these barriers: being homeless, pregnant, acting as a parent, be an ex-offender, be disabled, live in a foster facility, be a runaway, or have deficiencies in basic skill development (Bellotti, et al., 2010). Interviewing ten participants was the goal, as this number provided a range of individuals from whom to gather in-depth information and also represented a diversity of background, thought, and experience. The researcher sought a balance of male and female participants, as well as diversity of race. Participants were purposively selected to share their perspectives and reflections on their experiences.

Table 1
Demographics of the Ten Participants

Name	Gender	Age	Race	Barriers to employment (all are low income)
Ellen	F	21	African American	poor work history, CJ involvement, parenting youth, & foster care
Gwen	F	18	Asian	poor work history, foster care, & pregnant
Jacob	M	18	Puerto Rican/Caucasian	poor work history, CJ involvement
Justin	M	19	Caucasian	poor work history, disability (ADHD)
Kanani	F	23	African American	poor work history, parenting youth
Laila	F	20	African American	poor work history, parenting youth, CJ involvement, & foster care
Mac	M	20	Caucasian	poor work history, disability (Autism Spectrum), low basic skills
Magnus	M	18	Caucasian	poor work history, mental impairment
Nicolette	F	19	African American	poor work history
Ruby	F	23	Caucasian	parenting youth

Interviews

In ecological research, several validity concerns must be taken into consideration. Bronfenbrenner (1976) considered research ecologically valid when the research is conducted in settings that are natural to the participants. The requirement of ecological validity applies to the elements and interactions within those settings, which include the place, time, roles, and activities. In order to preserve the integrity of the environment, contextual validity was maintained by meeting the adolescents where they were currently and where they normally functioned such as home, work, or the community. The interview site selection was flexible as the researcher met the scheduling needs and preferences of the participants. Interview sites included the Workforce Center, the participant's homes, the mall, and a billiards hall. These sites allowed the interviews to occur in a setting that was natural to the participants and already a part of their ecological system.

Dudwick, Kuehnast, Jones, and Woolcock, (2006) have described the importance of qualitative methods lies in the researcher's ability to explore the views of different groups and *unpack*

differing perspectives that exist within groups. This *unpacking* occurred with individuals that shared the SYEP experience. Participants took part in a semi-structured interview that lasted one to two hours. A series of open-ended questions formed prior to the interviews was asked in order to encourage the adolescents to produce their own narratives. Open-ended questions guided the participants and encouraged them to expand on their initial responses, providing rationale for their responses free from the researcher's restrictions and assumptions (Dudwick, et al., 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1998). The ecosystems perspective was used to develop interview questions about relationships, interactions, communication with people and places (e.g., family, peers, school, work), as people and places are considered important elements that influence a participant's ecosystem (Arum, 2000; Bogenschneider, 1996).

During the interview process, the researcher built a graphic representation of the youth's ecological system by constructing an ecomap (see appendix). This tool assisted the researcher in understanding the elements of the participants' lives and how they interacted and communicated with each element. In addition, the ecomap assisted both the researcher and the participants in identification of emerging themes and patterns related to the participant's reflections on the impact of adults who influenced their life, as well as the impact of the SYEP experience.

The interviews consisted of rapport building and soliciting the youths' perceptions and feelings related to the SYEP, their ecology/environment, and their motivation and future planning (*What types of plans/hopes/dreams do you have for the future?*). More specifically, the interviews gathered narratives with whom the participants have connected in school/work/SYEP settings (*Do you remember the people who worked with you in the youth program?*); what they enjoyed doing (*What do you enjoy doing in your free time?*); what growing up was like for them (*How would you describe your family?*); descriptions of their family structure (*Who is the primary caretaker in your family?*); how they felt about their relationships (*How do you feel about your family?*); how they felt about teachers, administrators, mentors, and work supervisors (*Describe your teacher's attitudes/behaviors.*); and how they interacted with these *institutional agents* (*Can you describe him or her? How did you interact with him/her?*).

