The Rhode Island Teen Institute:
Positive Youth Development in Practice

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Abstract: This article describes the application of the positive youth development approach to promote and enhance leadership skills among middle and high school age peer leaders. The article reviews the goals of the positive youth development approach and describes how this approach was adopted and implemented by the Rhode Island Teen Institute (RITI), a comprehensive, residential prevention program founded in 1989. Data are presented from pretests and posttests administered during each of seven annual Institutes delivered between 2002 and 2009 with 775 youth. Participants in the RITI demonstrated significant gains in their leadership skills; an effect that persisted at a 3-month follow-up survey administered with high school age youth. Other significant findings and anecdotal effects are also discussed, such as creation by RITI graduates of a youth-led prevention program for elementary and middle school children.

Introduction

The Rhode Island Teen Institute (RITI) typifies the relatively new positive youth development approach to enhancing youth leadership. This article begins with an overview of *positive youth development* followed by a description of the RITI implementation and a report of evaluation findings.

The Positive Youth Development Approach

Programming aimed at assisting adolescents has evolved from a focus on ameliorating problems to incorporating principles of what has become known as *positive youth development*

(Anderson, Sabatelli, & Trachtenberg, 2007). Traditionally, many community youth programs sought to prevent specific problems, such as drug and alcohol use/abuse, teen pregnancy, or suicide. Often funded by federal, state, and local agencies and foundations dedicated to reducing the incidence of a particular type of problem behavior, many of these programs concentrated their messages/strategies on a single risk area. Judgments of program impact were based on delaying or reducing the incidence/prevalence of the targeted behavior.

The *positive youth development* (PYD) movement operates from a very different perspective. PYD programs seek enhancement of a broad range of skills in young people in order to equip them to make positive decisions and lead healthy lives. For example, Networks for Youth Development (1998) conceptualized a positive youth development approach that involves helping youth develop "competencies that will enable them to grow, develop their skills, and become healthy, responsible, and caring youth and adults." The earlier prevention field focus on risk factors is being replaced in many settings with a view of adolescents as possessing the potential to grow and prosper given appropriate support and training (Damon, 2004). Lerner and Benson (2003) summarized the philosophy of PYD as follows:

> Preventing a problem from occurring does not guarantee that youth are being provided with the assets they need for developing in a positive manner. Even if prevention efforts were completely successful, it is not the case that 'problem-free means prepared'; that is, preventing problems among young people does not mean that they are capable of making positive, healthy contributions to family community, and civil society. (p. 7)

While it is easy to differentiate between the problem-prevention and PYD approaches to community youth programs, a review conducted by the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2002) concluded that the two philosophies are complementary. The newer orientation should not be touted as replacing the older prevention approach. Instead, the PYD movement should be viewed as creating a larger framework for working with young people.

Goals of Positive Youth Development

A definition of PYD remains elusive (Kress, 2006), underscored by variation in the theoretical underpinnings among youth programs. For example, Parrish and colleagues (2008) turned to research on resilience as a framework for their teen institute program, Tetloff and Griffith (2008) employed empowerment theory for the basis of their program, while Larson (2006) stressed the importance of *internal motivation* as central to conceptualizing PYD.

Nevertheless, advocates of PYD increasingly agree about general goals and objectives. The National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2002) conducted the most comprehensive effort at articulating these goals and objectives. To do so, they examined and synthesized the writings of numerous developmental theorists. Through this process, they discovered a high level of consistency regarding a set of characteristics they labeled *core assets for both current and future well-being:*

- A sense of safety and having one's basic physical needs met;
- A sense of social security and attachment – confidence that one's emotional needs will be met (social connectedness);
- A sense of competence and mastery (a sense of personal efficacy and mastery motivation);
- A desire to learn and curiosity about one's world (intrinsic motivation);
- A sense of identity and meaning in one's life (personal and social identities);

- A positive self-regard and general mental health; and
- A positive sense of attachment to social institutions.

