

Positive Youth Development in Rural High Schools: A Two-State Case Study

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Abstract

This research explored what students and school staff in rural, low socioeconomic (SES) high schools perceive as factors that strengthen and inhibit the positive youth development (PYD) attributes of students' confidence, competence, character, connection, and compassion. A collective case study was conducted in four rural high schools, two in Kansas and two in West Virginia. Fieldwork at each school involved semi-structured focus group interviews with students and school staff. Observations and documents collected focused on the various social-emotional learning (SEL) support, services, and opportunities made available to students as well as community resources and statistics. It was discovered that students and school staff perceive that a student's lack of understanding and acceptance of others, a challenging and disruptive home life, and the pressure to perform academically can be significant inhibitors of all five PYD attributes in rural, low-SES high schools. Providing diverse opportunities for student engagement and hands-on and engaging courses, such as Career Technical Education (CTE) combined with adult intentionality, modeling, and encouragement, emerged from the study as perceived factors that strengthen all five attributes of PYD. The recommendations section of this paper provides thoughts and suggestions on strengthening the PYD of students attending rural, low-SES high schools.

Introduction

There has been an increased focus in many schools and school systems on social-emotional health and positive youth development (PYD). PYD has historically been applied in three different but related ways: referring to the developmental process of youth, a set of principles and a philosophy centered around focusing on youth assets instead of deficits, and the practices of programs, organizations, and initiatives that deliver on the principles of youth development in fostering a healthy growth and development process for youth (Hamilton et al., 2004). Social-emotional learning (SEL) is closely linked to positive youth development theory as both are focused on capitalizing on the internal strengths of the individual and leveraging the ecological assets available to the student to help them thrive, as well as fostering resiliency through supports and opportunities (Romer & Hansen, 2021; Osher et al., 2014).

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Schools are part of an intricate and intimate microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) where students interact not only with curriculum and programming but also with different people and numerous opportunities, such as clubs, sports teams, and specialized courses. Schools play a critical role in intellectual and social-emotional youth development (Osher et al., 2014). Within a school, students receive support from individuals, such as teachers and coaches. They also benefit from programs and services, such as social-emotional interventions, food distribution, and after-school programming.

A growing number of students experiencing mental health issues, accompanied by the increase in risky behaviors during adolescence, has drawn much attention from parents, policymakers, and public education teachers and administrators (Romer & Hansen, 2021; Zablotsky & Terlizza, 2019). However, there is a growing interest in PYD as an approach to promoting overall robust health and well-being in youth because not only does it encourage developmental growth and success into adulthood, but research has shown that PYD interventions can also improve student mental health and reduce participation in risky behaviors (Lerner & Lerner, 2013).

Learning how to promote youth development positively can provide insights into how to facilitate developmental success for all students, including those living in rural communities and poverty. Research indicates that rural students experiencing poverty are more likely to have mental health issues compared to urban students in poverty (Gale et al., 2019; Lenardson et al., 2010). The research that has been conducted on student poverty consists of conflicting views on how best to engage students in poverty, understand poverty and the students and families experiencing it, and how to improve the emotional health and outlook of students (Dweck, 2016; Gorski, 2016; Duckworth et al., 2007; Payne, 2005).

This study is relevant and important to School-based Agricultural Education (SBAE) programs and FFA chapters. According to Lisa Barger of the National FFA Organization (personal communication, July 13, 2023), 60% of active chapters in 2021-22 were in rural communities, and 20% were in town locales. Limited qualitative research has focused on the student perspective of their own PYD within the context of the rural, low-SES high school. This study sought to explore the perceptions of students and school staff in rural, low-SES high schools regarding what prevents and promotes strong PYD.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this case study was to explore the perceptions of students and school staff in rural, low-SES high schools regarding the PYD of students. The study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What factors do students and school staff believe contribute to lower levels of PYD?
2. What factors do students and school staff believe contribute to higher levels of PYD?

Literature Review

Students Experiencing Poverty

Socioeconomic status is a predictor of several outcomes in youth, including mental health, cognition, and social-emotional development (Elliott, 2016; Lacour & Tissington, 2011; Office of Socioeconomic Status, 2010; Ready, 2010). The rate of severe mental health issues is four times greater in poor communities compared to more affluent neighborhoods, and the teachers and administrators in those poor community schools are usually tasked with the challenge of supporting student needs with fewer resources (Berliner, 2013).

Two major theoretical frameworks have emerged from research concerning students experiencing poverty: a deficit model and an assets-based model. Some researchers conclude educators must inspire poor students to develop a “growth mindset” (Dweck, 2016, p. 7), while others stress the importance of assisting

them in the development of “grit” (Duckworth et al., 2007, pp. 1087-1088). Others deem such approaches a form of “deficit ideology” (Gorski, 2016, p. 379) and conclude that these approaches only serve to make students in poverty feel like the problem is inherent within them instead of caused by societal forces happening around them.