The participants varied in their abilities to articulate the elements of their ecologies and the impact of the SYEP on specific areas of their ecologies or their lives, in general. The group ranged from those who experienced disabilities such as ADHD or Autism and had received special education services throughout school, to those who were currently in college and doing well. During the interviews, participants told their stories, often relating anecdotes that expanded on the list of questions. Expansions were encouraged because they afforded greater opportunity for insight into how the youth understood their ecosystems and how they worked through their everyday lives.

Findings

This study provided a comprehensive look into the lives of ten urban youth. Their perceptions of the world around them, dictated much of their outlook on life and the behaviors they exhibited. The research supports the premise that programs such as the SYEP deeply affect the lives of youth, helping them make connections to positive adult role models, learn workplace dynamics and dialogue, and enter into areas of the workforce that have historically been preserved for the more privileged working and middle class.

Research question one restated is: Do out-of-school and community experiences through SYEP assist with occupational communication and relationship building? This question seeks to understand how SYEP directly impacted the youth in areas of career development, education, and professional communication. These can be addressed in both direct and indirect ways. First, the direct impact will be discussed for several participants followed by the indirect impact.

Direct Impact. The direct impact addresses tangible results from the SYEP experience (e.g., skills, particular experiences, successes, or failures). These are the results that outsiders might see as program outcomes.

Positives. Eight of the ten participants shared positive stories about the direct impact the SYEP had on their lives. They made connections, built their resumes through direct work experience, and were allowed access to work environments that they had previously only heard about in stories. The participants' histories reveal the power of their SYEP placements on their skill and institutional knowledge building and their responses are summarized below.

Justin met adults and youth of his own age at his job placement and stated, "I want to do it again. I met cool people, and it gave me the opportunity to work with different people and learn about them. I met two kids that actually went to my school." When asked if those peers would have been his friends before this experience, he said "no." These connections with peers created an opportunity for him to return to school with a stronger peer support system.

Kanani worked as a receptionist for an assisted living center. This position provided her the motivation to complete her CNA, which she did in the year following her SYEP experiences. She gained connections in the healthcare system that she was able to use as references for her next position. She is now working as a CNA, attending school to earn the next level certificate in health care, and is planning to pursue a nursing degree.

Mac's father taught him everything he knew about being a mechanic, or "grease monkey," as he described both himself and his father. His placement with a fleet management company allowed him to put his mechanic skills to work and gain experience that built his resume. He submitted his interest in becoming employed with his former SYEP placement and is waiting for the managers to contact him. He connected with several people and stated that they were now his "Facebook friends." He could name every employee he worked with by name and had a little story to tell about each of them.

Magnus first worked for SYEP troubleshooting computers for a local church. He later had a position with the Department of Commerce. He stated that his coworkers showed him trust, taught him how to drive, and actually gave him a computer when he completed his summer job. "They treated me like I had worked there for a long time." They were also very nice to him when his grandfather passed away that summer. They talked to him and encouraged him to take the time he needed to grieve. About the program, he said "they made me appreciate things more and understand the value of working." He was able to buy a car with the money he earned in SYEP. As a result of this program, Magnus received a scholarship to a community college. By being connected in this system, his case managers at Workforce had him on the radar and knew he could do well with support. He wants to go to college to study computers.

Nicolette was very surprised at what her SYEP position provided her. She wondered what a janitorial job would do for her and found that it showed her another side of people. Going in, Nicolette was thinking about becoming a social worker; this placement solidified that choice for her. "This experience gave me another side to people. It showed me how to relate to people. I got to talk to people who got their GED and decided to get some kind of work. I talked with high school students and saw how they were dealing with high school. I got to talk to other people about their dreams and goals, and it was interesting for me from a people perspective."

Ruby is the only participant in the study who is currently employed at her SYEP position. "I took advantage of anything I could to help me get ahead. This program taught me interview skills, and I am no longer afraid to go out there and seek opportunities. The connection they have had to me has saved me. When I have had something happen in my life, like losing one job or getting pregnant again, the program came up and offered me a new opportunity. I have learned how to get jobs, keep jobs, and be successful at a job."

