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“It Takes a Village!”: Social Capital Building in a Remote Hawai‘i Community

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Introduction

Youth development occurs within a dynamic social environment in which youth influence and are influenced by others. Scarr (1992) argued that “children are active, influential partners in their interactions with the people around them” (2). While youth development in general has attracted researchers for the past several decades (Edwards et al., 2010), less is known regarding the development of minority adolescents residing in remote communities, such as Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders (Minority Health, 2020) who are often susceptible to disparities related to education (Chung-Do et al., 2015; Durand et al., 2016). Addressing the needs of this adolescent group is important to reducing inequalities faced by minority and indigenous populations (Hishinuma et al., 2009).

We drew the data from Creating a Village program (Village) in Hawai’i, United States, a multi-level educational intervention that supports middle schoolers transitioning into adulthood through youth-adult partnerships, teen mentoring, and community sustainability. The youth stemmed from low-income, remote communities in which after-school activities were scarce, and whose circumstances worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Village provided them with opportunities to develop life-skill mastery through a support structure of adult and older peer role models. Previous research has shown that non-familial adults from the same community or culture can serve as important protective factors for vulnerable youth (Farruggia et al., 2013). Ultimately, the combination of skill development with social guidance in the Village aimed to create a safe social environment for youth to flourish.

The social, economic, and environmental changes that impact at-risk family dynamics also affect intergenerational support, the lack of which can leave youth without role models to support their transition to adulthood (Amato, 2005). This is especially true of life-management skills, which are decreasingly taught in schools

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(Danovich, 2018) but are necessary for a successful transition into the workforce and community. Thus, the Village incorporates several evidence-based programs and developmental theories into a multi-level program. The 4-H Positive Youth Development model utilizes an informal experiential learning approach that embeds the essential elements of mastery, belonging, generosity, and independence, which help youth achieve life skills (Meyer & Jones, 2015). The 4-H Thriving Model applies experiential learning with elements of mastery, belonging, generosity, and independence tailored to the needs of vulnerable youth.

Social Capital Framework

In this study, we examine youth developmental outcomes based on Coleman's social capital theory (1988). Social capital encompasses intangible resources from a network of relationships rooted within families and communities. Social capital provides resources in the form of values embedded in positive and productive relationships, which provide an individual access to information, resources, and support through interactions with others (Coleman, 1988). The Village creates a supply of social capital with participants attaining new knowledge and skills at each club meeting, guided by teen mentors, adult partners, and community expert volunteers—all of whom act as *information channels* for the youth. These social components encourage the sharing of knowledge and feelings among participants in horizontal and oblique directions through *reciprocity* and create a *social norm* of a supportive environment to help make participants feel belonging in the group. Guided by the social capital framework, this study explored participants' experiences and how the intervention promoted positive developmental outcomes among the youth.

Program Context

In the intervention, the role of teen mentors (high schoolers) was to guide the youth participants (middle schoolers) while adult partners (college students and adults) acted as mentors to the teen mentors and the middle schoolers. The teen mentors and adult partners worked together to develop and deliver hands-on and interactive learning experiences for the youth, encouraging them to lead activities, share their opinions, and make informed decisions through educational activities. Examples of learning activities included icebreakers, pre-recorded scenario videos introducing content topics, online games, storytelling, reflection discussions, and quizzes to help review and retain new information and reinforce problem-solving, decision-making, and communication skills.

The Village provided structured opportunities for interaction between youth and adult community members. The program staff recruited adult expert volunteers with specific skill sets from the local community, which shared common values and way of life, to serve as resources for knowledge gain and personal development for everyone in the Village. Using gamification, youth completed tasks in a variety of topic/mastery areas that expert volunteers facilitated in their one-hour visitations (see table 1). At each meeting, participants also received a bag of supplies that they used for hands-on activities, facilitated by the experts. Experts supplied additional resources such as videos and handouts to reinforce the youth's learning after each club meeting.

Table 1

An Overview of Community Expert Volunteer Mastery Areas

Learning (education) <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Applying to college• Looking at education options	Engaging (civic) <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What to do in emergencies• Volunteering
Investing (finance) <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Becoming familiar with banks• Spending choices	Grounding (agriculture) <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Community garden• Community food access
Working (jobs/careers) <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How to get a job• How to keep a job	Thriving (physical/mental health) <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Self-care• Nutrition, eating right
Exploring (transportation/travel) <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Transportation• Travel	Building (home) <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Home management• Deciding where to live

Program Participants

We recruited youth program participants from an upcountry Title I Middle School in Hawai'i, with the help of two school counselors. The school was located in a remote, low-income area where the poverty threshold was estimated at 53% in 2021. Program staff recruited teen mentors and a single adult partner from the same community. Table 2 depicts demographics of youth ($n_{boys}=6$, $n_{girls}=3$; $M_{age}=13$; 44.9% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, 44.4% Black or African American, 33.3% White, 22.2. % Asian; participants could select multiple ethnicities), teen mentors ($n_{girls}=3$; $M_{age}=18$), and a young adult partner (male; 24 years old) who participated in 26 virtual club meetings in Spring 2021.