Rural Schools and Students

Nearly one of every seven students in the United States attended a public school located in a rural school district in the 2016-17 school year (Showalter et al., 2019). Rural students and schools have been traditionally underrepresented in school policy and research (Lavalley, 2018). The issues being faced by rural students and schools can no longer be overlooked. The rates of severe mental illnesses, depression, and suicide are higher among students in rural areas than in urban (Gale et al., 2019). Children in rural, low-SES communities experience higher rates of food insecurity than children in non-rural areas, which has been linked to higher rates of mental health issues and lower educational attainment (Showalter et al., 2019). Rural youth are more likely than their urban peers to engage in risky drug and alcohol-related behavior, including binge drinking, driving under the influence, and methamphetamine use (Gale et al., 2019).

Rural schools and the communities they serve possess a unique set of traditions and history. These strong core rural values, when mixed with the everyday rural realities of unemployment, isolation, and poverty, can lead to unhealthy approaches to both physical and mental health and, in turn, shape the attitudes, behaviors, and development of youth in these communities (Slama, 2004). In many rural areas, due to instability in the home and lack of access to resources in the community, the school takes on the most influential and consistent role in a child's development.

Positive Youth Development

Positive Youth Development (PYD) is a perspective grounded in a positive view of youth that values their strengths and assets over problematic behavior. PYD seeks to identify the environments that promote thriving during adolescence and positive growth and development into adults who contribute to their communities and society. It is an outlook where youth are viewed not as problems to be fixed but as resources to be developed (Lerner, 2007).

The PYD perspective views youth development differently than traditional intervention and prevention efforts and holds several key assumptions. These include a belief that all youth have the potential for positive growth and development; a positive developmental trajectory is enabled when youth are embedded and engaged in relationships, contexts, and environments that nurture their development; and youth hold a significant role in their development (Duerden et al., 2010). Research indicates that the three most essential features of effective youth development programs include: “positive and sustained relationships between youth and adults, activities that build important life skills, and opportunities for youth to use these life skills as both participants and leaders” (Lerner & Lerner, 2013, p. ii).

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is one of the most well-known and utilized approaches to PYD (Romer & Hansen, 2021). Most SEL interventions occur in elementary and middle schools. SEL can take on many forms at the high school level, from character education programs to service-learning projects (Romer & Hansen, 2021). A meta-analysis of 82 school-based, universal SEL interventions involving over 97,000 kindergarten to high school students found that the PYD of students was enhanced through SEL interventions. The PYD benefits were similar regardless of the student's race, socioeconomic background, or school location (Taylor et al., 2017).

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The theoretical perspective that served as the lens of my research was interpretivism. The interpretivist approach examines the human interpretations and understandings of the social world (Crotty, 2015). My purpose was to understand what was happening at the school level, as experienced by students, administrators, teachers, and social-emotional support staff, and discover what factors are supporting and inhibiting rural students experiencing poverty with their development of strong mental, social, and emotional characteristics in preparation for adulthood.

The finer lens for my research in the realm of interpretivism was symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism emphasizes the process of humans making meaning of their interactions with the world to understand their social reality (Bhattacharya, 2017). This study provided students and school staff in rural, low-SES high schools an opportunity to make subjective meaning of the factors that impact the attributes of PYD. Those PYD attributes serve as the conceptual framework for this study.

A national study of over 7,000 4-H members indicated that youth who thrive during adolescence and have smooth transitions into adulthood share similar attributes and outlooks (Lerner & Lerner, 2013). These characteristics are summarized as the Five Cs of PYD, including competence, confidence, connection, character, and compassion (Geldhof et al., 2014). For these five Cs of PYD to be nurtured in youth, they must have access to developmental assets – positive people, activities, resources, and institutions that promote strong and sustained growth and development (Lerner, 2007).

In the Five Cs framework context, Lerner (2007) described competence as the ability to act effectively within various environments: school, society, and work. It is about what an individual can do, not how or what they feel. Confidence is about youth believing in themselves and achieving their goals through their actions. Lerner (2007) suggested that where competence and confidence are individual, connection is about the importance and impact of others. Youth can have all of the competence and confidence in the world, but they still need connection with and support from others. Lerner (2007) suggested that character is linked to three attributes: a moral compass, consistent and reliable morality, and respect for others. Compassion is about showing concern about the lives of others through words and actions and developing a sense of social justice, empathy, and sympathy (Lerner, 2007).

As a conceptual framework, the five positive outcomes (competence, confidence, connection, character, and compassion) within the PYD model served as a basis for the research questions. They provided a focus for the case study methods (Lerner et al., 2000).