Negatives. Two participants described the impact of the SYEP as negative, not because the program itself negatively impacted them, but because the life from which they were coming was not positioned to support their connection to work. Both participants needed stronger supports in the work world in order to maintain their commitment and interest, as both had been extremely disconnected from mainstream society for a very long time—most of their lives, in fact.

Gwen had her baby just as she was entering into the SYEP soft-skills classes. She stated that she was very self-conscious at this time due to her weight and being a teen mother. She was uncomfortable in the classroom setting, even though there were other teen mothers in the room. She said she felt "judged by the kids" in the SYEP program. "It just gave me a bad vibe." She was placed in a position taking care of young children at the Boys and Girls Club and noted that she did not have opportunities to connect with adults very often. Her job was "very easy," so she felt that she was just working for a paycheck and waiting for the end. When she left the program, she became disconnected once again as she returned home from her stay at a maternity home for teen girls. She has not had further Workforce counselor contact and does not know how to write her resume despite the SYEP training. "It was hard to cram all that in my head. It was a lot of stuff to talk about, and I didn't want to ask questions."

Jacob felt discouraged by his supervisor at his placement. "It was cool for a second, but then it was like, "What the hell am I doing here? I was doing other people's work. While I was doing my supervisor's work, she was on the phone talking to her little chick friends. When I would do something wrong, she would yell at me in Spanish. I might be Puerto Rican, but I didn't know what she was saying." He quit after three weeks and continued to feel disconnected. He said that he did not understand how to seek other opportunities from Workforce or get another job through SYEP. He stated that the way he was paid was also confusing, and he did not understand why he would miss pay dates and not get paid when he did not understand the process. He said he wanted cash and was confused by the debit card, as he would have to pay \$1.50 to get cash. Still, Jacob said that the SYEP program is a "really good program. If you go and pay attention and not go high, you will learn a lot."

Indirect Impact. Indirect influences are the feelings, levels of motivation, and goal setting, or essentially, how the participants see the world. Bronfenbrenner (1979) described this result as

a change in worldview. The second research question seeks to understand how the participant's attitudes and perceptions of their own abilities to change or impact their environments could be influenced by connections made in the SYEP program.

Positives. Five of the participants had significant stories related to the indirect impact of their SYEP experience. Kanani was able to access the world of healthcare that had been her ideal career. Once she realized how well she fit in and was encouraged by everyone around her in the work setting, she "knew it was her place and felt blessed."

Magnus stated that his grandmother had worked in housekeeping at the hospital where he was initially placed. She told him he would not like it because the nuns were not nice to people like him. He found out differently. Additionally, when he began his SYEP position at the Department of Commerce, he had been warned that his supervisor was "sort of aggressive, and to be careful." Again, he found that advice to be untrue. Magnus learned the valuable lesson that when people discouraged or warned him, it was better to wait and form his own impressions before jumping to conclusions and not following through.

Nicolette struggled with managing an anxiety disorder and has been seeing a counselor, who is helping her with techniques for working through episodes of anxiety. At her SYEP placement, she learned that "you do not have to run away when others see your problems or challenges." She left high school after she had an anxiety attack because she was afraid other students would ridicule her. When she had an anxiety attack at work, she learned that people were concerned about her and wanted her to go home that day to rest, but to come back the next day. "It wasn't as bad as I was making it out to be."

Negatives. The indirect negative experiences with the SYEP seemed to have more to do with the environment that the youth navigated on a daily basis and less about the experiences they had in the workplace. However, the interviews showed that the youth who lead the most troubled lives are the most marginalized. They also have trouble connecting and difficulty in sustaining commitment and interest. Four youth shared their perspectives on how their feelings, motivation, and worldview were left relatively unchanged.

