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## I'm Proud I'm Actually Writing: Analyzing the Poetry of Urban Youth with EBD for Risk and Protective Factors

Clara N. Bergene  
*St. Catherine University*

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*I'm Proud I'm Actually Writing:*  
Analyzing the Poetry of Urban Youth with EBD for Risk and Protective Factors

by

Clara N. Bergene, B.S.

MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the  
School of Social Work  
St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas  
St. Paul, Minnesota  
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Master of Social Work

Committee Members  
David Roseborough, Ph.D., LICSW  
Theresa Pease, LICSW  
Andrea Robertson, LICSW

The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

### **Abstract**

Urban youth experience any number of risk factors in their daily lives, but they also have protective factors that serve to support and shield them. This study was designed to examine how urban youth who have been given the label of Emotional or Behavioral Disorders (EBD) experience and perceive the various risk and protective factors that are present in their lives. This was done by examining 486 poems written by these youths. Data were analyzed using the framework of Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets, as well as deductively coding for themes of risk. The following themes were used to code for developmental assets: support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, constructive use of time, commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity. The eight themes developed through analysis were: lack of safety, loss, law and police, drugs, lack of relational support, poverty, race, and feeling lost. When taken together, these sixteen themes represent both the strengths and challenges these adolescents face. Possible explanations for and implications of these themes were explored, as were suggestions for future research.

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Over 62 million youth in America live in an urban setting, which is defined as a city with a population of 50,000 or more, and with suburbs that are between 2,500 and 50,000. “Rural” includes all other, and often less populated areas (Bureau of Census, 2014b). Urban youth in America face a number of challenges. One report shows that adolescents living in urban areas are at a higher risk for exposure to violence, racial profiling and school disengagement (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2014). However, there is evidence that these adolescents are highly resilient, and able to have positive experiences amidst challenging environments (Anthony, 2008).

A framework that can be used to understand their experiences is the model of risk and resiliency. Resiliency can be defined as “the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten system function, viability or development” (Masten, 2014, p.1). One of the questions that those who study risk and resilience seek to answer is: why do different individuals respond differently to the same event? (Masten, 2014). In this model, risk factors make it more likely that a negative outcome will occur, while protective factors help lead to positive experiences (Anthony, 2008). Some risk factors relevant to youth include school disengagement, poor neighborhood conditions and exposure to violence (Henry, Knight & Thornberry, 2011; Riina, Martin, Gardner, & Brooks-Gunn, 2012; Stoddard, Zimmerman & Bauermeister, 2012; Williams, Stiffman, & O’Neal, 1998). Protective factors include social support and high self-esteem (Daly, Shin, Thakral, Selders & Vera, 2008; Henry, Knight & Thornberry, 2011; Howard, Budge & McKay, 2010). Moderating factors come between the risk factor and the negative outcome, meaning that the risk factor will have a less powerful effect (Howard, Budge & McKay, 2010).

There are many risk and protective factors for urban youth that can influence how well they will do in and out of school. In Minnesota, the urban school districts are St. Paul and Minneapolis, serving about 72,000 students total. These students are ethnically and culturally diverse, and come from many different income brackets. Many of these students receive free or reduced lunch (St. Paul Public Schools, 2014, Minneapolis Public Schools, 2014). Since this is calculated based on income, this serves as an indicator of the poverty level (Minnesota Department of Education, n.d.)

Within St. Paul Public Schools (SPPS), low income students and students of color as a group are experiencing significant disparities in their academic outcomes. These students are less likely than their white or non-low income counterparts to take advanced classes, graduate, enroll in college, or pass the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments, and they are more likely to be suspended. However, the disparities do not end there. The Graduation-Required Assessments for Diploma (GRAD) tests are given throughout the state. On average, students in Minnesota as a whole consistently outperformed students from SPPS (SPPS, 2014). Differences in educational outcomes between students of color or low-income students and students who are white or from higher income families have tangible costs for society beyond test scores and school funding. Students who do not graduate from high school earn less, on average, throughout their lifetimes (Bureau of Census, 2014a). This can be passed on to society in the form of lower tax revenues, higher medical expenses, and less productivity (Children's Defense Fund, 2007).

These risk factors, especially low school bonding, connecting to antisocial peers, and low expectations, have a direct link to low academic achievement and dropout rates. This indicates that family, school, community, and peers all impact how well students will do in school (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000). Youth of color, especially males, and young people from lower income

families have similarly been found to be more likely to receive an educational classification of “EBD” or “emotional and behavioral disorders” (Coutinho, Oswald & Forness, 2002; Forness, Freeman, Paparella, Kauffman & Walker, 2011).

One response to these risk factors is a program in urban Minnesota that uses writing groups to give students with an EBD label a voice and a creative outlet. This program focuses on spoken-word and poetry groups, often using hip-hop and spoken word to start discussions and to prompt writing. It is designed to give youth a voice and a means of self-expression. Each year, the poems written by students in these groups are compiled into a written anthology. This study examines four years of written anthologies, and included a qualitative content analysis, listening for themes of risk, and searching for protective factors through the lens of the 40 Developmental Assets created by Search Institute (Benson, Scales & Syvertsen, 2011). It explores the question: which risk and resiliency factors can be found in poetry written by urban youth?

This is an exploratory look at what urban youths value and what things might serve as risk or protective factors in their lives. The data are unique in that students were not asked specifically about risk or protective factors, nor is the information coming from a survey, meaning that the range of available responses is unlimited. The analysis has the potential to provide new insights into the lives of urban youth, and could be used to help shape future interventions in schools.

## **Literature Review**

### **Urban Youth**

In the United States, there are 62,380,000 school-aged children (ages 5 to 19) (Bureau of Census, 2014a). About 80 percent of Americans live in urban areas and face challenges their

rural counterparts do not face, such as higher levels of poverty and violence (Bureau of Census, 2014a; U.S. Census, 2000 as cited in Kutash & Duchnowski, 2004).

In Minnesota, the Twin Cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis are the urban centers. Each city has its own school district, serving approximately 37,000 and 35,000 students, respectively (MPS, 2014; SPPS, 2014). These two districts are ethnically diverse, with 67 to 77 percent students of color. The actual breakdowns vary between districts. St. Paul has 30 percent African American students, 31 percent Asian American students, 13 percent Hispanic American students, and two percent American Indian students (SPPS, 2014). In Minneapolis, 37 percent of students are African American, seven percent are Asian American, 19 percent are Hispanic American, and four percent Native American (MPS, 2014).

Another measure commonly used to describe school districts is the percentage of students on free and reduced lunch. This is an indicator of the level of poverty in the district (Minnesota Department of Education, n.d.). In St. Paul this number is 73 percent, while in Minneapolis it is 65 percent (MPS, 2014; SPPS, 2014). In Minneapolis, 17.2 percent of families live below the poverty line (Bureau of Census, 2014a).

**Emotional or Behavioral Disorders (EBD).** Over the last 40 years, special education policy in the United States has evolved dramatically. Schools must now make formal accommodations for students to ensure that the students can reach their potential. There are 13 different categories of disabilities, covering a range of physical, emotional and developmental conditions. One of these includes “emotional disturbance”, which is defined as “an inability to learn; build or maintain satisfactory, interpersonal relationships; inappropriate behavior or feelings; pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression, over a long period and to a marked degree” (Altshuler and Kopels, 2003, p. 321). From this comes the idea of Emotional or



Behavioral Disorders (EBD). The Minnesota legislature defines EBD as “an established pattern of one or more of the following emotional or behavioral responses:

- A. withdrawal or anxiety, depression, problems with mood, or feelings of self-worth;
- B. disordered thought processes with unusual behavior patterns and atypical communication styles; or
- C. aggression, hyperactivity, or impulsivity” (Emotional or Behavioral Disorders, 2007).

Beyond meeting one of those criteria, these responses must affect functioning in at least three different environments, such as home, school and community. EBD as a classification can have a large impact on students’ social and academic achievement.

Similarly, it is estimated that one in five children has a mental health condition, meaning about 12,476,000 children nationwide need supports to help them with their functioning (Kutash & Duchnowski, 2004). However, some estimate that 70 percent of adolescents do not receive the treatments they need. Schools provide a lot of the mental health services for adolescents. One study indicated that 72 percent of student with an emotional or behavioral disorder received services at their school (Kutash & Duchnowski, 2004), making the schools’ influences on these students especially important.