Methods

Collective case study methods were utilized to explore the factors impacting PYD by closely examining four similar schools or cases so each could provide insight into the issues facing students attending rural, low-SES high schools (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The use of collective or multiple-case study design has increased in recent years because, as Herriott and Firestone (1983) suggest, evidence from multisite qualitative case studies is often considered more compelling and robust. The four sites were selected to seek in-depth understandings of each school while "embracing a constant-comparative perspective that allows for the emergence of broader insights, or themes" (Johnson et al., 2011, p. 9). This approach provided an opportunity for cross-case comparisons where similarities and differences could be highlighted, and it offered greater generalizability of findings compared to a single case study with only one school (Johnson & Christensen, 2008).

During the data collection, I maintained a researcher's journal to document my reflexivity and to serve as a space to record memos on my data and protocols, including additional questions and emerging

connections and patterns. Stake (1995) indicated that reflective practice throughout the case study enhances the overall quality and rigor of the study. Using multiple data sources for each research question provided triangulation and made the findings more comprehensive (Hays, 2004). Triangulation was utilized by collecting data from multiple sources: semi-structured focus group interviews with students and school staff, collecting and analyzing school and community documents and information, and observations. This data triangulation makes it more likely that the findings can be trusted and addresses problems with construct validity in the research design (Yin, 2018; Hays, 2004).

At each step of the coding and analysis process, the data went through a peer review process, providing credibility to the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Findings were shared with each school administrator, and they were asked to provide any further information or corrections. This member checking served an important role in adding validity to the research. Dependability was established by providing a rich description of the study methodology and maintaining an audit trail of the data collection and analysis process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Researcher Subjectivity

The subject of positive youth development is personal to me. My entire career in education has been dedicated to developing and providing PYD opportunities to students through education, specifically the Career and Technical Education (CTE) area of Agricultural Education. I believe CTE programs can positively impact the PYD of poor and affluent students from rural and urban communities; therefore, I constantly checked this bias through reflection and journaling as I researched schools with SBAE and additional CTE programs.

Case Selection

The most defining characteristic of case study research involves delimiting the object of study (Merriam, 2009). This study was bounded by time and place (Creswell & Poth, 2018), as the study was delimited to four rural, low-SES high schools in Kansas and West Virginia during the spring semester of the 2020-21 school year and involved only the students attending and adults working in and with those schools. Each case in the study was carefully and purposively selected so that individual cases would predict similar results, a literal replication (Yin, 2018). The four cases were believed to be literal replications based on initial PYD survey data and conversations with school administrators about their implemented practices to address PYD.

In the initial research stage, I sought to identify 10 schools in Kansas and 10 in West Virginia to create a pool of schools from which the four case study schools could be selected. The following three criteria were used to select the schools in each state: the highest percentage of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch in their respective states, located in a school district classified as either rural or town using the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) urban-centric local classification system (Provasnik et al., 2007), and offered SBAE.

The initial phase of the case study involved having sophomores and juniors of each school complete the PYD Questionnaire Short Version (Geldhof et al., 2014). The survey results were used to assist in the selection of cases. Fifty-three students from five schools in West Virginia and 63 students from five in Kansas completed the initial survey. The four schools for the collective case study were then selected based on three significant factors: the quantitative survey results, the level of survey participation, and phone conversations with school administrators about PYD and SEL.

Participant Selection

Students and adults in each school were purposively selected for focus group interviews. I worked with each school principal to identify students and adults who would be in the best position to answer questions openly and honestly. Two groups of five to seven students were created at each school for student

focus group interviews. An attempt was made to organize each group with students with similar interests and backgrounds to create an atmosphere where deeper sharing would occur and, in turn, provide richer data (Krueger, 1994).

The first student group was comprised of students with various levels of school involvement but also identified by the school principal as students who had benefitted from a specific youth development or social-emotional intervention at the school. The second group consisted of students with various levels of school involvement but had yet to rely on any specific youth development or social-emotional intervention. One adult focus group of five to seven members was organized at each school.

Profile of Participants

Across all four cases, the student groups comprised 24 females and 11 males. One freshman, 13 sophomores, 18 juniors, and three seniors participated in the focus group interviews. The most significant percentage of students were White, but there were two Black, one multiracial, and one Pacific Islander student. Pseudonyms were used in place of real names to protect the identity of the students. Some students were very active in their school, including student organizations, intra-curricular activities, and extracurricular activities, while some did not participate in anything or very little. Some students were enrolled in CTE courses, while others focused more on academics and Advanced Placement (AP) courses.

Twenty-one (13 female and eight male) school staff participated in adult focus group interviews across all four cases. The following school staff participated in the focus group interviews: all four principals for each school; four school counselors; two CTE teachers; two social workers, two sports coaches; one Assistant Principal; one English teacher; one Spanish teacher, one Choir and Music teacher; one Career Specialist, one mental health counselor, and one district Student Services Coordinator. Years of education experience among the school staff group ranged from one to 33. Pseudonyms were used in place of real names to protect the identity of the school staff.