Gwen has lived a disconnected life since she was a small child. Although she was glad to be in the SYEP program, she had just had a baby and felt self-conscious of her body and what people thought about her as a teen mother. Gwen continued to be isolated even at her worksite. She did not want to engage with peers at the worksite "because they didn't really focus on work; they would just talk and hang out. I focused on work, and I didn't do anything sloppy." When her position ended, she had not gained any motivation to keep herself connected to Workforce. Likewise, she stated that they did not reach out to her, either. When asked about her interest in getting her GED through Workforce, she said, "I don't know what they offer." Although she dreams of being a pharmacist, she has not learned how to seek resources or even look into finishing her GED.

Jacob really wants to work. However, the SYEP experience made him feel that "there was no point in my being there." He values his creativity most of all and wants to enjoy his work. His job placement failed to identify the role he was to play in the workplace, and as a result, he stated that he "did not fit in" and never understood what he was expected to do. The conflicts with his supervisor disconnected him from the SYEP and Workforce programming altogether.

Jacob's anger gives him the ability to just walk away from any situation. As someone who has already left the "safety" of home, he can turn his back on anything. He has already been to jail, been sent away, and was forced to learn the "hard way" that he is alone in the world. The way he copes is through violent video games, smoking marijuana, and carrying with him an attitude that says he does not care about anything or anyone.

Justin experienced a disconnection from the program as well. His father had passed away at a young age. When Justin was placed with a group of men to work outside and maintain the grounds, he hoped for greater connections. For most of his life, being removed from his mother's home and living in four foster homes, Justin has simply been neglected. He has not continued with any Workforce services, although he stated that he wanted to do so.

Each of the urban youths' narratives provided a whole picture of the realities of their ecological systems. While the SYEP program had a positive impact on the majority of the participants, some negative issues emerged. These negatives however, did not overshadow the positives of the program. All participants experienced varying levels of direct and indirect impacts due to the SYEP.

Ecomapping Finding Examples

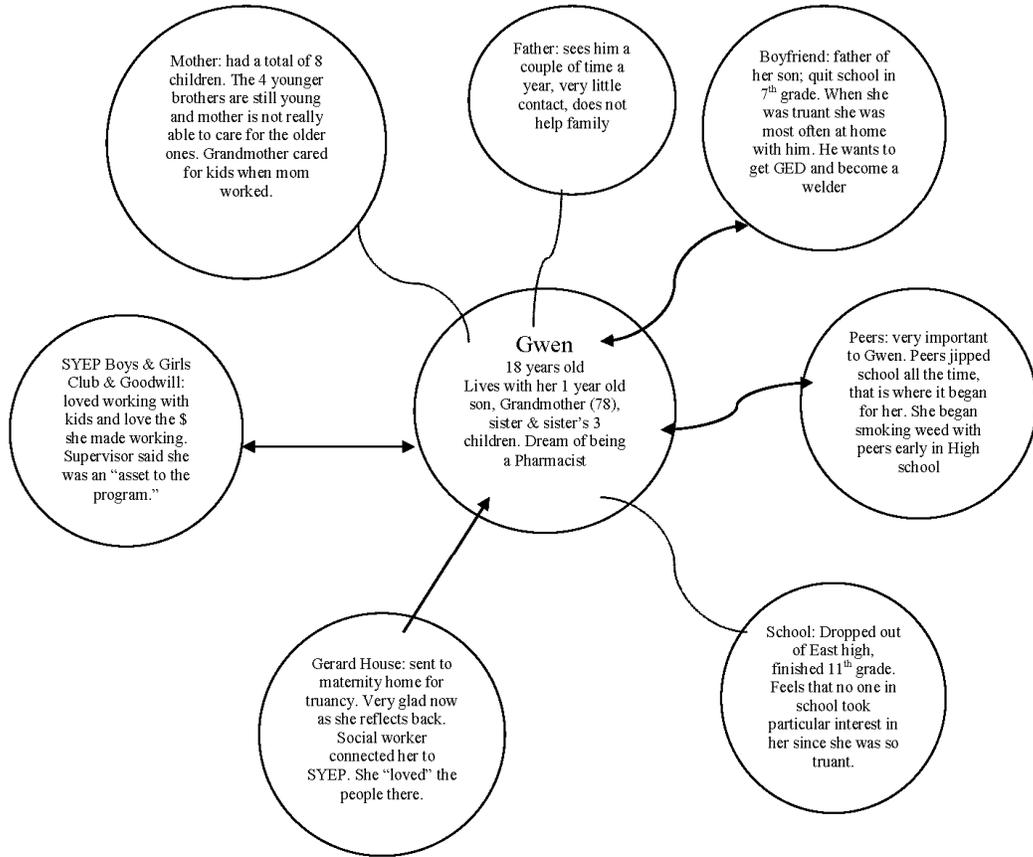
An ecomap can "depict a variety of reciprocal influences between the individual and people around them, relevant social institutions, and environmental influences" (Barker, 2003, p.136). For this research, an ecomap was created with each participant. Here, we will discuss the implications of the ecomaps for two participants. We have selected to highlight the ecomaps for participants with the most negative experiences with the SYEP in order to explore ways that their ecologies may help to explain the difficulties they had with engagement in the program.

