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Working With Teens

"A Study of Staff Characteristics and
Promotion of Youth Development"



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Working with teens

A Study of Staff Characteristics and Promotion of Youth Development

REPORT

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Promoting Youth Development

Over the past twenty years there has been growing emphasis on the importance of providing environments that facilitate positive development in youth. One potentially influential context in the lives of developing youth is an organized non-school time activity. Research has found that involvement in these types of activities can reduce dropout (Mahoney & Cairns, 1997), problem behaviors (Benson & Pittman, 2001), increase academic outcomes (Marsh, 1992) and connection to school (Brown & Evans, 2002). In a recent National Academy of Science (NAS) report on youth development, Eccles and Gootman (2002) reviewed the existing research on this topic and outlined features of youth programs that are associated with positive developmental outcomes. They found program environments that promote personal and social assets in youth provide *physical and psychological safety; appropriate structure; supportive relationships; opportunities to belong; positive social norms; support for efficacy and mattering; opportunities for skill building; and integration of family, school, and community efforts* (see Table 1, page 21). These features typically work together synergistically, with programs exhibiting more features having better developmental outcomes for youth (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).



“There has been a growing emphasis on the importance of providing environments that facilitate positive development in youth.”

Staff and Positive Youth Development

“Staffing training, educational background, and skill sets are considered key elements in the overall effectiveness of a program’s ability to promote the features of positive development”.

Another critical element of successful community-based programs that work directly with youth is the staff themselves (McLaughlin, 2000; Walker, 2003; Yohalem, 2003). In recent years child and youth work professionals have attempted to advance the field through the development of professional standards of practice and credentialing. Staff training, educational background, and skill sets are considered key elements in the overall effectiveness of a program’s ability to promote the features of positive development (Thomas, 2002). The literature is extensive on the elements needed to affect positive change in youth. Unfortunately, little is known about the characteristics of people who work directly with youth to implement these programs and accomplish program goals. This national study was developed to identify the characteristics of people who work directly with youth in non-school time programs. It examined the relationship between youth program staff experience, training, and educational background, and staff’s self-reported competency in implementing the features of positive developmental settings as outlined by the NAS report. Additionally, it examined the characteristics that lead to youth staff satisfaction and retention.

METHOD

Measures

A multi-step process was used to develop the web-based instrument that assessed staff's perception of their skills, using the features of settings that promote personal and social assets in youth as outlined in the NAS report (Table 2, pages 22-24). After the items were reviewed by a panel of experts in the youth development field, the items were modified and the instrument was formatted into a web-based survey. Prior to distribution, the instrument was once again reviewed by the same panel of experts, as well as several administrative staff members from various national youth research organizations.



Self-Reported Competency Scales (SRCS). Eight scales were created to assess youth program staffs' perceived competency in each of the features identified in the NAS report (Table 2, pages 22-24). Reliability for each of these scales ranged from .85 to .92. A confirmatory factor analysis was conducted and revealed excellent consistency with the proposed subscales. These scales were aggregated to form a composite competency scale, which was then used for many of the analyses in this report.

"Survey items were developed using the features of settings that promote personal and social assets in youth."

"Scales were developed to assess youth program staffs' perceived competency in each of the eight features from the NAS Report."

Recruitment

National youth organizations were contacted to request their assistance in distributing the survey web link to the front-line program staff working directly with youth. An email message was sent to administrative representatives of youth service organizations throughout the United States requesting either their organizational email lists or their assistance in distributing an email message to their listservs. Some organizations also posted an announcement and link to the study on their organization websites. Each organization also was asked to provide additional professional organization contacts that may have had staff eligible to participate in this study.

Administration

Data were collected through a web-based survey posted on *surveymonkey.com*, a website exclusively designed for survey research. Surveys posted on this site are assigned individual web addresses, thereby making them accessible only to those individuals who have obtained the web address from the researchers. This helped assure the inclusion of only legitimate program staff.



"The survey was designed to screen out those individuals who did not meet the criteria for participation."

Sample

The survey was available on the website February 1 through July 15, 2004. During that period of time, 1,147 individuals who worked in non-school time programs participated in the survey. The survey was designed to screen out those individuals who did not meet the criteria for participation (e.g., did not work directly with youth ages 10 – 18 years old in non-school time programs). After eliminating respondents who were screened out or failed to finish the survey, the total number of valid survey program staff was 981.