Table 2

The Village Participant Demographics

Participants	Gender	Age	Ethnicity
Youth	Female	12	Black or African American
	Female	14	Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander and White
	Female	14	White
	Male	12	Black or African American
	Male	12	Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
	Male	13	Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander and Asian
	Male	13	Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, Asian, and White
	Male	14	Black or African American
	Male	14	Black or African American
Teen mentors	Female	18	Asian
	Female	18	Asian
	Female	18	Asian and White
Adult partner	Male	24	Asian

N=13

Method

This cross-sectional study consisted of 27 individuals who participated in a total of six focus groups at the end of the program. The focus group protocol asked open-ended questions about participants' experiences in the program, and the perceived benefits and drawbacks. We conducted two separate focus groups with the youth, one with teen mentors and an adult partner, two with twelve community expert volunteers, and one with two program coordinators. The focus groups were recorded and transcribed for analysis purposes. In addition, we took observation notes during each club meeting, with a focus on observing the social environment, individual behaviors, the activities, and various participants' reactions to these details (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Participation in this study was completely voluntary.

For the qualitative data analysis, we drew on both inductive and deductive approaches to generating common themes. First, we approached our raw data inductively. We applied thematic analysis by coding the data to identify emerging themes and patterns that corresponded with the areas of inquiry (Saldaña, 2016). Second, we employed a deductive approach guided by the social capital theoretical framework, which allowed us to unpack our data in ways that answered our research questions. In the final phase, another team member of this study provided feedback on the generated themes to establish the trustworthiness of the data analysis.

We used triangulation to clarify meaning through multiple participants' perspectives and data sources, covering focus group interviews, interviews with staff members, as well as observations. Triangulation of the data is one way for the researcher to increase the confidence of correct interpretation, and to establish credibility of the study (Stake, 2010). Triangulation requires the researcher to look and listen from various vantage points, from

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speaking with the participants to observing their interactions and engagement in the program. This approach to our data collection and analysis helped us understand the program experiences from different perspectives.

Findings

Our data analysis revealed three main themes that supported the development of participants' social capital: skill development, youth-adult relationship building, and sense of belonging.

Skill Development

Youth reported skills that they gained from the Village, some of which included gardening, healthy meal preparation, stress management, listening, self-initiative to interact with people they did not know well, responsibility handling, the importance of communication, working with a team, leadership, and problem solving. Middle schoolers expressed the skill growth in their comments:

"I really enjoyed the cooking one because I think that for my family, there is a lot of us so we do not normally make lunch a lot. So, it is nice to know how I can make different meals."

"I can start thinking about like, how I would want to manage my living style and not just blow out my money, or something that I really needed. And that would probably be useful."

"The way you treat your car is how you treat your body. If you do not take care of it well, it is going to rust, it is going to get rid of it until it dies. And if you take care of your body correctly, [you] treat your bike, your car the same way as how you take care of yourself."

Skill development, as per social capital theory, occurred via *information channels* built into the program structure, where participants were equipped with the opportunities to obtain and share information on various skills and strengths among the Villagers. For instance, the youth mentioned that the information provided in a bag of supplies for demonstration purposes during each club meeting allowed them to learn new things. Other participants stated the following:

"It was this key like a flash drive ... And it was different things for different purposes if you are stressed out or something. And it was a skill I learned because I was not used to doing anything of that sort. I normally would just leave and come back or go for a run or do something outdoors and then come back and do it. [This was] a different way to manage my stress." [Middle Schooler]

"Kids don't know what's out there and what's available out there ... only what they see on TV and family. This program presents a lot of topics that they can relate to their life." [Expert Volunteer]

"It is a good opportunity to have a discussion with youth whether or not they will go to college, and what skills they would need in the future ... It is very important to share with students but also to allow them to dream about their future ... Are they building their skills toward their dreams? If not, how do they adapt? Action steps towards building the dream, career, future for them ... it takes a village to help people to grow." [Expert Volunteer]

These findings illustrate the acquisition of both tangible and soft skills that several youths reportedly continued to use outside the Village in their daily lives.