Gwen has a very large family: seven brothers and sisters. Her father is "in and out, visiting a few times a year," and her mother has always worked two jobs to make ends meet. Gwen felt that she had "raised herself" and reported that she became rebellious as a teenager. She described that when she got to high school, she left the friends she had in middle school because she wanted to "be cool" with a new group that "jipped" school most of the time. Gwen met her current boyfriend when she was almost 16. He had dropped out of school in the seventh grade, and she spent her time out of school with him.

By the age of 17, Gwen was pregnant and left school. Since giving birth to her son, she stated that it has become increasingly difficult to be a single mother, try to work, and go to school. She currently has no job and has dropped out of high school. She wants to complete high school and go to college; but she is currently her 78-year-old grandmother's caretaker and is disconnected from work and school.

Figure 1

Participant Eco Map-Gwen



Key:

Indicate nature of connection with a descriptive word or by drawing a different kind line:

- strong relationship
- tenuous, weak, little investment
- ~~~~~ stressful relationship

Arrows to signify major flows of energy, communication, or resources:

→ → →

Jacob lives in the basement of his 28-year-old cousin's house with his cousin's girlfriend and the seven children they share between them. He has not gotten along with his mother and stepfather for many years and feels he "never really had a good childhood." "My step-dad be trippin' on the little minor stuff, and my mom just sits there in the back." He stated that he acts like he is 13 years old rather than going on 19.

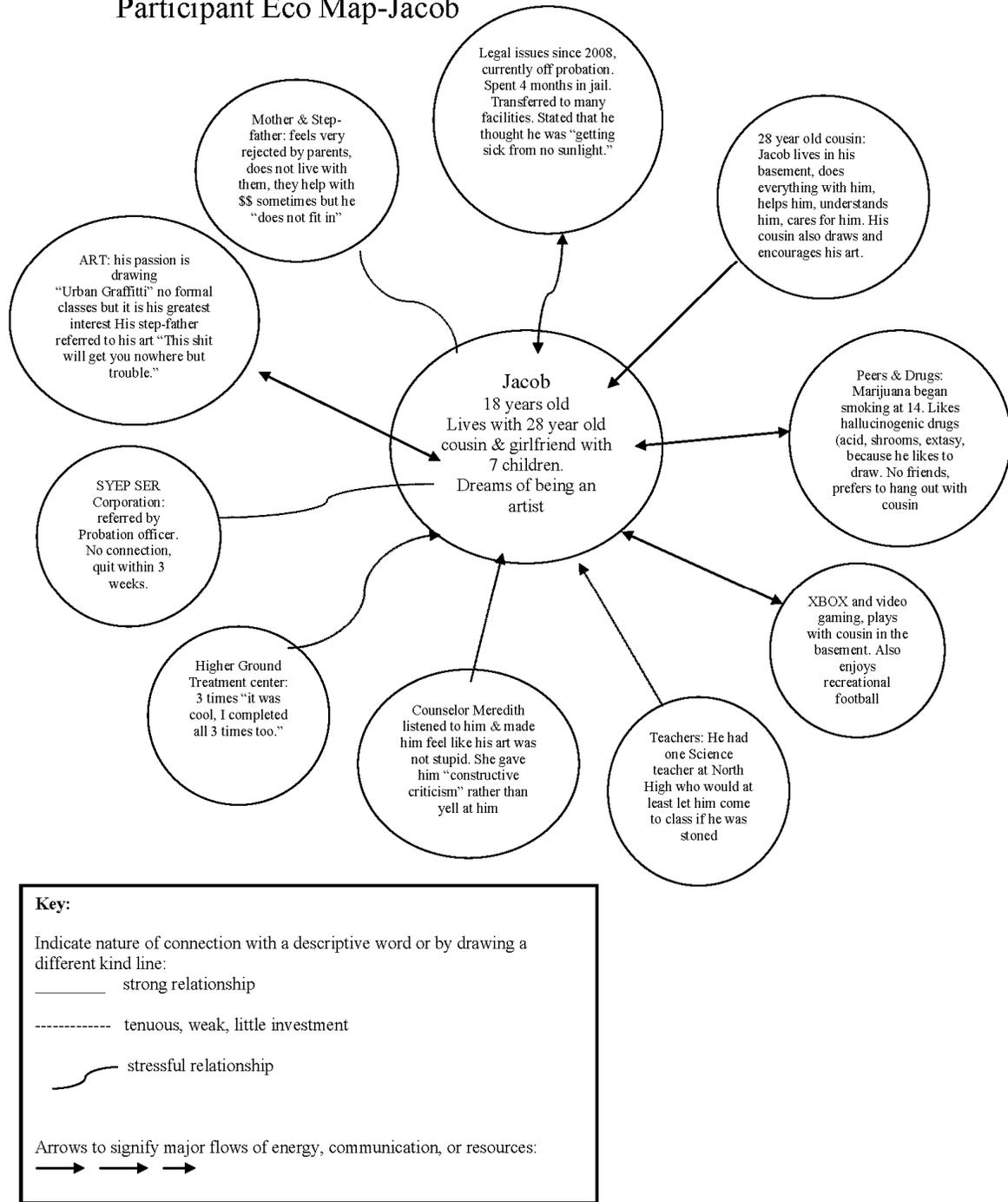
Jacob has been expelled from school every year since the sixth grade, often for fighting. "I would be mad on my way to school, and someone would mess with me, and I would just go off." He was on medication for anger at some point but stated that he did not have insurance and could not get the medication. He has had significant legal issues since 2008. He has been on probation for assault and battery on a law enforcement officer and possession of an illegal substance.

His greatest passion is drawing and painting. He has never taken any art classes because his parents have never supported his art. His stepfather told him, "This #@*? ain't going to get you nowhere but in trouble...if I threw paint on walls, my ---- would end up in jail." When Jacob talked about art, his tone of voice changed, and his language became more eloquent. He stated that he "enjoyed documentaries and tutorials about artists and art."

The documentary *Exit through the Gift Shop* about an urban graffiti artist became a dream for his own life. He seeks the freedom to run in the night, paint to his heart's content, and show others in secret how wonderful he is—because today, no one sees his talent or how wonderful he can be. This need for expression has been buried for a long time. In his mind, the military seems to be the only way out. He remarked that when he was locked up, "I thought I was getting sick; I thought I was dying." What was dying was his spirit. What emerged from the lockup was an even angrier boy, a boy who was more discouraged with his world and had a greater mistrust of the people in it. He felt unchanged by the experience and began looking toward the military to fulfill his needs. He plans to use the military experience to travel and pay for his college, so he can pursue an art/business degree. "It is not like I have never seen anybody get shot. I am going on active duty so I can shoot somebody, so I can physically and legally hurt somebody without going to jail. This is just the animosity and anger that has built in me for 13 years. It's almost to the top, right here in the chest region."

Figure 2

Participant Eco Map-Jacob