**Cradle to prison pipeline.** A phenomenon that is starting to gain more attention is called the “cradle to prison pipeline”. This phenomenon was first noted and articulated in the form of a written model by the Children’s Defense Fund (CDF) in the year 2007. As the name suggests, it explains why so many young children are put on a developmental track, the “pipeline,” that leads directly into the penal system. One staggering statistic suggests that among young boys born in 2001, there is a one in three chance that a boy who is black will go to prison in his lifetime. This number is one in six for a boy who is Latino, but one in 17 for a boy who is white. As is made

clear from these numbers, race has a large predictive role in this outcome, and plays a role in many other areas of these children's lives, as well (CDF, 2007).

Being a Latino or a black child is a disadvantage when compared to a white child in other areas noted in this model. These include foster care, suspension rates, dropout and graduation rates, access to medical insurance, employment, academic performance, and the likelihood of living in poverty. In every one of those areas, children who are white are advantaged, as a group, when compared to children who are either black and/or Latino. This is through no fault of their own. There are a number of risk factors that make it more likely a child will be on the pipeline. Offsetting these are important sources of resiliency, to which schools or other systems can contribute. The CDF notes the cumulative nature of risks. If six or more risk factors are present, it is considered highly unlikely that the child will be able to overcome so many challenges, even with assistance from other systems (CDF, 2007). This signifies that some type of early intervention might be needed, before the problems intensify and more risk factors are added. Beyond that, for the children who have fewer risk factors, programs and schools have been found to have a positive impact.

One moving example of the cradle to prison pipeline is a book written by Wes Moore (2010). In his book, titled "The Other Wes Moore", he tells a compelling story of two boys with the same name who enter life in very similar situations. Both are black, growing up in single parent homes, with mothers who are doing their best to make ends meet. Both become involved with gangs, and have run-ins with the police. One ends up being convicted for the murder of a police officer and is sentenced to life in prison. The other goes on to become a successful Rhodes Scholar. Throughout the book, Moore (2010) reminds readers that for a few small changes along the way their stories could easily have been reversed.

Some argue that, beyond the fact that some children are born into challenging situations, the systemic responses do little to change their paths. Once a child has his or her first run-in with the detention system, they are being removed from potentially pro-social peers, and surrounded by other people tending away from being pro-social (CDF, 2007). This would indicate that the prison and juvenile detention systems risk doing more harm than good, as they relate to the welfare of that child.

### **Risk Factors**

“A risk factor is “is an agent or characteristic of the individual or environment that is related to the increased probability of a negative outcome”” (Campos, 2004, p. 264, as cited in Benson, Scales & Syvertsen, 2011, p. 203). Generally, risk factors make it more likely a negative outcome will occur in certain areas of a young person’s life, such as one’s ability to be successful at school, at work, or in one’s social relationships. More specifically, they are challenges or barriers faced by youth that increase the likelihood of things like drug use, low grades in school, dropout or violence (Henry, Knight & Thornberry, 2011; Riina et al., 2012; Stoddard, Zimmerman & Bauermeister, 2012; Williams, Stiffman, & O’Neal, 1998). For urban youth, these factors might be exposure to violence and disengagement from school, which can later lead to dropping out from school and higher rates of crime or delinquency (Henry, Knight & Thornberry, 2011). There are multiple risk factors at play for each person. Some of the factors that commonly affect urban youth are school disengagement, exposure to violence, and poor neighborhood conditions. (Henry, Knight & Thornberry, 2011; Riina et al., 2012; Stoddard, Zimmerman & Bauermeister, 2012; Williams, Stiffman, & O’Neal, 1998).

The effects of protective factors often moderate the effects of risk factors. If a person is experiencing a number of risk factors that have a negative effect on school engagement, for

example, protective factors might lower the predictive power of risk factors. Protective factors include things like: peer, family and teacher support, higher self-esteem, and involvement (Daly et al., 2008; Henry, Knight & Thornberry, 2011; Howard, Budge & McKay, 2010).

Much of the research on urban youth focuses on the effects risk and protective factors might have on education. This ranges from the effects of protective factors on grade point average (GPA) and school engagement to avoiding dropout (Benson, Scales & Syvertsen, 2011). Other research focuses on risky behaviors, such as substance use or risky sexual behavior, and the risk of future violence. The following discussion focuses on three factors that have an effect on urban youth: school disengagement, exposure to violence, and neighborhood conditions.

**School Disengagement.** Students classified with EBD already experience difficulties with engaging in school due to emotional or behavioral challenges (Wagner & Davis, 2006). However, there are other risk factors at play that can complicate this. School engagement, which often has different names, can be measured in a number of ways. It is broadly defined as how committed students are to school, and the level of effort they put into their success (Henry, Knight & Thornberry, 2011). Daly et al. (2008) looked at how students feel about their school along three constructs: “students’ attitudes, investment, and commitment toward school” as a way of measuring engagement (p. 67). It is seen as an important concept in that the level of engagement is a predictor of dropout rates, which lead to further indicators of a positive or negative outlook (Daly et al., 2008).

It is clear that many factors, such as exposure to violence and neighborhood conditions can lead to school disengagement. One measure of disengagement, the school disengagement warning index, uses standardized test scores, attendance, grades in core subjects, suspension and grade retention as a warning index to identify students who are at risk for dropping out of school.

These factors serve as a very accurate predictor of dropout (Henry, Knight & Thornberry, 2011). Other risk factors include negative peer support and a lack of social support. In the opposite direction, higher levels of teacher and family support, but not peer support, are related to higher levels of school engagement (Henry, Knight & Thornberry, 2011).

One way to operationalize disengagement is to look at the factors forming the school disengagement warning index (Henry, Knight & Thornberry, 2011). Higher scores on the index, meaning greater levels of disengagement, are related to a number of delinquent behaviors during middle and late adolescence and early adulthood, as well as school dropout. These behaviors include substance use, serious crimes and arrests. Students who dropped out of school were more likely than other students to engage in delinquent behavior across the developmental stages (Henry, Knight & Thornberry, 2011).

This is important because as school disengagement increases, the likelihood of school drop out also increases. When students drop out, they are more likely to engage in violent crime and risky behaviors, such as substance use and sexual risk taking. Even without including factors related to dropout, students with high levels of disengagement are at a much greater risk of criminal activities and substance use than their more engaged peers (Henry, Knight & Thornberry, 2011). For a group of students that is already suspended and arrested more often than their peers, this is of especially large concern (Sullivan, Van Norman, & Klingbeil, 2014).

**Exposure to violence.** Adolescents in an urban area are exposed to violence at a higher rate than those in suburban or rural areas (FBI, 2014). This increased exposure can have many negative effects on students, including increased disengagement from school, aggression, and internalizing behaviors, which relates to conditions like depression or anxiety (Daly et al., 2008;

Howard, Budge, & McKay, 2010; Riina et al., 2012; Stoddard et al., 2012; Williams, Stiffman, & O'Neal, 1998).

Exposure to violence, whether direct, indirect or perceived, has an effect on students' educational success and their own future violent behavior (Daly et al., 2008; Howard, Budge, & McKay, 2010; Stoddard, et al., 2012; Williams, Stiffman, & O'Neal, 1998). One study reports urban students' exposure to violence at 94.3 percent, while another study says the exposure is at a very low percentage (Daly et al., 2008; Howard, Budge, & McKay, 2010). Regardless of how many students are exposed to violence, the effects are more consistently agreed upon. Exposure to violence correlates negatively with GPA and persistence intentions, and positively with symptoms of distress (Howard, Budge, & McKay, 2010; Williams, Stiffman, & O'Neal, 1998). Persistence intentions are essentially a measure of how much effort a student is putting in to attempting to succeed at school (Howard, Budge, & McKay, 2010). Exposure to violence also correlates with higher levels of future aggression (McMahon et al., 2012). However, when a student is removed from a neighborhood where he or she is witnessing high levels of violence, his or her levels of aggression are likely to decrease. McMahon et al. (2012) suggest that, because of this, "attributions for aggression should be shifted from the student to the context" (p. 417).

