

The role of developmental assets in predicting academic achievement: A longitudinal study

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Abstract

A sample of 370 students in the 7th–9th grades in 1998 was followed for 3 years through the 10th–12th grades in order to investigate the relation of “developmental assets”—positive relationships, opportunities, skills, values, and self-perceptions—to academic achievement over time, using actual GPA as the key outcome variable. The greater the number of developmental assets students reported in the 7th–9th grades, the higher their GPA in the 10th–12th grades. Students who stayed stable or increased in their asset levels had significantly higher GPAs in 2001 than students whose asset levels decreased. Increases in assets were significantly associated with increases in GPA. Experiencing in 1998 clusters of specific assets increased by 2–3 times the odds of students having a B+ or higher GPA in 2001. The results offer promising evidence that a broad focus on building the developmental nutrients in young people’s lives may contribute to academic success.

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Introduction

A vast amount of studies has been conducted, model reform approaches tried, and heated political dialogue carried on in an effort to identify successful ways of reforming schools to promote achievement and lessen achievement inequities across different groups of students. Recent school reform, with some notable exceptions (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; National Middle School Association, 2003) has focused almost exclusively on the goal of raising students' standardized test scores, but generally without a larger vision of the schools' role in promoting positive youth development more broadly (Oakes, Quartz, Ryan, & Lipton, 2000). Yet implementation of developmentally based "best practices" such as interdisciplinary team teaching, co-operative learning, and heterogeneous ability grouping has been associated with better school climate and student achievement, among other positive outcomes (Fellner et al., 1997).

Human development as an achievement strategy

Weissberg and O'Brien (2004) describe the "broad mission" of schools as developing young people who are "knowledgeable, responsible, healthy, caring, connected, and contributing" (p. 87). They point to research suggesting that an integrated combination of social, emotional, and academic learning is the most effective means to achieve that developmental goal. Students' school success may be viewed theoretically as a result of a complex interplay among numerous factors reflecting multiple levels of young people's ecology (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). School success is promoted when developmental nutrients: Provide caring and supportive relationships in the school community; increase student motivation and engagement; increase the value that students attach to education; increase the effectiveness of students' study habits; strengthen social norms and expectations that promote achievement; and increase parent involvement and student attendance (Starkman, Scales, & Roberts, 1999). Research shows numerous developmental influences playing a role in school success, including: family support (Gutman, Sameroff, & Eccles, 2002; Petit, Bates, & Dodge, 1997; Steinberg, 2001); relationships with non-family adults (Fletcher, Newsome, Nickerson, & Bazley, 2001; Wenz-Gross, Siperstein, Untch, & Widaman, 1997; caring school climate (Roeser, Midgely, & Urdan, 1996); providing children opportunities to feel useful, such as through service-learning (Araque, 2002; Billig, 2004); fairness of school discipline policies (Catterall, 1998); high expectations (Schmidt & Padilla, 2003); positive peer influence (Bagwell, Schmidt, Newcomb, & Bukowski, 2001; Mounts & Steinberg, 1995); participation in co-curricular and after-school programs (Barber & Eccles, 1997; Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001; Mahoney, Cairns, & Farmer, 2003; NICHD, 2004); achievement motivation and school engagement (Jessor, VanDen Bos, Vanderryn, Costa, & Turbin, 1995; Shiner, 2000); and social competencies (Arroyo & Zigler, 1995; Malecki & Elliot, 2002).

Developmentalists have long noted that, as Ryan, Stiller, and Lynch (1994) put it, school is as much an interpersonal as a cognitive enterprise. Greenberg et al. (2003) reviewed a wide range of evidence that suggests the most effective school-based prevention and youth development approaches are those that "enhance students' personal and social assets" and improve the school–community environment (p. 467). Effective approaches try simultaneously across multiple

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