Youth-Adult Relationship Building

Participants recognized relationship building as the most valuable aspect of the Village, as reflected in the following comments:

“It took me a little while to get to know them [teen mentors] and message them. But now I feel like I do not want to let them go.” [Middle Schooler]

“The most impact we had, for us, was the relationship we built between us and them [youth].” [Adult Partner]

“They created new friendships through this program, and perhaps that would have never happened had they not been in this group ... Seeing that confidence growth between those age groups was really quite wonderful.” [Program Coordinator]

Relationship building, based on social capital theory, occurred via *reciprocity* of the Village activities, allowing participants to get familiar with, and accustomed to, a social environment in which they were expected to bond with one another. The following comments reflected this type of reciprocity:

“When they brought up games because I am a competitive person and at the same time I was in sports. When that came up, I can tell that some of them were more competitive, too. So then, I kind of bonded over the activities.” [Middle Schooler]

“I could tell a lot of people watched a different TV show or maybe they were a bit more involved with indoors like gaming. And I game too, but normally I am an outdoor person doing stuff outside. So, I kind of enjoyed telling them about what I do outside and stuff like that. It felt good. And then hearing what they do inside, the games they play.” [Middle Schooler]

“The ones [activities] that allowed us to get to know the kids more. I think that helped to build the relationship between us and the kids. ‘Would you rather’ sort of things where they give their opinion on different things.” [Teen Mentor]

Through reciprocity, expert volunteers commented on social capital resources being shared within the Village:

“Speaking with students and sharing the resources is part of our kuleana (Hawaiian for responsibility). And kuleana comes back around. One day they will be in the position to share back because one day it was shared with them in the past. It empowers them because of the population they come from and the time spent with them.”

“When there is time to go to university they know people, someone to turn to. This is very important for them and all of us. Opportunities usually come from knowing someone ... Especially for youth from less capitalistically empowered families, this is very important.”

As our observations indicate, the Village set the stage for relationship building between youth and adults, which proved essential for “the kids to keep coming back” each session. Moreover, the findings demonstrated that the educational activities and resources shared within the Village were key for youth retention in the program, particularly in the absence of other after-school activities.

Sense of Belonging

From the youth perspectives, there was a sense of gratitude that this virtual program operated during the pandemic. Youth reported a sense of belonging as a result of their participation in the program, which was reflected by all Villagers in the following comments:

“I am usually kind of quiet because I do not like interacting a lot unless it is with my family because I feel comfortable with them. But it was kind of surprising when I was able to feel comfortable talking.”

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[Middle Schooler]

“I really like the people [in the Village]. I think that if there is not the correct people there, it will just not go as smoothly as it did... I liked how they got community people. I think that makes it more like real, or like, more towards home and how it can actually relate to them.” [Teen Mentor]

“I liked the environment of the program, everyone was very welcoming. It really did feel like a village, you know.” [Adult Partner]

The sense of belonging, based on the social capital framework and the positive youth development theory, occurred via a social norm of a supportive environment and reciprocal community relationships among participants that were trustworthy and conducive to sharing. Participants reflected on this in the following comments:

“From like, when I first joined until now, I have been really chill. So, it did not make it too difficult for me to just, like, walk my wing in and then like, just come in and pay attention.” [Middle Schooler]

“I definitely feel like it is sort of like a home, a very safe space where we were more related. It is not like a teacher-student relationship but rather like a mentor, like a cousin, uncle sort of relationship.” [Teen Mentor]

“Based on the fact that kids kept coming back, there was a connection, community, and sense of belonging that was built ... It is so wonderful, especially in times of COVID-19 [pandemic] when it is all on Zoom.” [Expert Volunteer]

These findings show that the participants built positive youth-adult partnerships that cultivated a collective sense of belonging for youth in a supportive social environment.