Following its examination of both the theoretical and empirical literature bearing on youth development, the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine review group (2002) arrived at eight factors deemed important to successful PYD programs/strategies:

- Physical and Psychological Safety
- Clear and Consistent Structure and Appropriate Adult Supervision
- Supportive Relationships
- Opportunities to Belong
- Positive Social Norms
- Support for Efficacy and Mattering
- Opportunities for Skill Building
- Integration of Family, School, and Community Efforts

The Rhode Island Teen Institute

Background/History

The Rhode Island Teen Institute (RITI) was founded in 1989 by Initiatives for Human Development (IHD) in response to a community need for substance abuse prevention services. IHD is a statewide prevention agency that delivers a variety of prevention programs for youth and adults throughout Rhode Island. Based on a positive youth development model and strategies that can be implemented outside of schools, the RITI rests on two premises. First, its founders believed that in order to foster positive behaviors among youth, prevention programs must provide teens with the psychosocial tools necessary to: 1) make healthy decisions and 2) act on them when confronted by challenges to their safety and wellbeing. A second premise was that youth can be effective in changing negative social norms that promote harmful behaviors.

To mobilize youth as prevention advocates, the RITI begins by identifying youth leaders. The program seeks formal and informal leaders who are involved in both, positive and negative activities. Students' natural abilities to motivate and lead their peers are enhanced and directed toward prevention efforts in their local communities. The RITI utilizes adults working with youth as well as Teen Institute graduates to identify and recruit peer leaders of secondary school age. The RITI identifies these leaders in a broad range of community settings, enhances their existing leadership skills, reinforces or fosters their commitment to wellness, and trains them to organize peers to work for prevention in their communities. The RITI integrates youth with peers from all geographic, cultural, and socio-economic groups in Rhode Island and connects them with their local communities. The middle school component consists of a 3½ day residential training serving roughly 50 youth per Institute. The high school RITI serves approximately 50 youth per Institute in a 5-day training.

Groups of youth are recruited from public/private secondary schools and community sites throughout Rhode Island. Sites are encouraged to select leaders of all types who possess the power to motivate their peers. Middle school groups consist of ten youth and two adults. High school groups range in size from three to eight youth and no adults but are sponsored by an adult from their community. All Institute activities are facilitated by 16 - 20 trained youth and adult staff, all of whom graduated from the high school program.

The initial training component consists of:

1) *general sessions* and workshops presented by trained professionals on issues of conflict resolution, communication skills, problem identification, and decision-making about substance use and other high-risk behaviors;

2) small group processing (*family groups*) designed to develop interpersonal skills, increase positive group identification, enhance and develop relationships with peers, adults and teen mentors;

3) adventure-based activities based on the Project Adventure or "ropes course" model (*action groups*) designed to develop communication and problem solving skills, promote teambuilding and trust building, and teach conflict resolution through physical challenges;

4) alternative activities (*large groups*) designed to connect youth from different cultures and communities and foster a healthy, noncompetitive environment;

5) *action planning* designed to help teams develop action plans to address issues in their community based on a local needs and resource assessment, and

6) follow-up community planning meetings and large group Teen Institute *reunions* that serve as an opportunity for re-connecting, networking, and further training.

Following participation in the initial training, groups begin implementing the prevention action plan they developed at the Institute. Each group participates in onsite meetings with the Project Coordinator and youth staff member who worked with the group to develop the action plan during the training. RITI staff provide ongoing technical assistance to the groups by facilitating post-training planning meetings, enlisting onsite support, and assisting groups in identifying and recruiting community resources.

Approximately three-months following the initial training, all participants are invited to participate in a one-and-a-half-day Teen Institute Reunion. The goals of the reunion are to:

1) allow youth groups to report on progress made on their action plan;

2) align youth with existing statewide prevention activities and an annual statewide RITI action plan;

3) reconnect youth with the positive experience of their initial training;

4) broaden the established statewide youth advocacy network developed over the years by RITI; and,

5) foster non-use peer groups.

Following the Teen Institute Reunion, youth can participate in additional training activities to become

1) Teen Institute youth staff,

2) facilitators in their own schools or communities,

3) community substance abuse task force members, and/or

4) leaders and community advocates.

Implementing the Positive Youth Development Model in the RITI

PYD is implemented at the RITI through its: 1) five components, 2) general Institute culture, and 3) norms established by the staff. Different combinations of the five components and the RITI culture bear on each of the eight factors identified by the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine review group (2002) as central to successful PYD programs/strategies:

Physical/Psychological Safety. RITI staff model acceptance of all participants and encourage active participation by all attendees (within established rules/boundaries). This norm carries over into each of the RITI's core activities. For example, staff foster personal disclosure within boundaries that protect participants during the general sessions, set clear boundaries for respecting participants' privacy during family group sessions, and establish rules that foster participation while protecting participants from negative consequences during action planning groups. The RITI promotes meaningful participation and learning in the context of rules that ensure a constructive rather than destructive process.