For Gwen, the two positive relationships identified on the ecomap have both ended: the maternity home and the SYEP job placement. Family connections are weak and are identified as stressful relationships. Gwen’s father is nearly completely disconnected from the family. Her mother works and is often gone. While she identified that grandma helps take care of the

siblings while mom is working, Gwen had also identified that she cares for her ailing grandmother. The relationship with school was also a stressful one, with her dropping out in 11th grade and currently having no real connection to the educational system. The only relationships marked with reciprocal flows of energy, communication, and resources are with her peers and her boyfriend; however, both of these groups are also stressful relationships according to Gwen. Her boyfriend quit school in 7th grade and is unemployed. Her friends introduced her to marijuana and skipping school.

Jacob's ecomap revealed a mix of positive and stressful relationships. He felt rejected and disconnected from his parents. His relationships with SYEP and his addiction treatment center were both stressful. While he quit SYEP unsuccessfully, he did remark that he had been successfully through treatment all three times he had gone. He has significant legal issues which also creates a stressful relationship. His current living situation is a positive one, but the communication is uni-directional coming from his cousin to him. He identified one counselor and one teacher who had positive relationships with him; again the communication was one direction. He felt he had positive relationships with his peers and he identified two way communication and support in those relationships. However, he later identified that he does not really have any friends and mostly hangs out with his cousin. The positive portion of that relationship comes from sharing experiences via the X-box gaming system.

These ecomaps reveal highly disconnected youth. Both Gwen and Jacob had little to no connection to family at home. While Jacob identified a cousin with whom he has a good bond, he also identified that playing video games was the significance of the relationship. Gwen had stressful relationships with most everyone in her daily life, including the person with whom she was living and her peers. With youth who lack any institutional supports and any family supports, SYEP was not able to assist in building meaningful work relationships. From this, we can determine that SYEP and other workforce programs aimed at disenfranchised youth will need to identify youth who may be more disconnected from society. Using an ecomap to accomplish this could allow the program to design a plan with additional supports for youth like Gwen and Jacob.

The ecomapping model could be used to aid Workforce programming professionals in the assessment and placement of youth in work experiences that would meet their ecological needs. For some youth, such as Gwen and Jacob, this program was not enough. The matching of the job was very important, along with the opportunities to connect with key adults. Interventions could be created in which the work experience would fit the ecological needs of the individual. By using such a tool, intervention models could easily be implemented.

Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The research questions address the direct and indirect impact SYEP has made on the ecosystem of the individual youths. It also looks at how these influences may have carried over into their future planning and decision making. As the stories of the participants emerged, it became apparent that groups could be formed based on ecological background. The experiences of these youth placed them on a continuum that reflected their abilities to produce positive outcomes, depending on where they began. The results show that their starting point determined the difference in their abilities to take full advantage of opportunities and fully engage in a short-term experience such as the Summer Youth Employment Program.