RESULTS

Demographics

Participants for this study were adults, ages 18 years or older (mean age = 38), who work directly with youth in non-school time programs. Responses were obtained from program staff in nearly every state in the country.

Seventy-two percent of those who participated were female and 28% were male. Ethnic background was reported as follows: White/non-Hispanic (77%); African-American (10%); Hispanic/Latino (5%); multi-ethnic (3%); Asian/Pacific Islander (2%); and other (1%).

RESULTS (cont'd)

Education

Level of formal education was reported by respondents as follows: High school diploma or GED (2%); community college degree or certificate (6%); some college (13%); bachelor's degree (48%); master's degree (29%); doctorate degree (2%). More than one-third of program staff (36%) said that 80 – 100% of their formal education was in youth development or a related field, such as psychology, family and consumer science, education, social work, and human services (Figure 1). When asked how much about their jobs they learned from more experienced staff members or colleagues, 48% percent said they had learned “much” or “very much”, 35% said they learned “a little”, and 17% said they learned “not much”.



Figure 1. Percentage of respondents' formal education in youth development or related fields.

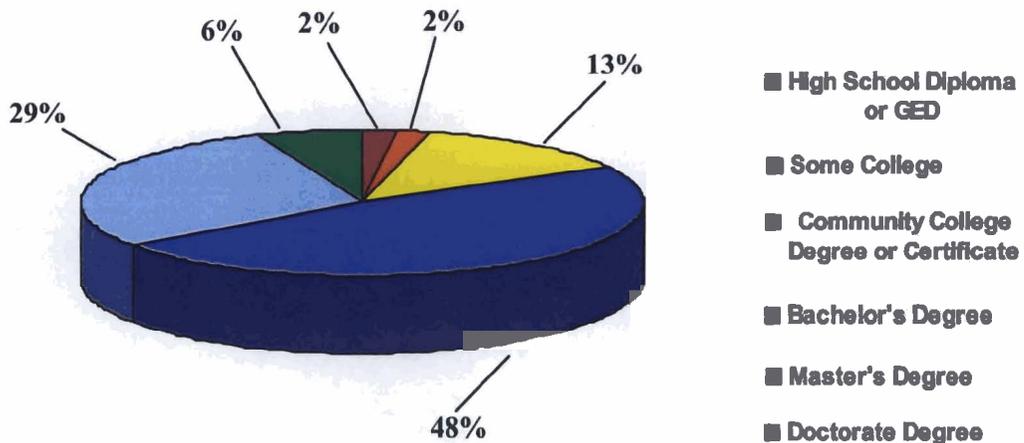
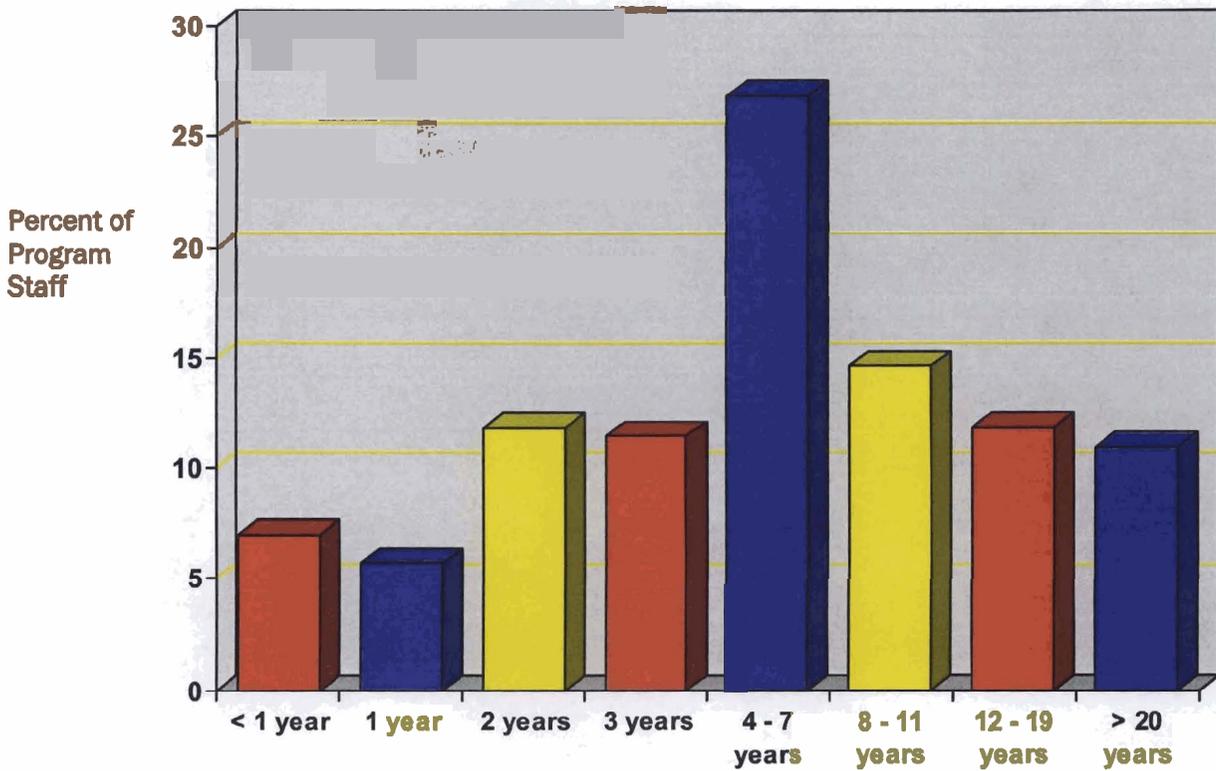