Essentially, the more violence an adolescent is exposed to, the worse they are likely to do in school, the more distress they will experience, and the more likely they are to be aggressive (Howard, Budge, & McKay, 2010; McMahon et al., 2012; Williams, Stiffman, & O'Neal, 1998). Students who have an EBD label are already facing their own unique challenges, and adding the effects of high exposure to violence complicates an already challenging situation. In addition,

the level of violence an adolescent is exposed to is a systemic issue that directly impacts the student (McMahon et al. 2012).

**Neighborhood conditions.** Another complicating factor for these students is neighborhood conditions. As the above sections note, students' experiences in the schools are affected by their experiences outside of school. When adolescents perceive their neighborhoods to be low in amenities, such as public parks or libraries, or if the incidences of homelessness and illegal drug access are higher, they are more likely to become disengaged from school (Daly et al., 2008).

Adolescents who felt they had been discriminated against because of race, ethnicity or color within their own neighborhoods were more likely to engage in externalizing behaviors than youths who did not feel discriminated against (Riina et al., 2012). In addition, discrimination, either within or outside of one's own neighborhood, also led to higher internalizing behaviors, such as anxiety or thoughts of worthlessness (Riina et al., 2012).

Higher levels of perceived neighborhood crime also relate to lower levels of school engagement (Daly et al., 2008), which in turn leads to higher rates of dropout, and then violent crimes, substance use, and arrests (Henry, Knight & Thornberry, 2011). Another measure of deteriorated neighborhoods looked at access to illegal drugs, abandoned buildings, and homelessness in the neighborhood. This measure did not relate to increased violent behaviors (Williams, Stiffman, & O'Neal, 1998).

From a systems perspective, it is important to note that these outside factors have an effect both on the mental health status of the affected adolescent, as well on their external behaviors. McMahon et al. (2012) remind us that there are many potential reasons behind a student's behavior, with many of them stemming from outside circumstances. This is important

to remember for the students with an EBD label, as there may be many explanations for why a student is behaving in a certain way, or presenting with different symptoms.

### **Protective Factors**

Protective factors increase the likelihood of a positive outcome. They again consist of things like peer, family and teacher support, high self-esteem, and social and community involvement (Daly et al., 2008; Henry, Knight & Thornberry, 2011; Howard, Budge, & McKay, 2010).

Search Institute has found eight protective factors that they call developmental assets, within two larger categories. The first category, external assets, includes support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time. The second category, internal assets, includes commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity. Each of the eight categories is broken down even further, leading to forty total assets (Benson, Scales & Syvertsen, 2011). Other research fits within these categories, too.

Social support consists of support from families, peers, and teachers. Support from families and peers is especially important in predicting persistence intentions, which are essentially a measure of how much effort a student is putting in to attempting to succeed at school (Howard, Budge, & McKay, 2010). Support from teachers is, logically, important in increasing school engagement (Daly et al., 2008). Family support also plays an important role on its own. It increases the level of school engagement, especially when children are under the age of twelve (Daly et al., 2008). This support also negatively correlates with symptoms of distress, and points to the importance of adults in these adolescents' success (Howard, Budge, & McKay, 2010).



Social support in the context of a family is sometimes referred to as “family attachment.” Family attachment is a similar concept that measures how close the family is through questions about time spent together and communication. Higher levels of family attachment have been found to correlate with lower substance use rates (Peterson, Buser & Westberg, 2010).

Individual characteristics and traits play a role in protection, too. One of these characteristics is how involved an individual is, whether in her church, school, or community. It is a concept that looks at the kinds of leadership and social roles an adolescent takes on. Higher levels of involvement are related to lower levels of substance use (Peterson, Buser & Westberg, 2010). Another individual factor that has a protective effect is self-esteem. Higher levels of self-esteem are related to lower levels of substance use (Peterson, Buser & Westberg, 2010).

Both external and internal factors can have a role in protecting students. Some of these factors are things like social support, involvement and self-esteem. For students with an EBD label, it can be especially important to foster these factors and traits.

### **Moderating Factors**

The model of risk and protective factors includes moderating factors. Moderating factors come between the risk factor and the person, and serve to lessen the negative effect of the risk factor. Moderating factors are similar to protective factors. They are things like social support, higher self-esteem, and neighborhood cohesion (Daly et al., 2008; Henry, Knight & Thornberry, 2011; Howard, Budge, & McKay, 2010; Riina et al., 2012).

One moderating factor is social support, including support from peers and families. When students are exposed to violence, directly or indirectly, they are at a greater risk of doing poorly in school. If high levels of peer support are present, the effects of the exposure to violence or perceived neighborhood crime are moderated, or decreased (Daly et al., 2008;

Howard, Budge, & McKay, 2010). Similarly, students who had high levels of family support did not have higher distress symptoms when also reporting high levels of exposure to violence (Howard, Budge, & McKay, 2010).

Peer support has also been found to moderate the relationship between persistence intentions and exposure to violence, such that students who have a higher level of peer support did not report lower persistence intentions when also reporting high levels of exposure to violence (Howard, Budge, & McKay, 2010). While family support also predicted persistence intentions, only peer support moderated the effects of exposure to violence on persistence intentions (Howard, Budge, & McKay, 2010). One area where social support was not a moderating factor was on school engagement. High social support has not been found to have any moderating effects between neighborhood conditions and school engagement (Daly et al., 2008).

Neighborhood cohesion, as measured in studies by questions asking about how well neighbors got along and trusted each other, has been found to moderate the relationship between within neighborhood discrimination and externalizing behaviors. It has not been found to moderate the effects of discrimination on adolescents' externalizing or internalizing behaviors (Riina et al., 2012). As with protective factors, it is important to help increase the number of positive moderating factors for each adolescent. This will help ensure that these adolescents have the best chance at a successful outcome.

### **Poetry Groups**

It is clear that the more protective factors at play for each student, the more likely they are to do well in school. One way to help this process is through implementing groups in schools. Groups can cover a range of topics, populations, and challenges, and do so effectively

in school settings (Allen-Meares, Montgomery, & Kim, 2013). One specific type of group is showing promise in therapeutic settings. Writing groups help students express themselves and tell stories in a supportive environment, and are often less intimidating than traditional psychotherapy (Olson-McBride & Page, 2012). Expressive writing can also help change cognitions and mood. Lepore (1997) found that expressive writing helped reduce the number of intrusive thoughts and depressive symptoms in participants experiencing a stressful situation.

Urban youth sometimes experience difficult life circumstances. Being able to process these events in a safe setting can be beneficial. Only two studies were found addressing the use of writing/poetry groups with urban youth. The groups in one of the studies used music and poetry to help students with self-disclosure. The students in these groups were at-risk youth in alternative schools or transitional living settings. The authors discuss using current music to capture students' attention. This made it easier to keep students engaged, and helped with self-disclosure (Olson-McBride & Page, 2012).

Olson-McBride and Page (2012) also found that the music helps provide a common language for facilitators and students to use that is less foreign or intimidating than classical therapeutic language. Group members were chosen by caseworkers who knew the youths at their agency. The individuals from three groups ranged in age from 12 to 21, and were a mix of genders, while most participants were African American. The structure of the group began with a song chosen by the facilitator or a group member. The written works created were structured poems, unstructured poems, collaborative poems, or other writing. The members then shared what was written during the group, and received feedback. Groups were 45 minutes to one hour (Olson-McBride & Page, 2012).

This study focused on evaluating levels of self-disclosure, finding that these were the highest when students selected their own songs to discuss, especially if the song contained a particular theme that was important to them. The level of self-disclosure decreased when the topics shifted from the students' own lives to their communities. The authors also discuss how using song lyrics proved particularly effective in helping the youths make connections to their own lives, and starting those discussions (Olson-McBride & Page, 2012).

A second article examined a similar group framework. One program works mainly with students who have the label of EBD. It also stresses that music is a large part of many youths' lives, and so incorporating it into therapeutic groups can be very beneficial. These groups are one hour long, and students are referred by teachers and staff (Tinucci, 2008).

Students living in urban areas with an EBD classification clearly face a number of challenges and risks on a daily basis, while also encountering a number of protective and moderating factors. This study looked at students' poems to learn more about their perceptions of risk and protective factors, and compared them to the existing research and conceptual framework.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This study uses Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets as a framework for approaching the first half of the data analysis. This framework has been extensively studied, cited, and researched. The Developmental Assets, derived from over 20 years of studying adolescents, represent things that are likely to decrease risk factors, increase a successful outcome, and that communities and adolescents can reasonably be expected to achieve (Benson, Scales & Syvertsen, 2011).