Data Collection and Analysis

This research accessed multiple data sources, which Yin (2018) posits is a significant strength of the case study method. Informal, open-ended, semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with students and adults at each school to provide a rich description of the findings. Observations were made during fieldwork with school documents and community information collected at each school to provide a rich description and triangulation. A focus group interview protocol was designed and piloted before being used in the field. I piloted the focus group protocol with two groups of Kansas State University Agricultural Education students, and their feedback proved invaluable. The same questions were used for students and adults, but a separate adult focus group protocol was created.

As I began analyzing and interpreting my data, the research questions remained at the forefront of my thinking. They continually reminded me that the purpose of a case study is to answer questions rather than gain a complete understanding of what is happening at the site (Hays, 2004). The data analysis process with focus group interviews begins during the interview with proper discussion facilitation and gaining rich data during the interview accompanied with observational notes (Rabiee, 2004).

After each focus group interview, I captured initial thoughts and notes in my field notebook. I saved the audio file from each interview on a secure university-provided computer and cloud-based storage for backup. Each audio file was uploaded to Otter.ai™, an online transcription service, and each audio file was transcribed. The audio files from each school were listened to for the first time to become familiar with the data, correct any mistakes in the generated transcripts, and assign pseudonyms to each participant.

The transcripts for each school were read and reviewed a second time, and open coding was conducted with notes and memos written about emerging ideas. This inductive approach allowed the raw

data to be transformed into codes (Bhattacharya, 2017). Notes and memos were created during the coding process to provide an audit trail for the data analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A file in Microsoft Excel© was created to serve as a code book in preparation for axial coding and the third reading of the focus group interview transcripts. Student and adult transcript coding were kept in the same file but on different spreadsheets. As the transcripts were read and reviewed a third time, each research question was taken one at a time, and axial coding was conducted to organize the developing data into categories of codes. The audio files were also listened to again during the coding to listen for expression and emotion.

The code category column in the spreadsheet was sorted, and common code categories across all four schools were organized together. This sorting showed if code categories were common across all four cases. Only a few code categories emerged that were not consistent across the four cases. For the unique code categories that did emerge, I organized them within a separate spreadsheet and shared them with the school principal. I also noted potential future research based on some of these unique code categories. Student and school staff coding was done separately and then compared and combined. Once the code categories were determined to be consistent across the four schools and between students and school staff, transcripts were read a fourth time, and the audio files were listened to again as categories of codes were organized into themes.

At this point in the data analysis, school and community documents, and field notes from observations made during my visit to each school were analyzed and used to substantiate existing codes and themes and provide more details about specific areas not discussed in depth during the focus group interviews. For example, students shared very little about the poverty they experience, yet the information collected confirmed the challenges many students and families face because of poverty.

Limitations

This study was delimited to the focus group interview responses of students and adults and documents and observations analyzed from two rural, low SES high schools in Kansas and two in West Virginia. Even though it was made clear to the participants that this was a non-COVID-19 study, the subject of the pandemic did come up at various points during the focus group interviews. It is impossible to know the extent of the pandemic's impact on the responses of students and adults. However, great care was taken to clarify various statements and to separate comments directly or indirectly connected to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Another limitation of this study was the reliance of each school principal in selecting the students and adults for each focus group interview. I provided each principal with the criteria for group selection in hopes that the participants would all feel comfortable sharing. However, conducting one-on-one interviews would have been ideal.

Findings

Research Question One

The first research question focused on discovering what students and school staff perceive as factors contributing to lower levels of PYD. The emerging themes included challenging and disruptive student home life, lack of student understanding and acceptance of others, and pressure to perform academically. Table 1 summarizes the first research question's significant themes and code categories. The third column indicates which PYD attribute the code categories were linked to in the data.

Table 1*Summary of Themes, Code Categories, and PYD Attribute*

Theme	Code Categories	PYD Attribute
Challenging and Disruptive Student Home Life	Family Structure	Confidence
	Poverty	Confidence
	Lack of Moral Teaching	Character
Lack of Student Understanding and Acceptance of Others	Disconnect with Transfer Students (Outsiders)	Character & Connection
	Intolerance of Student Difference	Character & Connection
	Lack of Empathy for Mental Health Issues	Compassion
Pressure to Perform Academically	Difficult Subjects	Competence & Confidence
	Focus on Grades	Confidence