Figure 2. Number of years program staff had worked in non-school time teen programs.



Employment and Program Type

Seventy-three percent of program staff reported being employed full-time, 17% were employed part-time, and 10% volunteer their time in non-school time programs. Approximately one quarter of program staff (27%) had worked in non-school teen programming for four to seven years (Figure 2).



Table 3 indicates the types of programs in which program staff reported working. The five most represented types of programs were those that taught life skills (17%), drop-in centers (11%), mentoring programs (10%), recreation programs (9%), and “other”, which consists of programs that represent a combination of the program types (15%).



Table 3. Types of programs in which program staff reported working.

Type of Program	Percent
Life Skills	17%
Other (combinations of the other types)	15%
Drop-in	11%
Mentoring	10%
Recreation	9%
Community Service	6%
Tutoring	6%
School-based	5%
Camp	4%
Service Learning	4%
Arts	2%
Faith-based	2%
Job Skills	2%
Juvenile Justice	2%
Substance Abuse Prevention & Intervention	2%
Individual & Group Counseling	1%

Table 4 indicates the various national organizations that program staff represented. Approximately one-third of the responses (35%) fell in the “other” category, which consists primarily of State Parks and Recreation Associations, various church groups, and 21st Century programs; 34% of program staff worked in 4-H; 11% were from Big Brothers Big Sisters; and 4% worked with Cooperative Extension.



Table 4. National organizations represented in the study.

Organization	Percent
Other (National & State Parks & Recreation, church groups, 21 st Century programs)	35%
4-H	33%
Big Brothers/Big Sisters	11%
Cooperative Extension	4%
Boys & Girls Club	3%
Girls, Inc.	3%
Girl Scouts	3%
YMCA	2%
YWCA	2%
Beacons	1%
Boy Scouts	1%
Camp Fire	1%
Junior Achievement	1%

Figure 3. Geographic Areas of Youth Programs

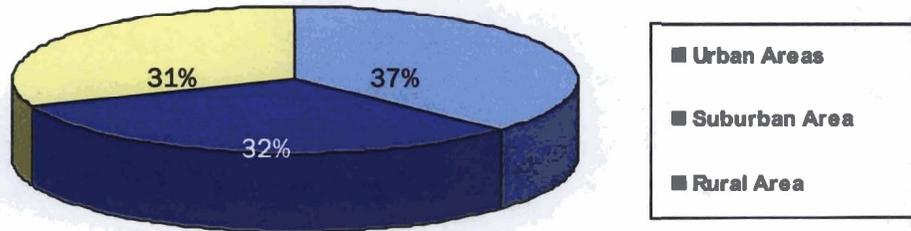


Figure 3 indicates geographic areas served by non-school time youth programs. Program staff were well distributed regarding the geographic areas in which they work, with 37% serving youth in urban areas, 32% working with youth in suburban settings, and 31% working with rural youth.

Table 5. Percentage of youth from “low income or at-risk backgrounds” and ethnic minorities served by program staff.