Initially, this framework was started in 1990, and was comprised of 30 assets that were linked to positive youth development. Almost a decade later, after receiving feedback from other researchers and professionals, the current list was created. In addition, an extensive literature review was conducted, and Search Institute used surveys to further help define the developmental assets. These surveys have reached more than three million students between 4<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade, and over 2,000 rural, suburban and urban communities. These communities have been significantly different from each other, in terms of ethnicities and socioeconomic statuses (Benson, Scales & Syvertsen, 2011). The Developmental Assets that will be used in this study cover adolescents ages 12-18.

The 40 Assets are divided in half into two categories: external assets and internal assets. Each of these is further divided into four subcategories. External assets split into: support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time. Internal assets are made up of: commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity. Again, these categories are further broken down into the individual assets, as shown in Table 1 (Benson, Scales & Syvertsen, 2011).

Table 1.  
*Framework for the 40 Developmental Assets for Adolescents*

	Category	40 Developmental Assets
External Assets	Support	Family support, positive family communication, other adult relationships, caring neighborhood, caring school climate, parent involvement in schooling
	Empowerment	Community values youth, youth as resources, service to others, safety
	Boundaries and Expectations	Family boundaries, school boundaries, neighborhood boundaries, adult role models, positive peer influence, high expectations
	Constructive Use of Time	Creative activities, youth programs, religious community, time at home
Internal Assets	Commitment to Learning	Achievement motivation, school engagement, homework, bonding to school, reading for pleasure
	Positive Values	Caring, equality and social justice, integrity, honesty,

---

Social Competencies	responsibility, restraint Planning and decision making, interpersonal competence, cultural competence, resistance skills, peaceful conflict resolution
Positive Identity	Personal power, self-esteem, sense of purpose, positive view of personal future

---

A developmental asset is “an agent or characteristic of the individual or his/her developmental ecologies (e.g., family, peer group, neighborhood, school, community) that is related to the increased probability of *positive* outcomes” (Benson, Scales & Syvertsen, 2011, p. 204). Positive outcomes are things like school completion and pro-social behaviors, often leading to fewer risky or violent behaviors. Essentially, developmental assets are risk factors in reverse. Developmental assets work cumulatively, with each additional asset serving to further increase the likelihood of positive outcomes. When students were given surveys about the number of developmental assets present, and a measure of their success, it was clear that more assets meant higher success. With each jump in quartile (for example, from having 0-10 assets to 11-20 assets) there was a significant increase in the outcome scores. These findings remain the same, regardless of the characteristics of the group of adolescents studied (Benson, Scales & Syvertsen, 2011).

However, all assets do not have the same effect size. Some groups are more likely to increase positive outcomes than others. One example is the effect on GPA. Students who, in middle school, had the assets that indicate higher levels of involvement, such as service to others, “were three times more likely to have B+ or higher GPAs 3 years later in high school than youth who did not experience that cluster of assets” (Benson, Scales & Syvertsen, 2011, p. 207).

The assets are a logical choice to use as a conceptual framework for a few reasons. First, the list of assets is extensive, ensuring that the focus is not too centered on any one area of

adolescents' lives, and providing a more thorough look at the anthologies, and the lives of students in the program. Second, they seem to fit well with the existing research, which shows that there are many factors at play, including both internal and external factors. The development assets are almost a summary of the existing research, presented in a cohesive manner. Third, the assets fit with the strengths-based model of social work. When examining the assets, they look for the positives in the adolescent's environment, and within the adolescent himself. Fourth, the assets are generalizable, such that they will be applicable to the diverse population used in this study. Last, they provide a solid starting point from which to use the information gathered in this study. The assets were designed to be actionable, so depending on the results of this study, they could provide further direction and next steps to take (Benson, Scales & Syvertsen, 2011).

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

The literature review shows that there is a large amount of research on the many risk, protective and moderating factors affecting urban youth, and especially those labeled with EBD. The existing research was largely conducted by asking parents and teachers about students' experiences, or by using surveys to get information from the students directly. This project adds to the existing data by using the students' own words to learn about what risk and protective factors they demonstrate through their writing. This was done using a qualitative approach, analyzing anthologies of poems produced by a single program.

### **Population and Sample**

Students who participated in poetry groups wrote the poems in the anthologies between the years of 2008 and 2013. The sample consists of middle and high school students, most of

whom had an EBD label. These students were also typically African American males. The population for this study includes urban youth in Minnesota with an EBD label. Because of the nature of the data, it is impossible to know the exact characteristics of the participants.

### **Protection of Human Participants**

While the students participated in the groups, they wrote poems that were collected by the staff and typed. These poems are marked with a single initial, which is the only identifier used in the anthologies. This means that the students remain anonymous. When writing the results, identifying information was excluded, and the program was not named. If the students or staff read the poems or quotes, it is possible that they would recognize them. However, other readers would be unable to identify the author of the poem.

### **Data Collection**

The poems were previously gathered during program groups, typed by the staff, and compiled into annual anthologies. During groups, the students were typically given written prompts by the staff, often other poems or lyrics to music that the students may be familiar with. The prompts focused on topics such as self-exploration, community, and goals. The groups were about an hour long, and consisted of six students and two facilitators, on average. The anthologies were published by the program, and distributed throughout schools in the district.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed using both inductive and deductive approaches as forms of textual analysis. First, a deductive approach was used to analyze the data. The 40 Developmental Assets described in the conceptual framework were used as a lens through which to view the data. The names of the eight subthemes, as derived by Search Institute, were used as the basis for coding. When more information was needed, the individual assets were also



included so as to be more precise. Codes that seemed to fit well within the eight main categories were noted with a color-coded post-it flag next to the side of the poem. This made it easy to visualize which themes were the most prevalent, in addition to providing greater ease while doing word counts and other analysis.

Second, the data were analyzed inductively, looking for any themes that might appear. Content analysis attempts to find patterns in the data. The inductive approach is useful because it leaves open all possibilities when examining the data (Berg & Lune, 2012). When reading the data, words or phrases, also known as codes, were identified that relate to risk factors. As the data are repeatedly examined, more codes and themes were identified. These codes were then organized thematically. While reading the poems, codes were written down and flagged with a post-it in the anthology. As themes began to develop, codes were organized into themes. When codes arose that did not yet fit a specific theme, they were written off to the side as analytic memos. As the coding progressed, some of these codes were matched together and compiled into themes. When determining themes, the themes had naturally included six or more codes. Other weaker themes existed that consisted of three or four codes, but it was decided that this did not constitute enough codes to gain a cohesive enough picture of what those themes might be. There were also naturally eight themes derived from this coding process. Word counts were conducted for all sixteen themes, adding weight to the analysis.

The original plan was to code five anthologies, but saturation was reached after coding four. This means that little to no new information or themes were being found by the end of the fourth anthology.

## Results

This study aimed to look at factors related to risk and resiliency affecting urban youth, as shown in their writings. Four poetry anthologies were examined and coded to look for these themes, with approximately 500 poems reviewed and analyzed. The resiliency factors were coded inductively, starting from Search Institute's framework for 40 Developmental Assets. The risk factors were coded using a deductive method, based on existing research. The results will be presented, below, first exploring the developmental assets, and then the risk factors. The final themes were organized into eight categories corresponding to developmental assets, and eight themes, corresponding to risk factors. Relevant word counts are included as well, and poems are excerpted, except where noted (in a few cases an entire, brief poem is included).

### 40 Developmental Assets

As shown in Table 2, Search Institute divides the 40 assets into eight subcategories. These are the categories that were used during coding, and will organize how the results are presented here. Table 2 shows the eight subcategories with their specific assets, and the number of times each theme or subcategory is mentioned.