Challenging and Disruptive Student Home Life

The aspects of a student's home life that emerged from the data as negatively impacting PYD included family structure, poverty, and lack of moral teaching. Students and adults connected a lack of confidence to home life for some students. Mark linked the lack of confidence in an individual to the student's family structure, "Confidence goes back to the parent thing. A lot of kids will not come to school confident. It's easy for me and you to be confident because we have two parents who taught us to be that way." Mark went on to share, "I don't know the percentage rates, but I remember a teacher last year said something about the percentage of kids who don't even have parents from like drugs and stuff. You know that's got to take a huge toll." Carl said, "Our county has the second highest rate of kids living with grandparents." The comments shared by students and school staff were supported by additional data collected during case study fieldwork from documents and community research indicating that in each of the communities where the schools of this study were located, the percentage of children living in single-parent households well exceeded the state average (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). In one community, 100% percent of the grandparents living with their grandchildren under 18 were responsible for their care (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).

With this study focused on low-SES high schools, poverty was part of the bounding of this case study, but poverty also emerged in the discussion about student confidence. Mr. Lance said, "A lot of that comes from home environment, too. They don't have the confidence from their parents or people who are in the household that are living in a poor environment or just poverty in general; it's hard to have confidence." Data collected from community research revealed that all four communities had higher poverty rates than the state average and an average median family income of \$27,500 lower than their respective state averages.

Several adults interviewed indicated that home life impacts student character. Mrs. Flinn shared, "I think depending on their home life, some of their morality is a little skewed." Mrs. Miller said, "The only character-building skills or respect that they learn are things they're taught here. And once you meet and talk with some of these parents, that's really obvious." Based on observations at each school, from bulletin

board materials to classroom and advisory protocols, it was apparent that each school in the study was prioritizing character education.

Student Lack of Understanding and Acceptance

A recurring theme with students and school staff across the PYD discussions was the lack of student understanding and acceptance of others. Based on the sharing, many students in small, rural high schools struggle to accept people who are different or considered outsiders and link this to the PYD attributes of character, connection, and compassion. The data suggested that students attending rural, low-SES high schools struggle most to accept transfer students, students who are considered different, and students with mental health issues.

Several students and adults shared how challenging it can be for a new student in a rural high school. Mr. Bliss said, "I think where we run into some disconnect with the kids that transfer in. There are some that are considered outsiders and maybe not given a chance, especially if they're a little bit different." Arlee shared her experience of moving from a large urban school to a small rural school, "I was called out because I'm from the city. I was told I was like a dying puppy and just kicked under a porch and died." Kim said, "Yeah, we have a really hard time accepting new people."

Many students attending rural high schools struggle to treat students of different races and backgrounds with respect and dignity. Roger shared, "I've heard so many instances where students of color have been, like, not physically harmed for being the color they are, but verbally, said to their face." Jerry shared, "It's really been a struggle trying to make connections with kids. I've come from a different way of life from them, as they've been raised as city kids, and I've been raised on a farm." Kim, a multiracial student, shared, "I moved here in my sixth-grade year, so I've been here for five years. But I wouldn't necessarily say that I've been completely accepted into this atmosphere because I'm just so different cultural norms-wise." Three of the four schools represented in this study lacked a diverse student body, with a student population averaging 96% White students (Kansas Department of Education, 2021; West Virginia Department of Education, 2021).

Focus group interview transcript data revealed that compassion was a common attribute shared by many students in these rural schools. Students and adults shared how students have compassion for one another because they share many of the same difficult life experiences. However, it was revealed that there can be less compassion and understanding when it comes to students struggling with mental health issues. Mrs. Starcher said, "Coming from a rural community, when it comes to mental health, there are people who are empathetic, and then there are some who are not." Shawna shared, "Like if you are out of class, and like at the social worker's office or something. The kids will be like, oh, what's up with her family and all that." Samantha said, "I think they're always willing to bring it up as a joke. I struggle with mental health. I don't know that I would be comfortable opening up and saying, I struggle with this."

Pressure to Perform Academically

Many students linked lower confidence and competence with the pressure to perform academically. They shared how struggling with certain subjects or receiving specific grades can negatively impact their confidence and competence.

Several students linked their confidence and competence to their success or lack of success in specific school subjects. Jerry said, "I would say there's some confidence, but it depends on what they're doing. If it's like a test, there's low confidence." Andrew was more specific, "It depends on the class you are in, too. Well, I'm very confident in math. Math is my best subject, but in English, I just lose it all." Kasey said, "I feel like math is a big one, where there's a lot of non-competent students. I'm probably one most of the time. I do struggle with that." Erika shared, "AP Biology started with, we have a big list on the

whiteboard you need to know. And so, everything since day one has been stressed about passing this test, and I hate it!”