Clear and Consistent Structure and Appropriate Adult Supervision. Adult and youth staff are present during all groups and activities. Upon arrival at the Institute, participants are introduced to all staff members and made aware of the leadership structure. Boundaries and rules relating to personal disclosure and safety are stated clearly, repeated regularly, and provided to participants in writing. Staff members supervise activities and ensure that boundaries and rules are enforced consistently. This process reinforces the physical and psychological safety net described above by providing youth with a reliable and consistent structure within which to operate and explore in a predictable environment.

Supportive Relationships. Staff at the RITI model supportive relationships at all levels, starting with the staff themselves. Experienced staff model supportive relationships for the participants as well as for less experienced staff members. Youth staff represent a cross-section of the youth in attendance. They model what can be accomplished by a heterogeneous group of youth with common interests. The collaborative activities in all groups and activities at the RITI foster respectful and supportive relationships across race, culture, age, and geography.

Opportunities to Belong. General session activities intentionally allow youth to explore common ground through conversation and learn the importance of respecting alternative points of view. This theme is reiterated during action groups and family groups. The action groups provide youth with the opportunity to take part in team/trust building exercises that promote a sense of belonging without competition. Similarly, family groups consist of heterogeneous pairings that bring together strangers from different communities and backgrounds. These groups help youth develop social skills, such as the abilities to engage others, build connections with peers, and share opinions with others. This experience fosters compassion for others, positive group involvement, bonding, and a sense of belonging.

Positive Norms. All communication at RITI must be positive. Youth are informed that negative or personal messages outside of the boundaries/rules are not acceptable. Positive reinforcement and problem solving, not sanctions, encourages participants to correct their mistakes and to work through their differences. Youth staff support positive norms by modeling positive social behaviors and safe risk-taking and by reinforcing group rules and boundaries when they lead activities and co-facilitate groups. Positive norms are further reinforced through the action planning process. Action plans involve promoting education and advocacy in such areas as non-violence, social acceptance, and healthy choices for individuals and communities.

Support for Efficacy and Mattering. The action planning process epitomizes the RITI philosophy that personal self-efficacy and mattering are central components of actualizing change. RITI staff promote self and group empowerment by supporting youth participants in their selection of an action plan goal, defining ways to successfully implement the plan when they return to their schools and communities, and identifying supportive resources.

Opportunity for Skill Building. All RITI activities build youths' skills and capacities to make non-destructive decisions and affect positive change in their communities. Emphasis is placed on building skills in areas that will support youth in their personal growth and future efforts – decision-making skills, sense of control over one's life, communication skills, teamwork skills, and leadership skills. Youth who attend the RITI are taught to make the following distinctions as the basis for learning these skills: facilitation versus leading, supporting vs. caretaking, modeling vs. enabling, intervening respectfully and appropriately vs. intervening in an authoritarian manner, enthusiasm vs. silliness, flexibility vs. rigidity, patience vs. impulsivity, articulating problems vs. stating personal opinion, and respect for and appreciation of differences vs. criticism and negative judgment.

Integration of School and Community Efforts. The RITI action plans created by each group serve as the legacy of the Institute and represent an intersection and integration of state, community, school, and family efforts to affect positive change. The action planning process requires youth to:

1) assess their targeted environment for prevention programming needs;

2) identify resources, barriers, and training needs;

3) develop a concrete, realistic plan;

4) implement this plan; and

5) evaluate its effects.

During the RITI reunion events, staff facilitate discussions with youth about what worked when implementing their action plan, what didn't work, and lessons learned.

Methods

Design
The RITI was evaluated with a pretest-posttest repeated measures design. Participants completed an anonymous pretest questionnaire when they arrived at the Institute and a posttest at the end. A participant-generated code allowed matching responses on the pretest and posttest while preserving participant anonymity. High school participants also completed a follow-up questionnaire during the Teen Institute reunion event approximately three months following their initial participation.

Sample
The sample consisted of 621 youth who participated in the middle school Teen Institute from 2003 through 2009 and 154 youth who attended the high school Teen Institute and the reunion event between 2002 and 2008. The Teen Institute specifically targets youth with the ability to lead their peers, either for better or worse, and who are willing to consider adopting a healthy, substance-free lifestyle. Middle and high school participants were selected for the program based on the recommendations of adults working with youth at the local level or from Teen Institute graduates. Participants were recruited from schools, community-based programs,

churches, neighborhood groups, and community prevention task forces. Care was taken to ensure that participants at each Institute represented the geographic and cultural diversity of Rhode Island.