Table 2.  
*40 Developmental Assets and Number of Mentions*

Themes/Subcategories	Developmental Assets	Number of Mentions
Support	Family support, positive family communication, other adult relationships, caring neighborhood, caring school climate and parent involvement in schooling	32
Empowerment	Community values youth, youth as resources, service to others, safety	1
Boundaries and Expectations	Family boundaries, school boundaries, neighborhood boundaries, adult role models, positive peer influence, high expectations	2

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Constructive Use of Time	Creative activities, youth programs, religious community, time at home	23
Commitment to Learning	Achievement motivation, school engagement, homework, bonding to school, reading for pleasure	21
Positive Values	Caring, equality and social justice, integrity, honesty, responsibility, restraint	35
Social Competency	Planning and decision making, interpersonal competence, cultural competence, resistance skills, peaceful conflict resolution	7
Positive Identity	Personal power, self-esteem, sense of purpose, positive view of personal future	84

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**Support.** Search Institute lists six different assets under the category of support: family support, positive family communication, caring neighborhood, caring school climate, and parent involvement in schooling. As the name suggests, these assets all relate to adolescents having a number of adults in their lives who provide support, from parents to teachers to neighbors. In the anthologies, of the 36 poems mentioning support, 31 mentioned support related to family.

Here's one example of a supportive mother:

*Through the joy and pain  
 Momma cared  
 Through the sun and rain  
 My momma was there  
 Dear momma  
 Appreciate all the love that you shared  
 You showed me so much love*

Three poems related to supportive teachers, while two mentioned other supports. Here's another poem that shows support from a number of different people:

*Im [sic] thankful for having a family and  
 Being alive today  
 I am very glad that my sister gave me another nephew  
 I'm glad that I have a teacher  
 That wants to teacher me  
 And that I have a good school to go to*

*And learn new things*

References to caring neighborhood, parent involvement in schooling and positive family communication were not found in the poems.

**Empowerment.** Empowerment is the second category from Search Institute.

Empowerment consists of community values youth, youth as resources, service to others, and safety. This was only found once, explicitly, in all of the poems. These are again external assets that help adolescents to feel empowered or important.

*I am smart*

*My family sticks together*

*My neighborhood is quiet*

*I am proud that I am actually writing*

**Boundaries and expectations.** This category consists of family boundaries, school boundaries, neighborhood boundaries, adult role models, positive peer influence, and high expectations. These include clear and consistent rules and consequences at home and school, neighbors who keep track of the adolescents, peers and adults who model positive behaviors, and adults having high expectations for the adolescents. These were found twice in the poems. This one relates to family boundaries:

*I always fought*

*And hung in the streets*

*Rollin' with my peeps*

*And momma got mad*

*When she saw me in the street*

From this brief excerpt, it is clear that this author perceived him or herself as having had a mother who kept track of his or her whereabouts, and was clearly upset when she saw him “in the street”. The other example talks about teachers as adult role models, and family support:

*What matters to me is that I have a family to love*

*What matters to me is that I have friends to help me out*

*What matters to me is I know I have a family to go to and live with*

*What matters to me is I know my teachers are here for me and other people  
 What matters to me is I know I can live a good life  
 (Entire Poem)*

**Constructive use of time.** This category consists of creative activities, youth programs, religious community and time at home. These assets have specific time limits associated with them. Creative activities and youth programs say that the adolescent should be involved in these programs for three or more hours per week. Religious community is defined as involving at least one hour per week, and time at home means that adolescents are out with friends less two or fewer nights per week. Due to the nature of the data, the time limits were essentially ignored. If a poem mentioned terms related to religion, it was included as something meaningful or worthy of mention by the author, and therefore included in the analysis. This was the same for creative activities and youth programs.

Creative activities were found 23 times in the poems. This poem talks about a creative activity:

*I believe that poetry  
 Is a great influence on me and my writing*

*I believe that poetry can help me feel a lot better  
 When I write it down on paper,  
 I choose not to slap, punch, kick  
 That's why I believe poetry is right for me  
 I believe*

For this author, poetry seems to be a coping skill, in addition to a creative outlet and healthy way to spend time.

Fourteen poems made references to religion. These references tended to be brief. For example:

*Sunday is the day  
 Praise God  
 And that's what I got to say*

Or:

*I care about  
[...]  
My faith*

Or:

*I am thankful for everything God has given to me and  
To my family*

One of the longer mentions of God is:

*God can he help me  
Release my anger  
In a good way?*

*I know I can do better  
I am just mad as hell.*

*God will help me get it together.*

The ten mentions of youth programs were all sports related, including football and basketball.

This poem mentions football:

*I am tired of myself  
I am tired of arguing  
I am tired of swearing*

*What can I do,  
What can I do  
Get some help  
Move on  
Move on  
Move on*

*I'm going to move on by playing football  
Getting good grades  
And staying out of trouble  
I want to go pro.*

This author describes using football as a way to motivate him or herself to succeed. Another poem mentions both football and basketball:

*I come from a place where we play games  
Video games  
Basketball games  
Football games  
I come from a place where I talk to girls  
And hoop*

**Commitment to learning.** This category includes achievement motivation, school engagement, homework, bonding to school, and reading for pleasure. Together, they represent a student who is engaged in school, motivated to succeed, actively does homework, and reads. In the poems, achievement motivation was found ten times, and school bonding was found eleven times. This author writes about being motivated for school by hoping to graduate and “live my dream”:

*I come to school to get an education  
To get good grades  
To learn new things  
To pass on to the next grade  
To meet new people  
To make new friends  
To have fun & learn at the same time  
I come to school to live my dream  
And life after I graduate  
And that is being the poet I am*

Most other mentions of school and commitment to learning were brief, such as:

*I believe  
I can do good in school*

Or:

*For me it all depends on  
Schools  
College  
Scholarships  
Graduations*

Or:

*They put me in school, so I can learn*

*And get an education and go to college too,*

Many of the poems mentioned college, moving on, or future aspirations as a reason to do well in school, or a means of staying motivated. The other themes were not clearly expressed in the poems.

**Positive values.** This category includes traditional values, such as caring, equality and social justice, integrity, honesty, and responsibility, as well as restraint from sex, alcohol and drugs. There was at least one poem found for each of these, with 14 and six examples for equality and social justice, and restraint, respectively. The author of this poem writes about social justice and caring:

*If you look through my eyes you will see...  
A young man  
That's not scared  
To take up for himself and others.  
If you look closely in my eyes you will see...  
A person  
That loves to rhyme  
And loves to be known  
And loves to give and receive  
And loves to feed the homeless  
And loves to help old people with stuff they can't do  
And help people cure the flu.*

Here is another poem expressing the same themes:

*If you look through my eyes  
You will see a person who believes  
  
You will see a person who cares  
And shares with mankind  
Her loves,  
And rhythms,  
And rhymes  
[...]  
A person who will stop hunger  
with her words and love*

There are other, shorter expressions of social justice and equality:



*Why do we as blacks have  
To worry about getting stabbed.  
Getting shot,  
Or about getting harassed by white cops  
(no offense though)*

Some of the poems talked about refraining from drugs, such as this one:

*Why give up?  
Why leave?  
If a job ain't good enough  
Smoke a rock, smoke some weed  
But whatever you do  
Stay away from me!  
I'm gonna get my diploma and some Gs*

This author seems to be talking about how other people use drugs to cope with hard situations, but he or she does not want to be near those behaviors or substances. This author is using graduation and money as a motivator for staying away from drugs. In many cases where social justice or equality were mentioned, the authors were concerned about how issues were negatively affecting them. Other themes within positive values were much more rare, if mentioned at all.

**Social competencies.** This theme includes a lot of skills, including planning and decision making, interpersonal competence, cultural competence, resistance skills, and peaceful conflict resolution. In general, these skills allow an adolescent to successfully navigate interactions with peers and adults, with positive outcomes. In this poem, the author writes about peaceful conflict resolution, as well as resistance skills.

*I don't wanna be the thug  
That everybody else is  
The one that kills his own people  
[...]  
Instead of slugs passing  
Let's come together and  
Build something for the family*

The author writes about wanting to be different from the people around him or her. Instead of using guns and violence, the author would rather help people “come together”. The next poem fits into many themes, but demonstrates a level of cultural competence. The author is very aware of race, and the poem alludes to cultural competence, which was not specifically mentioned in any poem.