For many students, their grades on assessments and report cards can significantly affect their confidence. Erica shared, “I got my first ‘B’ freshman year because I didn’t want to change my shoes for gym, and that’s the first ‘B’ I’ve ever gotten in my life, so it was like a big thing.” Riley shared, “For like me, my sister, I feel like she gets good grades, doesn’t even have to try. And so, I feel pressure to be like her, but I feel like I have to work harder than her.” Roger added, “Checking your grades every day is not a mentally healthy thing.” Based on school observations and discussions with each principal, it was apparent that each rural school worked diligently to build more student confidence and competence connected to academic work. Each of the four schools provided some form of after-school tutoring and mentoring for all students.

Research Question Two

The second research question focused on discovering what students and school staff perceive as factors contributing to higher levels of PYD. The emerging themes included student opportunities, adult intentionality, and engaging classes. Table 2 provides a summary of the significant themes and code categories. The third column indicates which PYD attribute the code categories were linked to in the data.

Table 2

Summary of Themes, Code Categories, and PYD Attribute

Theme	Code Category	PYD Attribute
Student Opportunities	Student Voice	Competence & Connection
	Intra-curricular and Extracurricular Activities	Confidence, Competence, Connection, & Character
	Service Learning	Connection, Compassion & Character
Adult Intentionality	Encouraging Words	Confidence
	Providing Opportunities	Confidence, Competence, & Connection
	Modeling	Character & Compassion
Engaging Classes	Career Technical Education (CTE)	Confidence & Competence
	Fine Arts	Competence

Student Opportunities

It was clear that when schools provide students with opportunities to become engaged and involved, PYD is strengthened. The data from the focus group interview transcripts indicated that students and school staff believe that when students are provided space to use their voice, access to school-based intra-curricular and extracurricular activities, and opportunities to give back through service-learning, the most significant gains are made in PYD.

Students indicated that competence and connection are strengthened when schools provide a platform for their voices to be heard. Betty shared, "You can even take the ideas that you have...I like this,

this, and this, and the teachers here will help you try to put it together. They want school to be like, adapted to you." The concept of student voice emerged during the discussion about connection, and students shared how important it is for the adults in their school to share important information and seek their opinions when significant changes are being implemented. Ashley shared, "They always do surveys before they change something or do something different. So, they see what the students like first, to make sure they're not going to step on any toes before they change something."

When schools provide diverse opportunities for student engagement through extracurricular and intra-curricular activities, they create a culture where all students can succeed and strengthen their confidence, competence, character, and connection. Kim shared, "Normally, in a bigger school, you could do maybe three; here, you can do as many as you want. I feel because we get to do all those different activities, you get confidence and know you can do something." When discussing connection, Mary shared, "I feel like a club is a good one to point to with this one because you have a place where you feel comfortable with people because you know that everyone here has the same beliefs." Arlee said, "Connection also has a lot to do with what you do with your time, so the kids in sports have really strong connections with each other." Ashley shared, "Clubs try to help us build character and teach us right and wrong. They help with confidence; they just give you a sense of belonging."

Each rural school focused on providing students with service-learning opportunities, and students and school staff indicated its impact on connection, character, and compassion. Amy shared, "Special Olympics brought a lot of us together when we would all hang out with our kids. It even brought the teachers together, the ones that did the games and stuff." Mrs. Nestor said, "Compassion, character, and connection, I think, all get attributed to our service-learning that we implemented about three years ago."

Adult Intentionality

The intentionality of adults in each school emerged as an overwhelming theme when asking students and school staff about strengthening all five attributes of PYD. Specific examples of this intentionality included sharing encouraging words, creating and providing opportunities, and modeling positive behaviors and attitudes.

Students truly treasure the words of affirmation and encouragement from the adults at their school. Jan shared the following about her teacher, "If he can tell that you're not doing good on an exam, he will tell you that you're brilliant and that you got this, that you just need to work on some things." Sometimes, the written word can be just as powerful, as Riley shared, "Even a little comment on a test or something that said, 'Good Job!' That builds my confidence." Students additionally shared how specific teachers and administrators in their school greet them daily with positive words and ask them how they are doing in the hallways. This type of daily encouragement was observed during the fieldwork of this study.

In addition to these affirming words, the school's adults prioritized creating and providing students with school-based opportunities to gain and build confidence, competence, and connection. One of the school principals, Mr. Hinkle, shared, "We want 100% of our kids involved in some activity. That's one of the big things we are trying to do. We're trying to get them all involved, so hopefully, the academic piece comes up." Mary said, "At our age, we are still trying to figure out what our skills are, what we like to do. There is something here for everyone so you can figure out what you're good at and what you enjoy." John shared, "There's lots of opportunities here. If students are not taking advantage of them, then I can only see it as being their fault. A student shouldn't complain if they don't feel connected." Observations at each school confirmed that these rural high schools provide numerous diverse student opportunities to get involved. Each school prioritized advertising these opportunities throughout the building so students would be aware.