The pretest and posttest questionnaire included five scales intended to measure decision-making skills, sense of control over life, communication skills, teamwork skills, and leadership skills.

Decision-making skills (α=.80 middle school, α=.83 high school) were assessed at the middle and high school levels using a five-item scale from Botvin, et al., (1995) that asked about considering one's options before making a decision, taking the time to accurately understand a problem before making a decision, and reviewing bad decisions. Respondents indicated the frequency with which they engaged in various decision-making skills on a 5-point scale ranging from "Never (1)" to "Always (5)."

Control over life was assessed at the middle school level (α=.71) using a six-item scale adapted from Jessor (1998) that consisted of items about being able to cope with problems and perceived control over one's environment. Respondents rated their agreement with statements such as, "I have control over most of the things that happen to me" on a 4-point scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree (1)" to "Strongly Agree (4)." At the high school level, respondents completed the original four-item Jessor scale without any modifications (α=.68).

Communication skills at the middle school level (α=.72) were measured using a seven-item scale adapted from Botvin, et al., (1995). Respondents rated their agreement with statements such as, "When I disagree with others, I ask questions if they say something that isn't clear" on a 4-point scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree (1)" to "Strongly Agree (4)." At the high school level, respondents completed the original eight-item Botvin scale without any modifications (α=.78).

Leadership skills (α=.82 middle school, α=.78 high school) were measured at the middle and high school levels using a four-item scale, created by the external evaluators, that included items, such as, "I know how to persuade other teens to join me in changing my community". Respondents rated their agreement with a set of statements on a 4-point scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree (1)" to "Strongly Agree (4)."

Teamwork skills were measured at the middle school level (α=.73) using a six-item scale, created by the external evaluators, that included items, such as, "A good team member always listens to the opinions of others in the group." Respondents were asked to rate their agreement with a set of statements on a 4-point scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree (1)" to "Strongly Agree (4)." At the high school level, respondents completed a truncated 3-item version of this scale (α=.70).

Data were analyzed using SPSS Statistics Version 17.0. Paired t-tests were used to compare pretest to posttest differences among middle school participants. High school data were analyzed using repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) to compare pretest, posttest, and three-month follow-up responses.

Results

Middle school participants improved significantly from pretest to posttest on all five scales (see Table 1). Effect size estimates (Cohen's d) for single participant research designs were calculated for each of the scales (Sigurdsson & Austin, 2004; Swanson & Sachse-Lee, 2000). Among middle school participants, effect sizes were medium – only for teamwork skills was the effect size negligible.

Table 1
Paired t-test Results for Middle School Youth (n=621)

Scale	Pretest Mean (sd)	Posttest Mean (sd)	df	t	d
Decision-Making Skills	3.79 (.78)	3.92 (.73)	577	4.87**	0.17
Control Over Life	3.37 (.42)	3.44 (.48)	578	4.13**	0.17
Communication Skills	3.04 (.44)	3.17 (.56)	577	6.29**	0.26
Teamwork Skills	3.28 (.59)	3.34 (.61)	565	2.06*	0.09
Leadership Skills	2.99 (.59)	3.22 (.58)	567	9.84**	0.39

* $p<.05$; ** $p<.01$

Table 2 presents the high school results and shows a significant main effect of time of measurement for decision-making skills and leadership skills. Post hoc comparisons were performed using the Bonferroni adjustment for multiple comparisons. The pretest mean of 3.82 for decision-making skills increased significantly to a posttest mean of 4.04 ($p<.01$). The improvement was largely maintained at the 3-month follow-up (M = 3.96, $p<.10$). The pretest score for leadership skills increased from a mean of 2.99 to a posttest mean of 3.34 ($p<.01$). The improvement in leadership skills was maintained at the 3-month follow-up (M = 3.26, $p<.01$). The main effect of time of measurement was not significant for perceived sense of control over life, communication skills, teamwork skills. Effect size estimates (Eta Squared) were calculated for each of the scales. The strongest effects were for leadership skills and decision-making skills.