*I grew up with racism  
 Sometimes I hear my little sister talk about white people  
 Saying that she hates them  
 But why is there racism?  
 I sometimes think it comes from the parents  
 Whites and Blacks should get along  
 Same for Mexicans and Blacks  
 I think sometimes is wrong [sic]  
 That Mexicans and Blacks should get along  
 I am both Mexican and African-American  
 Everyday I hear people saying “I hate white people”  
 Or people saying “I hate black”  
 But why is it?  
 Is it because of the way we act?  
 Or just our skin color?  
 Just why?  
 (Entire Poem)*

In the next excerpt from a poem, this author is demonstrating restraint, and hinting at planning and decision making abilities.

*And just ‘cause I won’t hit the trees, they think I’m a lame. But they just don’t know that  
 I had a plan for us to make it out of the streets.*

This author is saying that peers think he is not cool because he won’t do drugs with them. Instead, he is hoping to “make it out of the streets”, and is aiming for a better life and future.

**Positive identity.** This theme is made up of personal power, self-esteem, sense of purpose, and positive view of personal future. These themes came up 84 times in the poems. Of the four that make up Positive Identity, self-esteem was found most frequently, at 37 times,

accounting for almost half of the times Positive Identity was mentioned. Here is one example of how self-esteem was displayed:

*Sometimes I feel black as the midnight sky.  
Sometimes I feel as orange as an orange.  
Those are the colors for me,  
now time for you to show me your colors -*

*Let them shine,  
so that I can be me.  
I'm tired you see  
No more colors  
No more colors for me  
I want to be me  
Just me  
Not black, pink, yellow or blue  
Just the way I am -  
Don't you see?*

*Colors don't define me  
It's me that defines me,  
So I'm going to show my colors  
So that they don't show me!*

This author wants to be him or herself, without worrying about what others are seeing. It's also possible that this author is referencing a gang identity, and that he or she wants out of this gang.

The next example is more explicit:

*I can be me  
I know I have friends  
I know I have a family and a house  
Life is tough  
I'm a good kid  
A nice person  
(Entire Poem)*

This author knows that he is “a good kid” and “a nice person”, and isn't afraid to be him or herself. The next poem is also more direct:

*They say  
I'm a ghetto black girl  
Livin' in a white world*

*I say  
I'm a strong ghetto black girl  
Livin' in my own kind of world.  
(Entire Poem)*

She is taking what is likely intended as a negative remark from others, and turning it into a powerful statement, indicating that she feels strong and aware of what is happening around her.

The next sub-theme, personal power was found 18 times. The following poems demonstrate personal power, or when a person feels they have the power to control or change what happens in their lives:

*The power of me  
The power of my soul, my spirit  
The power of me  
and my life*

and

*When I think about myself  
I believe I can accomplish any goal,  
can defeat any flow*

The third sub-theme, positive view of personal future, was found 20 times. Some of the examples overlap with the sub-theme of personal power, where the authors have hope for their future, in addition to feeling like they have control over what happens in their life. As the name suggests, this theme relates to individuals who have hope for their futures. This poem is about a person who is hoping to change a negative situation into a positive one.

*Pain comes from a home where  
All you see is pain  
You got a step-dad that you hate  
Constantly debate  
Should I stay  
Or should I go?  
[...]  
I'm gonna grow up to be  
A good father figure*

This author experienced his stepfather as being rude to him, and who he says he hated. He took this perception of a negative role model, and decided that he is going to be different, and become a good father figure in the future. The next author also hopes to be a good parent:

*Sometimes when I think about myself I feel blessed  
 When I think about myself I think of my future  
 I think about the things I want to do  
 When I get older  
 [...]  
 Sometimes I think where would I be in the next five years?*

*I see myself in school taking care of my baby and being a  
 good mother.*

The last sub-theme is sense of purpose. This occurred nine times in the poems. This sub-theme describes when the authors feel that their life has a purpose, or something to accomplish.

*[...]  
 It's time to let children know their futures  
 Time to let children know they are somebody important*

*It's time to show my poems  
 Time to be known*

*It's time to be heard  
 Time to show my love*

*It's time to be the bigger person  
 Time to shed some light on a heart that's dark  
 Time to make a difference  
 Time to use my words and action  
 To show everybody what I can do*

*It's time...*

### **Risk Factors**

Risk factors were determined by examining all of the poems, and identifying codes that came up frequently. Each theme presented had a minimum of six supporting codes, but as many as 33. First, poems were analyzed for codes that presented risk, most of which are supported by

the research presented in the literature review. After codes were collected, they were organized into themes. The following themes are presented in order of strength, or how often they occurred in the poems. Table 3 lists the themes order of how often they occurred.

Table 3.  
*Risk factors by theme and number of mentions*

Theme	Number of Mentions
Lack of Safety	33
Loss	26
Law and Police	19
Drugs	16
Lack of Relational Support	11
Poverty	10
Race	8
Feeling Lost	6

**Lack of safety.** This theme was mentioned 31 times, and consists of violence (14 mentions), unsafe neighborhoods (seven mentions), domestic violence (two mentions) and rape (one mention). The following poems demonstrate several of the different ways feeling unsafe was expressed in the poems, sometimes more explicitly than others.

*I remember like it was yesterday, a wet and rainy day  
 The sky was all gray, the clouds covered the sun  
 The man pulled his trigger and started to rattle off his gun  
 People scattered and ran, some dropped to the flo'  
 I was sittin' there stuck--didn't know what to do  
 --nowhere to go  
 So the old man cocked his gun back and ran down the block  
 People was screamin' and cryin', sayin', "Somebody call the cops!"  
 The boy was there dyin', shakin', coughin' up blood  
 By the time the feds came  
 The boy's time was done*

This author witnessed someone die after being shot in the street. The next two poems demonstrate similar ideas of being unsafe in their neighborhood. These three authors have experienced fear from witnessing or expecting violence.

*Sometimes I get scared to walk down the street at night  
Because I don't know if that person has a gun  
[...]  
I wish my neighborhood was safe*

and

*I come from a place where I used to call home  
But since all of the killing,  
Alcoholics,  
People doing drugs,  
I really can't call it home anymore  
Too much violence  
People being scared to come out of their homes  
But with all that,  
I come from a house and family that loves me!*

The next author reports both having seen and experienced domestic violence. The author's mother's boyfriend was experienced as abusive, and he or she insinuates being abused but unable to tell anyone.

*That time someone told me my mom's in the hospital  
Because her boyfriend almost beat her to death  
That time someone told me my dad is here to stay  
But then he left me alone by myself  
That time someone asked me why my face was black and  
blue  
I just told them I fell down the stairs*

**Loss.** The experience of losing someone, whether through death or other events, was a common theme throughout 26 of the poems. These losses ranged from ambiguous, such as someone who was alive but no longer in contact with the person, to more concrete, such as death. In addition, they covered different ways of experiencing loss. This theme is divided into sub-

themes separated by who was lost. These three sub-themes are loss of a parent, loss of a friend, and loss of another person or a person not specified in the poem.

***Loss of a parent.*** These poems occurred in 13 of the 26 mentions of loss, or half of the time. The following poem describes a father who is no longer present in this author's life.

While the circumstances are unclear, the expressions of sorrow and loss are clear:

*Dear Dad  
I wish we could have one more memory  
I wish you could jump right into me  
Those days you told me you will never leave me  
You said you will always be company and be here for me  
I was sad when they told me those guys took you from me  
Now I'm very lonely  
Now you're just in my dreams  
Like a little girl wishing for a pony*

The next poem is an author writing to her sister, offering encouragement and support after both of their parents were lost to addiction:

*My dearest sister  
Everything will be all right  
Trust me  
We can still go on in life without our mother and father  
We don't need them  
We have each other*

The next poem describes a young man who lost his mother when she was sent to jail. He indicates being left without support from the rest of his family:

*He's got a story to tell...  
  
He was only 10 years old  
when his mom went to jail  
his family didn't care  
so his life was s [sic] living hel*

In one of the more ambiguous examples, this author lost his father, clearly expressing sadness and a lack of understanding about what happened:



*It's a set up  
and it's hard for him  
to keep his head up*

*ever since his dad died  
he cried and cried  
and everything his brother told him?  
man, it was a lie. He wonders why,*

**Loss of a friend.** Both of the example poems for this theme show authors who have lost a friend. Both of the following poems include the author wondering why this happened, and trying to make sense of the loss.