Discussions about student character focused on the adults in the school being intentional about providing students with opportunities to build character and addressing character development in the SEL curriculum. Students shared how they witnessed the adults in their school prioritize student character. Mark shared how his school principal sets the tone for character, "I think, for the most part, we have good character here because our principal, he's big on that. You do not have to be the smartest, but you will have character; he's all about that." Students shared how they look to the adults in their school to model strong character. Riley shared, "So, like, we also have, like, good men. Like, the football coach will take those who don't have much character and put them with somebody who does have a lot of character."

Mrs. Nester said, "I feel teachers model compassion with each other. We are a family." When teachers model compassion, students notice. Referring to when students are having a bad day, Sarah shared, "Sometimes, teachers will let you put your head down on the desk for a few minutes to calm down. Most teachers will pull you out of class and talk to you. I feel overall; some teachers do show compassion." Ashley shared, "All of our teachers are very compassionate about their students. If they're going through something, they're going to help them through it."

Engaging Classes

Although some academic classes were associated with low confidence and competence, students and school staff agreed that engaging classrooms, specifically CTE and fine arts, strengthen student competence and confidence. One of the school principals, Mr. Wilson, realized the importance of hands-on classes and commented, "We do not have enough avenues for our kids to express their competence; we need more hands-on programs."

Kristen explained why CTE classes are effective, "They work with you until you are good at it." Sarah said, "I feel like it gives a student more experience and more on a higher level of knowing how to figure something out." Several students mentioned the impact CTE courses have on student confidence. Chris said, "We have a lot of career classes. Maybe if you want to go into a career, the classes we have here can give you an experience of that career before you even get into it in the future." Roger shared, "Those classes do something well. There's something different about the CTE teachers that I like."

For some students, being prepared for both a career and college was something they connected with being competent. Betty shared, "Our mission statement is college and career-ready. They get you prepared for if you want to go to college, or they prepare you for any career you want to go into." Mr. Bliss touched on these curricular opportunities' impact on student competence, "I think it goes back to opportunities. I think that in all areas, our pathways, our academics, CTE classes, some of the clubs, and FBLA activities, we build competence."

Classes in the fine arts, such as Theater, Choir, and Band, also emerged from the data as important in building student competence and confidence. Shawna shared the importance of her Theater class, "I'm dyslexic. I don't like reading in general. But, like, last year, I had two lines, and I was freaking out the whole time. But this year, I knew I could do that, so now I'm in like a pretty big part." Erika shared a unique perspective, "I think I'm one of the very few people who don't have like a fun class. I'll never leave the academic building. So, like, some people have like Choir or Band or, like, a lot of the boys are in like Welding or Carpentry."

Implications, Conclusions, & Recommendations

The findings from this research align with and add to the growing literature on positive youth development (PYD). However, this study is unique as it examined PYD in the context of rural, low-SES high schools and provided students and school staff a voice to share their thoughts on what contributes to higher and lower levels of PYD among students in their high schools. Therefore, in addition to the findings

of this research supporting and enhancing the existing information contained in the components of the Five Cs framework (Geldhof et al., 2014; Lerner, 2007; Lerner et al., 2000) that informed this study, they also provide additional information on how PYD is impacted in rural, low-SES high schools.

Competence

The findings in this study concerning competence aligned with prior research, indicating that competence is linked with what one can do, specifically academically, socially, athletically, and vocationally (Geldhof et al., 2014; Lerner, 2007). Students and school staff attributed higher student competence to school-based opportunities, like sports and clubs, and hands-on and engaging classes, such as courses in fine arts and CTE. Lower student competence was connected to academic courses, such as math.

A unique aspect of student competence that emerged from the study, not readily found in the Five Cs literature, was the positive impact providing students opportunities to use their voice has on competence. This aspect of competence is connected with the self-determination theory (SDT) framework. Ryan and Deci (2000) posit that intrinsic motivation is nurtured and enhanced when an individual is provided autonomy and an opportunity to have their voice heard.

Confidence

The findings of this study are supported by confidence research that indicates youth experience confidence levels differently in different situations or classes (Lerner, 2007). Students in this study attributed lower confidence levels to certain academic classes and a focus on academic performance. In contrast to these classes, CTE courses emerged from the study as classes that can build confidence. Student opportunities, such as clubs and sports, also emerged from the study as potential contributors to higher confidence.

When adults in high schools create and promote these student opportunities, a culture where confidence can grow and develop is provided. Additionally, confidence is enhanced when adults encourage students to keep trying academically and get involved and connected at the school. The research on supporting and nurturing youth confidence indicates the importance of positive and sustaining adult relationships (Lerner, 2007). The research also indicates that youth must be directed to activities where they can use their strengths and talents (Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007).