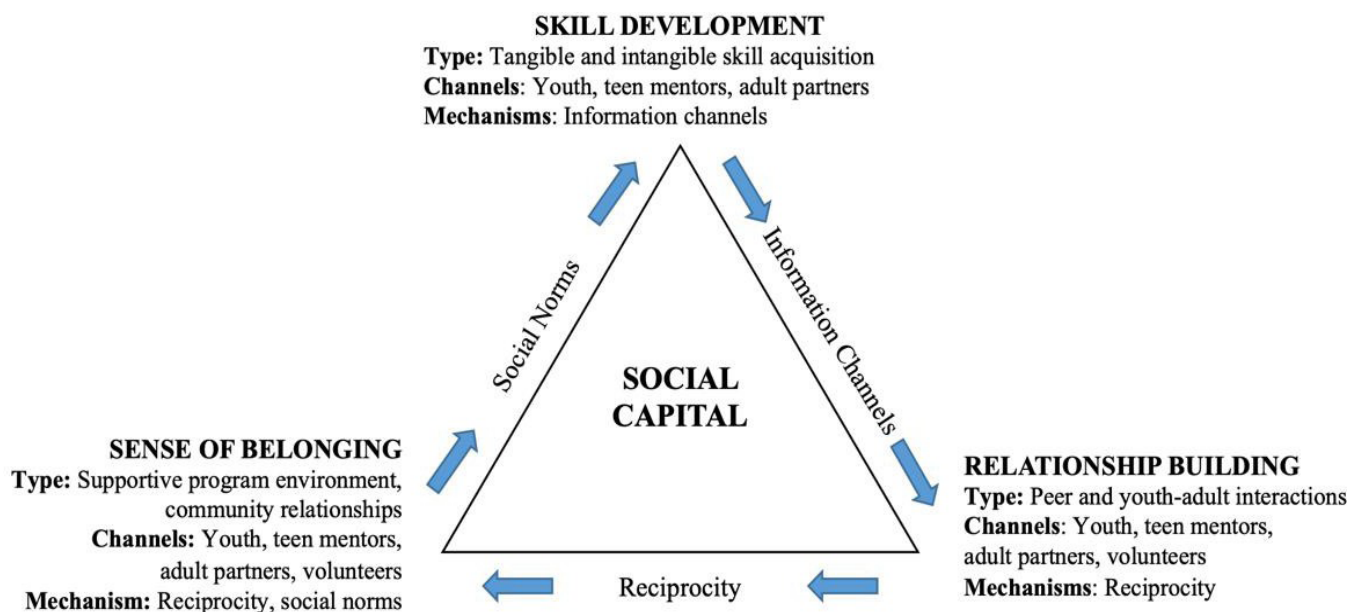
Discussion

This study aimed to understand how participants experienced a multi-level educational intervention, and in what ways it promoted social capital development between youth and adults. The findings illustrate that youth acquired intangible resources through skill development, a sense of belonging, and relationship building under the guidance of teen mentors, adult partners, and community expert volunteers (see fig. 1). Based on social capital theory (Coleman, 1988), through information channels via various participants, as they contributed to the whole group during club meetings, youth acquired life skills necessary for their academic and future career development. Through reciprocity established among the participants, youth gained a sense of belonging as they were afforded opportunities to share and be open with one another. Through a social norm that grew out of a supportive environment, the youth felt a strong sense of belonging to the group and the local community. Finally, a social norm of interactive educational activities that occurred regularly during each club meeting allowed youth to gain familiarity with each other over time, leading to new connections with peers and to youth-adult relationship development, which resulted in a sense of community.

Our findings also contributed to the understanding and the importance of bonding and bridging the social capital framework developed by Putnam (2000). The bonding social capital reinforced positive relationship building within a group (among middle schoolers, teen mentors, and adult partners), while bridging social capital extended beyond the group setting into the wider community) —in this case, the community expert volunteers who acted as bridging agents to a wider community (Putnam, 2000). In this way, social capital can be further reproduced and accumulated over time through acquired skills and knowledge, newly formed contacts, and active participation in various community activities (Ball, 2003).

Figure 1

Social Capital Development between Youth and Adults



Implications and Conclusion

The implications of this research show that multi-level interventions that build on community resources and youth-adult partnerships can benefit minority youth populations residing in low-income, remote communities. The Village created a safe environment for trust building between youth and adult mentors and provided opportunities to develop reciprocal social relationships among participants. As a result, the Village generated social capital for the vulnerable youth. Kowalski and Lankford (2010) identified the following barriers to after-school activities in remote and isolated communities in Hawai'i: transportation, lack of information, and financial constraints. This study showed that the structure of the Village itself provided youth with non-familial role models from the community— a major protective factor for vulnerable youth (Deane et al., 2018; Farruggia et al., 2013).

A sense of belonging to one's community is another protective factor that may lead to positive cognitive changes such as increased self-efficacy and resilience (Chung-Do et al., 2015) when youth make the decision to enter postsecondary education or the workforce. This is especially pertinent to minority and indigenous groups, such as African Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders, who were the majority in the Village program. These groups often lack tangible resources and role models in the community. As per Sanders and colleagues (2017), indigenous and minority adolescents need to “have access to culturally anchored resources that offer them some protective benefits across the individual, family and school domains” (776). Thus, effective youth interventions should build on knowledge of protective factors and the social capital framework to foster wellbeing and academic success as vulnerable youth transition into adulthood.

Finally, we acknowledge the limitation of our study's small sample size, which warrants consideration for future research. All youth in this study were affiliated with one middle school located in a remote community in Hawai'i, which limits this study's generalization and transferability to other populations and contexts. Future research should draw on a larger sample of youth and community members across different geographical areas.

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