*Blood hits the grave  
Drips, like the way a butcher slaughters sheep  
All the agony and pain  
Makes it hard to sleep  
As life goes on  
I'm forced to turn the page  
But never will I forget that awful day  
Lost a friend and  
Gained a memory  
Trying to let it go  
But it don't make no sense  
To me.  
(Entire Poem)*

This author expresses similar thoughts:

*Now you're in jail  
And that ain't funny.  
So why are you laughing,  
My friend is on the floor gasping for air  
I tried to save him but he died  
And now I am in my bed asking "why?"*

*Sometimes I am thinking thoughts  
I don't know where they came from  
"Why do people have to die everyday, that is so outrageous."*

**Other.** These poems included authors who had lost siblings, uncles, other relatives, or people who were not named in the poem. The following poems talk about the loss of a brother and an uncle, both of who died while the author was present.

*My younger brother got shot because of me  
He died in my arms [...]  
Man, I'm in a hard place  
Man, I need some space*

The next author writes about losing an uncle.

*Yo,  
It's hard in the streets  
but I don't need the heat  
I'm always think [sic] about the reason  
why I'm starin' at my feet  
with my head down,  
with a mean lookin' frown  
lookin' at my uncle on the ground  
with bullets in his chest  
all because some guys on the street  
tried to put him to rest.  
Yo, it's hard in the streets  
(Entire Poem)*

**Law and police.** This theme encompassed a wide variety of codes, including police brutality, encounters with police, harassed by police, mentions of jail or the juvenile detention center (JDC), being on house arrest or probation and seeing cops around. These codes occurred 19 times in the poems. Of the codes comprising this theme, jail and JDC occurred the most, at five times. The first poem talks about an author's arrest:

*I was already leaning and heated  
For something that happen early before  
First one came through the door  
Asked him straight up  
"What are you here for?"  
Then that was it  
Reaching for his cuffs  
I was already pissed  
The coward hiding behind the shield was gonna get his*

*But instead I got my hands behind my back  
Slamming my face on the car as I yelled to show everyone  
The brutality of this bust  
Damn near broke my arm*

The next brief excerpt mentions that the author is on probation:

*I wish I could go back and not made that threat  
Maybe I wouldn't be on probation  
But I guess not*

This author indicates that he or she has had “trouble with the law”, but wants to change:

*On the outside,  
I'm a mean person  
that always has a bad attitude  
and always stays in trouble with the law*

*But on the inside,  
I want to do what's right and  
I love to be around people  
(Entire Poem)*

**Drugs.** This theme occurred 14 times in the poems, with examples of both using drugs and dealing drugs. In the first poem, the author wants help to stop selling drugs on the street, and is worried about it escalating to violence:

*I need to be rescued from the block  
Selling them rocks  
Before I get shot and have to cock back the glock and pop  
A couple bullet holes with loud gunshots  
When people lookin' out the window, sayin', "Call the cops!"  
The cops trying to push me away from the block  
Is you gonna come rescue me?  
Or not?  
(Entire Poem)*

Similarly, in the next poem, the author wants to get a job at McDonald's to make money instead of a job selling drugs (“flipping nickels and dimes”).

*But am not going to cry  
Am trying to get a job at McD's  
Not flipping nickels and dimes*

*But burgers and fries.*

In this example, the author talks about using marijuana and coming home late:

*Sixteen I ran away, never faced my problems just sat there and looked dumb  
Smoking pot, coming home at 2-3 o'clock in the morning*

**Lack of relational support.** The theme of lack of relational support encompasses examples of no support from family or others, as well as parents with challenges. These challenges include things like drug use and emotional challenges. This theme occurred 11 times in the poems. The following examples show youth who are trying to comprehend the challenges that the adults in their lives are facing, as well as how to move forward in their lives without this support.

*Sitting in the dark  
Letting my life fade away  
Thinking one day my mom  
Will come take me away  
From all this pain  
Rainy days passing by  
Tears falling down 'cuz  
I can't help but to cry  
Your mom is a big part of a teenage life  
My momma is a part of something called my heart  
But slowly it's breaking apart  
Momma, it ain't too late  
Just turn it around  
(Entire Poem)*

and

*Rescue me from all my pain  
Daddy was never there and it drives me insane  
Mom is by herself and has her own struggles  
Not being able to help her has left me puzzled*

and

*Man, my mom just told me  
She didn't love me anymore*

**Poverty.** This theme encompasses mentions of food insecurity, moving around a lot, and “chasing paper”. It was mentioned nine times in the poems. This poem talks about being cold and hungry, and working to feed the family:

*When I was 10 years old  
There was never food  
It was cold, being hungry and sleepy  
I had to hustle to get food for the house  
All on my own  
Now time passed and it got better*

This poem talks about moving around a lot, and worrying about having food to eat:

*Growing up  
I was confused, going around the world  
Mama getting keys to different apartment doors  
I always wondered, were we in some kind of world?  
But mama strugglin’  
Making sure we can eat  
I love my Mama, but  
Life just ain’t sweet*

Next, the author talks about not having enough money, and trying to earn some:

*Imagine being me  
tryin’  
to hustle up a couple of dollars  
and getting in trouble in the street.*

**Race.** Codes related to the theme of race occurred eight times in the poems. These included mentions of race, typically black or white. The following poems describe feelings of being black, and what that means to each individual. They also both write about being white, and what that means to them.

*I see you looking at me  
Like I’m disgusting  
Who are you to judge?  
We might not have the same color skin  
But I’m not what you think  
Yes I am black and proud  
That doesn’t give you the right to think I am lazy.*

*You're white and I don't judge you  
 Tell you I hate you for what your people have done to us  
 I treat you like an equal  
 Like you were one of my people  
 Please don't judge what you don't know  
 Because I do get good grades.  
 (Entire Poem)*

The next author wonders about the differences between people.

*Why are black and white people  
 different from each other?*

*We're both the same -  
 just different colors.*

*Why do we have to struggle?  
 [...]  
 Why am I black?*

*If I was white, would I get equal respect?*

**Feeling lost.** The theme of feeling lost encompasses poems that directly mention feeling lost, unsure, or hopeless. These mentions occurred six times in the poems, with four of the six mentioning the word “lost”. The following poems describe challenges that these authors are experiencing, as well as feeling as though they are without control in their lives.

*My life is like a roller coaster  
 Always moving  
 Fast  
 I go from place to place  
 I feel I have on [sic] control over anything in my life  
 The world seems to be against me for no apparent reason  
 It's like I am falling into a black hole  
 It just keeps going on and on and on  
 I feel so lost  
 I just don't know what to do anymore*

The previous poem mentions feeling out of control, while the next poem explores a different meaning behind feeling lost.

*I'm lost in my mind...  
I'm lost not knowing what to do  
About the things I'm going through  
Like not being able to go anywhere  
Because of house arrest  
And most of the time I get depressed*

*I'm lost...  
I'm lost in the world not knowing  
Where to go  
What to say  
What am I going to do for the day  
I am lost...*

*I think about things for days and months at a time  
Thinking and dreaming for my own history that I might have  
Will I live to turn 18  
Will I live to have a queen  
A wife, a life that I want  
To have*

*I am lost.*

### **Discussion**

This study essentially consists of two parts: the themes developed by Search Institute and used as a framework for coding, and the themes related to risk factors that were developed through coding the poems. These parts were intended to give a complete picture of both the strengths and assets these urban youth have, as well as the risk factors they face. The eight themes developed by Search Institute and used for data coding are: support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, constructive use of time, commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity. Table 2 shows how often each theme occurred in the poems.

These themes, and the 40 assets that comprise them, were developed from extensive survey data indicating what assets are present in the lives of successful young people. When analyzing the data, it is important to remember that the young people who wrote these poems

were involved in this program because they are facing any number of challenges in their daily lives. This study never set out to find support for all eight categories; rather the goal was to determine which assets are present in their lives, by way of being voiced in their poetry. Each of these individuals is expressing what they feel is important in their life, but this might not be present or important in another person's life. This also indicates where there are deficits in support, and what communities and policy makers might do to address these areas. In addition to determining which assets are or are not present in the poems, eight more themes were developed to illustrate specifically which risk factors are present for these youths as expressed in their poetry.