Table 2
Repeated Measures ANOVA Results for High School Youth (n=154)

Scale	Pretest Mean (sd)	Posttest Mean (sd)	Follow-Up (sd)	F	Eta2
Decision-Making Skills	3.82 (.72)	4.04 (.67)	3.96 (.65)	7.62*	.073
Control Over Life	3.48 (.39)	3.54 (.46)	3.52 (.48)	1.19	.012
Communication Skills	3.26 (.38)	3.33 (.41)	3.29 (.38)	1.89	.019
Teamwork Skills	3.31 (.49)	3.42 (.52)	3.36 (.47)	2.78	.028
Leadership Skills	2.99 (.50)	3.34 (.44)	3.26 (.47)	29.30*	.232

* $p<.01$

Discussion

Consistent with the RITI's core goal of developing youth leaders, evaluation results show that the program's strongest effect at both middle and high school levels occurred in the area of leadership skills. Other statistically significant changes included:

1) improved communication skills and greater perceived sense of control over life among middle school participants and

2) increased decision-making skills at the high school level. Data from high school students indicated that improvements in leadership skills persisted at least three months following participation in the program.

Although the measures for perceived sense of control over life, communication skills, and teamwork skills did not differ significantly from the pretest value among high school participants, these three measures did move in the desired direction.

In addition to the quantitative findings presented above, the RITI has amassed a rich store of qualitative data over its nearly twenty year existence. Past participants in the Institutes frequently contact RITI staff to provide them with updates on their lives. For some, RITI became a pivotal experience where, for the first time, they experienced an environment of safety and support. Graduates report viewing themselves as "change-makers" in their community as a result of their RITI experiences. More than half of youth who complete RITI remain involved in some form of community-based activity related to prevention. For example, Teen Institute youth were instrumental in enacting stricter tobacco legislation in Rhode Island. Their action plans advocated for laws regulating second hand smoke in restaurants and on public beaches. RITI graduates helped diffuse significant racial problems that arose at a Rhode Island school. These youth worked with school staff to plan a successful "diversity" project that focused on the celebration of cultures involving all youth in the school. In addition, they initiated a program for negotiating problems before they escalated. One of RITI's most enduring successes is the founding by Teen Institute youth of a non-profit organization in one of Rhode Island's largest cities. The organization provides a variety of prevention programs for elementary and middle school youth that include an innovative theatre program and community service. The organization, which is completely youth-led, works closely with the city's substance abuse prevention task force. Started in 1998, the organization continues to flourish with an average of 32 youth working each year as volunteers in the program.

Conclusion

The Rhode Island Teen Institute demonstrates how the positive youth development approach can be practically applied to promote and enhance leadership skills among middle and high school age peer leaders. To fully measure the program's effectiveness, RITI is working with external evaluators and community sponsors to implement evaluation strategies that measure program impact on the attitudes and behaviors of RITI graduates over long time periods and quantify their anecdotal success experiences. RITI and the communities that sponsor youth are also working to assess the impact that RITI-supported prevention activities have on the norms, practices and policies that promote positive youth development at the local and state level.

Recommendations for Replication
Agencies and organizations wishing to replicate the RITI are encouraged to adhere to the following broad parameters in the areas of staffing, setting, and ongoing support.

From its inception, the RITI has operated under the guidance of one full-time Master's level Coordinator and a part- or full-time program assistant. These staff members are responsible for making all program logistical arrangements, liaising with other agencies and schools to identify program participants, and identifying and securing adult and youth staff for the retreats. Operating costs are minimized by relying on a fully volunteer workforce – youth and adult staff generally choose to assist RITI because of their commitment to youth in their communities and their belief in the program.

Youth staff members play a major role in the implementation of the RITI. Adult staff make presentations during the general sessions and supervise the adventure-based activities, while youth staff take a prominent role during small group processing, alternative activities, and the action planning components. Adult staff are trained as facilitators and sources of support - they empower youth staff to take ownership of the program and its operation. Ideally, adult staff reach a point during implementation where they step back and allow the program to operate under the direction of the youth staff while lending support and guidance, as needed.

RITI staff believe that the setting of the Institute must be a safe, informal camp-like setting - apart from where youth and staff live - to promote a "retreat" atmosphere for the program. This helps promote the sense of physical/psychological safety that is core to the positive youth development approach, helps participants focus on their personal growth, and helps to promote a sense of shared experience and adventure. These conditions would not be possible if, for example, participants and staff returned to their homes and communities each evening.

The long-term legacy of RITI is operationalized through its action planning component, where participants return to their community with a plan for addressing local issues identified through a needs and resource assessment (e.g., tobacco prevention, food assistance programs). Adult support at the local level from a school or supervising agency provides the reinforcement and assistance that youth need to overcome obstacles, identify resources, and plan effectively to meet the goals of their action plans. At the program level, this ongoing support is also facilitated by holding semi-annual or annual reunion events to keep participants connected to the overall RITI and to other program graduates across the state.

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