Group I. Ellen and Ruby were both raised in middle-class environments, had two-parent households, and entered into poverty only later in life. One young woman was African American and the other was Caucasian, but each one brought to the picture a fund of knowledge, resources, a history of support, and the ability to take advantage of resources. Their cases were success stories because Ellen and Ruby came equipped with middle-class values, responded to the efforts of others, and were able to enter into any situation with ease.

Group II. Kanani, Nicolette, and Magnus were raised in poverty and had significant challenges to overcome in their families. Kanani's mother was absent, and her father died when she was in the third grade. Nicolette's mother was disabled from seizures, so Nicolette became her caretaker at the young age of 11. Similarly, Magnus' mother was disabled from a mental illness. All of these participants developed a sense of resiliency that allowed them to graduate from high school on time and enter into secondary education. Each had strong institutional agents that facilitated their development of social capital. In workforce developmental systems, as well as in the educational systems, services are needed to support youth with these types of backgrounds. These three young adults responded easily to such services and connections with others and made progress quickly.

Group III. Gwen, Jacob, and Laila were raised in poverty and did not have the opportunities to build social capital or the contact with adults to facilitate it. Gwen raised herself with absent parents; Jacob was rejected from a very young age by his stepfather and eventually left home; and Laila's mother sold drugs and forged checks for a living, while her father was murdered in a drug deal. Youth with these backgrounds require a formula of services based on the needs that emerge from their ecological systems. All three youth had experienced legal entanglement from birth in terms of custody issues, divorce of parents, child support, and even the incarceration of their parents. These kids were bright, but they were victimized by those in authority, such as family and caretakers, and then again by the systems with which they interacted.

Group IV. Justin and Mac were raised in different environments, but both faced the management of their disabilities, ADHD and Autism Spectrum. Grouping the youth with disabilities advances the conversation about services to help them gain the social capital needed to be successful in the workforce. Certain students with disabilities are not clearly understood; as the workforce documents merely state that they have a mental impairment. It is difficult to gauge how this impairment will affect their communication and relationship building in the workplace and school settings. The question is how workforce programming for youth with disabilities might interact with the issues that arise from their diagnoses, and whether supervisors will be well enough informed to understand.

Discussion

Consistent with Ecological Systems Theory, we know that lives are complex systems that show some similarities but are often very diverse in terms of the elements that exist within them, and especially in how individuals interact with those systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). No two people interpret a single experience in the same way. Those who have positive interactions with people and resources will be more likely to perceive the world to be a positive place. The more the world around them has been negative, and if they have experienced different forms of

negativity with enough duration and frequency, their outlook and worldview will be skewed and more negative (Voydanoff, 2001).