The eight themes of the developmental assets were divided into internal and external categories. When analyzing the poems for the developmental assets, the data show a clear trend toward students experiencing internal assets, such as positive values, and less frequently expressing the external assets, such as empowerment or boundaries and expectations. This became very apparent during coding and even more so when the numbers were tallied. As is shown in Table 2, there are many more poems in support of the internal themes than the external themes. One notable exception is the theme of support, which has 32 mentions.

One possible explanation for this disparity comes from the nature of the data, the prompts used, and the setting in which the poems were written. In general, these groups and the poems written in them are used as a way to explore a sense of self, and so internal reflection is necessary and encouraged. However, references to external themes come up often in the risk factors. Because so many of the themes developed to reflect risk factors center on external factors such as neighborhood safety or a lack of certain types of relational support, it is safe to say that these youth do not seem to be perceiving these external assets as being as present in their



lives as the internal assets or external risks are. In addition, when coding for constructive use of time, the developmental assets give specific timeframes of two to three hours per week engaged in the activity. Due to the nature of the data, timeframes were not taken into account, so any reference was counted toward this category. It's possible that the students made mention to activities that do not meet the time requirement, so were counted in the analysis when they should not have been.

Most often, the theme of support was found after an author had written about several challenges they were facing, in the context of "but I have friends and family who love me". This theme was largely represented in support from family and friends, not usually from other adults or neighborhood members. In addition, the theme includes parents being actively involved in school, which was not found in the poems.

Of the six assets that make up the theme of support, only one, family support, was consistently found in the data. This is an important connection to previous research, which stated that support from peers and family predicted students' persistence intentions (Howard, Budge & McKay, 2010). Thirty-two of these poems mentioned feeling supported, often by family, which in turn makes it more likely that these authors will be putting forth effort in school. This is consistent with the finding that commitment to learning was mentioned 21 times.

Commitment to school is part of the definition of school engagement created by Daly et al. (2008), as are student attitudes and investment. These three factors predict dropout rates, so it is promising to see that commitment to school was mentioned that often in the poems. In contrast, neighborhood conditions and exposure to violence might lead to school disengagement and dropout (Henry, Knight & Thornberry, 2011). These themes were implicitly found in the risk factors of lack of safety, loss, and law and police.

In contrast, eleven poems mentioned a lack of relational support. This adds to the idea that each individual is experiencing different risk and protective factors. What might be present for one individual in this group is not necessarily present for another.

Positive identity is another theme that merits discussion, as it occurred 84 times in the data, far more than any other theme. This theme consists of personal power, self-esteem, a sense of purpose, and a positive view of personal future. These adolescents, as shown in the number of risk factors identified, face many challenges in their daily lives, yet continue to express a sense of high self-esteem and a positive view of the future. Consistently, all four of the assets in this theme were found in the poems. Because of the high number of mentions, it would be beneficial to devote future research to exploring what other subthemes may be present, and why these youth seem to express such positive self-identity.

The eight risk factors that were developed include lack of safety, loss, law and police, drugs, lack of relational support, poverty, race, and feeling lost. When taken as a whole, seven of the eight themes represent, for the most part, factors outside of the adolescents' control. This is interesting to compare to the assets found in the poems that mostly reflected internal factors.

The theme of law and police had the greatest variety in codes. The codes included things from police brutality to encounters with police to being under house arrest or on probation to simply seeing police in the neighborhood. While the specific phrases and codes differed, the general feel and idea behind each mention was similar. None of the mentions included positive comments or feelings associated with police and law, which is likely reflective of the experiences these adolescents have had.

This variety in codes was different from the other themes that consisted of a few main codes. It was startling at times how often the same phrases and words were used to describe

similar phenomena. One example of this is the phrase “girls doing things they really don’t want to do”. This is a specific statement that occurred almost word for word in two different poems from two different anthologies. Similarly, two different authors wrote about needing to “tuck in your chain” so as not to get mugged.

The theme of feeling lost, while occurring only six times in the poems, was striking in that almost all of the codes were the same. It’s also interesting to compare this theme to the assets that are present in the poems. These adolescents are committed to learning, have some external support, and have positive values and sense of personal power. At the same time, they express feeling lost or unsure about what to do, and how to overcome the various challenges they are facing.

One of the important decisions when developing these themes was how to determine whether there were enough codes to comprise a theme. The cutoff ended up being six or more codes in a theme. There were several other groups of codes that might develop into themes if more poems were analyzed, but at this point, they did not provide a strong enough theme. These potential themes include "girls doing things they really don't want to do" or young girls giving up their body which was mentioned three times, almost dying came up four times, being teased came up three times, being a teen parent came up three times, and foster care or adoption which came up four times.

The results provide a good basis for schools, communities and policy makers to begin to address the areas of deficits and risk identified in this study. There are some assets that are clearly present in these adolescents’ lives, including support, constructive use of time, commitment to learning, positive values and positive identities. It is important to emphasize these and continue to build and reinforce the existing assets and strengths that are present. Social

workers and other professionals working with this population should be aware of the strong positive identity these adolescents have, and can build off of that to increase things like empowerment and commitment to learning.

The theme of feeling lost also provides inspiration for various interventions that could be used in schools or other agencies. Often, these adolescents expressed commitment to school and desire for a positive future, but are also confused or unsure about how to achieve that. These adolescents also rarely express feeling empowered, or having clear boundaries and expectations. These topics could be emphasized in schools, encouraging educators, broadly, and interdisciplinarily, to work on those areas. This theme also shows a need for programs, like the one this data came from, that allow students to express themselves in a safe space and learn about healthy boundaries from people who have high expectations.

One of the main limitations of using poetry as a dataset comes from trying to interpret what the author meant to convey. Poetry is not limited to complete, grammatically correct sentences, which, while adding to the emotional power of the poems, means that some amount of interpretation on the part of the researcher was necessary. Because these poems were not written or selected specifically for this research, there might be poems that are purely products of the author's imagination, or an exaggeration of true events. However, because of the nature of the groups, the poems tend to be fact based rather than fiction. Using these existing poems also meant that the authors were not intending to answer any specific question, or to write about any assets or risks in their lives. This means that some risks or assets might be missing from the data, and therefore the themes.

Another limitation comes from trying to use Search Institute's developmental assets as themes to begin coding from. Because the themes were not derived from this data, it was

sometimes difficult to determine if a poem could truly be included as part of a theme or not. The study is also limited in that all of the data was gathered by one program in one school district. This means that the results will not be generalizable beyond high school students with an EBD label in this area.

One of the main strengths of a qualitative design is that it allows for exploration of new ideas and theories based on the analysis of the data. This study used data that was unsolicited, meaning that there were a large number of topics covered. The students were not limited by trying to answer specific questions, allowing a unique look at their views. Another strength of this study is that it used data collected over a number of years, increasing both the sample size and the generalizability across cohorts. The students were also in grades nine through twelve, further extending the generalizability of the results.

Another strength of the research is that it provides individual and humanizing glimpses into what these youth experience, and what they think is important. Students who are given the label of EBD are often treated as a homogeneous group. The label of EBD covers such a wide range of symptoms and behaviors that no two students experience it in the same way. Beyond that, no two students have identical pasts or presents. Everyone's lived experience is different, and these poems are one way of identifying many unique perspectives. This research may also have the potential to break down some commonly held stereotypes and beliefs about this group of students. By reading about each individual's life or thoughts, it becomes easier to view these students as different, not just as their EBD label.

Future research could further explore students' perceptions of the risk factors and assets that they encounter in their daily lives. It could also look at how to help increase the assets of empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and social competency. Another area that could use

more research is the idea of feeling lost. These adolescents expressed this feeling, and it could have a large impact on some of the missing assets, such as empowerment.

Each of the risk factors identified in this study could be further explored. All of the themes were created largely from references in poems, rather than in-depth explorations of these factors. To add further weight to this research, future studies could explore how youth would respond to seeing these results, if they would agree or disagree with the themes identified in this study, and to what extent these factors are or are not present.

These students are diverse in many ways, and each one has a unique lived experience. This study provides only a brief glimpse into the lives of urban youth who have an EBD label, with the hope of better understanding these adolescents, and therefore better serving them in the future. Because there are 72,000 urban youth in Minnesota, and dozens of potential risk and protective factors, it is important to understand as much as possible about this population with the goal of developing the best possible interventions to increase the likelihood of success for these youths.

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