A unique theme emerged from the data related to each school's rural, low-SES environment. Student home life was attributed to lower confidence levels due to the unstable family structure and poverty. When working in rural, low-SES schools, these factors are critical for staff to remember since many students will already be entering the school doors with low confidence and a sense of fatalism (Slama, 2004).

Connection

The findings of this study align with student connection research, which indicates that youth connection in the school setting is focused on mutual relationships that students build with friends, teachers, coaches, and mentors (Lerner, 2007). The connection students feel in their school is primarily impacted by the intentionality of the adults working there. Students shared how teachers are intentional in the classroom to make sure all students are engaged and intermingling with one another. Students shared how they realize their school tries to provide diverse opportunities so all students can find their place of belonging.

The results indicated that rural schools struggle to ensure that all students feel connected. It was clear from the results that if a student is different or has recently moved into the community, they sometimes struggle connecting to other students. Rural research indicates that rural citizens typically distrust outsiders (Slama, 2004).

Character

The findings of this study are supported by character research that identifies personal values, social conscience, values diversity, and conduct morality as part of the character construct (Geldhof et al., 2014). Lower student character was attributed to a lack of moral teaching at home and a lack of understanding and acceptance of others. These factors again indicate some challenges facing students attending rural, low-SES schools.

Factors contributing to a strong character identified by students and adults align with and add to the existing literature on promoting character in youth. School-based opportunities, service-learning, and adult modeling of good character were factors that emerged. These findings are supported by the character education research that indicates character education in schools can take on many forms – service-learning, social-emotional learning, and prevention programs (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004). Clubs emerged as one type of opportunity that can build character, and these findings align with research that discovered a student's feeling of connectedness to the school environment enhances the impact of character education programs (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004).

Compassion

The findings of this study are supported by student compassion research that suggests that compassion is about showing concern for the lives of others with words and actions (Lerner, 2007). An important finding in this research was a connection between student compassion and a rural, low-SES school environment. Students and adults shared how many students experiencing similar traumatic events have developed empathy for others. It was also shared, however, that students in rural, low SES schools can sometimes lack compassion for students who transfer to the school, are different, or who struggle openly with mental health issues.

Another important and unique finding in this study was the impact modeling of compassion by adults in schools has on students. Many students gave specific examples of how they witnessed adults show empathy and sympathy.

Recommendations for Practice

An important implication for practice that emerged from this study is the power of the words, actions, and examples of adults who work in schools. Schools and school staff must be intentional in the decisions they make when it comes to connecting students with opportunities in which they will find, grow, and nurture their strengths and talents. Adults should work to assist all school youth in discovering and developing their assets and not focusing on their deficits. School leaders in this study shared how they are working diligently to add as many school-based opportunities as possible so 100% of their students can connect with caring adults and peers, find a place in the school to connect and feel accepted, and develop confidence and competence.

Rural schools must continue guiding students to become more accepting of people who are different than they are through increasing and improving inclusion and diversity efforts. Rural students must be exposed to students from different backgrounds, races, and belief systems. Students in the study struggled to accept outsiders and people who were different. Students who transferred into the rural schools in this study or considered themselves different found connecting with students in their schools challenging. Rural, low-SES schools must address the impact of the challenging and disruptive home life of many students on their sense of confidence, competence, connection, character, and compassion. Home life emerged in discussions about almost all five PYD constructs; however, students and adults discussed how home life impacts student confidence and character the most.

Hands-on learning classes are critical to students' competence, confidence, and connection. CTE courses emerged from the study as playing an essential role in rural schools in connecting students to their

future careers, building confidence and competence, enhancing a sense of belonging, and providing an engaging environment for students to learn by doing. Schools should provide a diverse offering of CTE programs so students can find their passion, gain new skills, and have an opportunity to make higher wages in their future careers.

The information gained from this study is valuable to stakeholders involved with Agricultural Education. With an increasing number of students experiencing trauma away from school, especially in rural areas, and with the most significant percentage of FFA chapters located in rural and town locales, teacher educators need to include information in teacher preparation that informs future teachers about trauma-informed teaching, student mental health, and how to build and develop the five attributes of PYD among students.

Recommendations for Future Research

This exploratory study uncovered numerous future research opportunities. The impact of home life discussed in this study suggests the need to examine risk and protective factors more deeply in rural, low-SES schools. Another logical follow-up to this study would be to collect data on the PYD of students in more urban and affluent communities to investigate the levels of PYD and factors that impact it and compare those findings to students attending school in rural, low SES settings.

Students in three of the four schools in this study felt strongly about the lack of diversity. Although it did not emerge at every school in the study, it is evident that students of another race besides White, with different gender identities than male and female, and a different sexual orientation than heterosexual, were not accepted well in a rural school and struggled with their PYD and social-emotional health. This lack of diversity in rural, low-SES high schools and its impact on student mental health and PYD would make for an exciting study.

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