This study provided a comprehensive look into the lives of ten urban youth. The way they perceived their world dictated much of their outlook and behaviors. This study suggests findings from which decision makers and practitioners can learn how to better relate to this developmental age group and aid in adolescent transitions. Additionally, the findings suggest that supports are needed to aid in the youths' developmental and transitional experiences in a variety of settings, including schools and the workforce.

Several implications surfaced from the analysis of the data because evaluating the ecological systems of individuals opened up a broad spectrum of issues. With the youth in this study, several broad issues that significantly impacted the young people's lives are worth discussing. In addition, they offer implications for educators and policymakers in designing and implementing policies and programs to assist youth in building social capital. Impediments to workforce development for youth are the results of poverty, lack of education, parental unemployment, lack of parental education, and insufficient access to community-based services and programs (Brown & Thakur, 2005).

Programs such as the SYEP go beyond trying to reduce poverty through workforce development. They engage young people during a crucial stage in their development and help them overcome barriers to work and higher education (e.g., abuse or neglect, parents' physical or mental illness, and factors such as drug or alcohol use, running away from home, or having children early). The programs have the potential to set the tone for the future of these youth. Gaining knowledge about the lived experiences of young people can assist policy makers and educational leaders by equipping them with information about how youth navigate and interact with the complex ecological systems composed of their family, school, work, faith systems, community, and culture. This knowledge describes dynamic phenomena that take place within a particular context. As young people transition into adult roles in the workforce and secondary educational systems, their voices can advance the conversation about student perspectives and the impact of community and government interventions and programming.

Future Research

The reported research provides several opportunities for insight into areas of future research. Primarily, by examining the ecomaps and barriers listed by the participants, we can begin to develop areas of research that may benefit future programs that attempt to engage with disenfranchised youth. Research into efficacious programming for working with youth who have been abused or neglected, youth who come dysfunctional homes, and youth who confront anger concerns would be beneficial. While all of the youth in this study had some of these concerns in certain aspects of their lives, those who experienced abuse, neglect, family dysfunction, or anger more profoundly struggled more in the program. Looking at ways that programs could create positive experiences for youth with the most challenging backgrounds would provide needed insight into working with disenfranchised youth.

It would also be helpful to survey larger groups and interview more people to gain a broader perspective. The idea of saturation is an interesting one with the ecological systems, as all individuals would have different worlds. However, a larger group would inevitably provide a

larger pool of information from which to draw conclusions. In addition, it would be important to investigate how a series of interventions would impact youth, rather than one single short-term intervention (e.g., summer work). Young adults need multiple opportunities to address their fragmented needs and a support system that has a thorough understanding of higher education resources and workforce knowledge.

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