Percentage of Program	Low Income or At-Risk	Ethnic Minority
0 - 25%	28%	49%
26 - 50%	20%	16%
51 - 75%	20%	13%
76 - 100%	32%	22%

Table 5 shows the percentage of youth from “low income or at-risk backgrounds” and the ethnic status served by youth programs. Nearly one-third (32%) of program staff said that 76 – 100% of their program was made up of low income or at-risk youth; almost half (49%) said that ethnic minorities comprised up to one quarter of their programs.

Self-reported Competency

Eight scales were created to measure youth program staffs' self-reported competency in providing positive youth development environments. The scales, which mirror features of the NAS report, include Physical and Psychological Safety; Appropriate Structure; Supportive Relationships; Opportunities to Belong; Positive Social Norms; Support for Efficacy and Mattering; Opportunities for Skill Building; and Integration of Family, School, and Community Efforts. Youth program staff reported highest competency levels in providing settings that promote Positive Social Norms, Appropriate Structure, Physical and Psychological Safety, and Support for Efficacy and Mattering. Those areas that were rated lowest were Opportunities for Skill Building and Integration of Family, School, and Community Efforts (Figure 4).

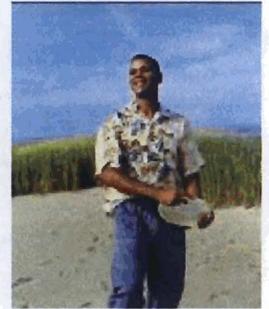
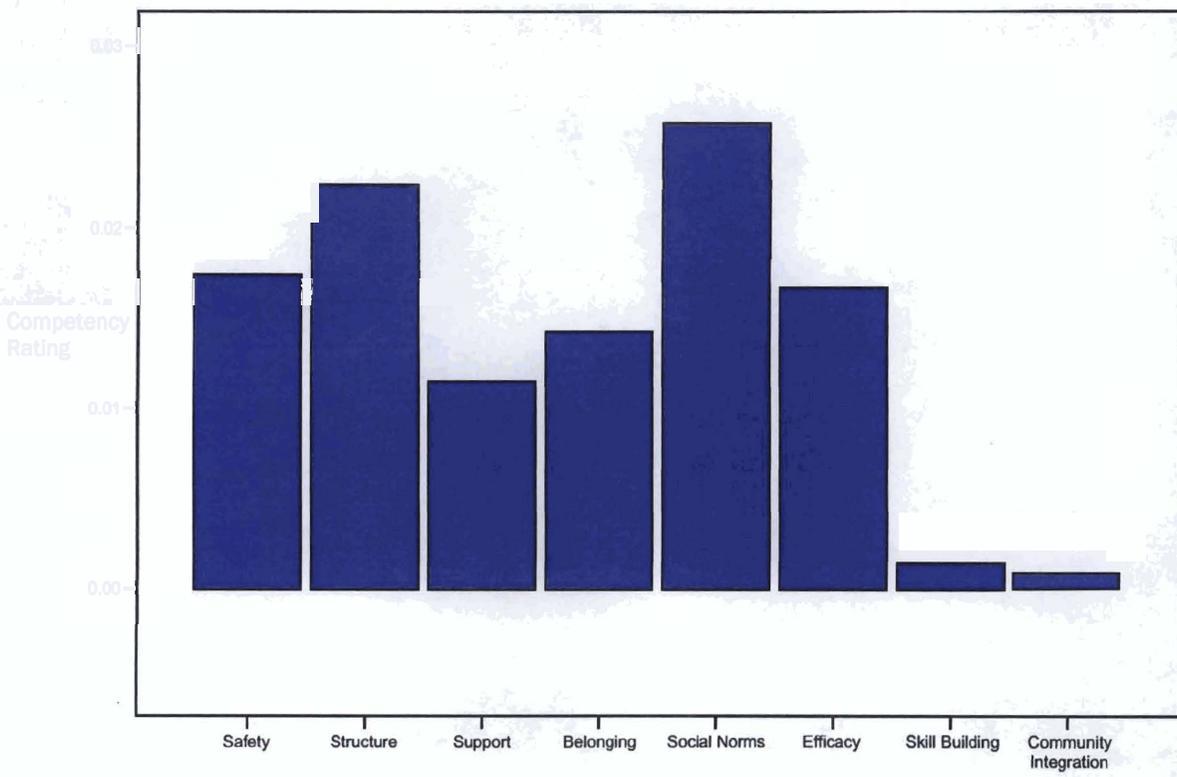


Figure 4. Self-reported competency scales.

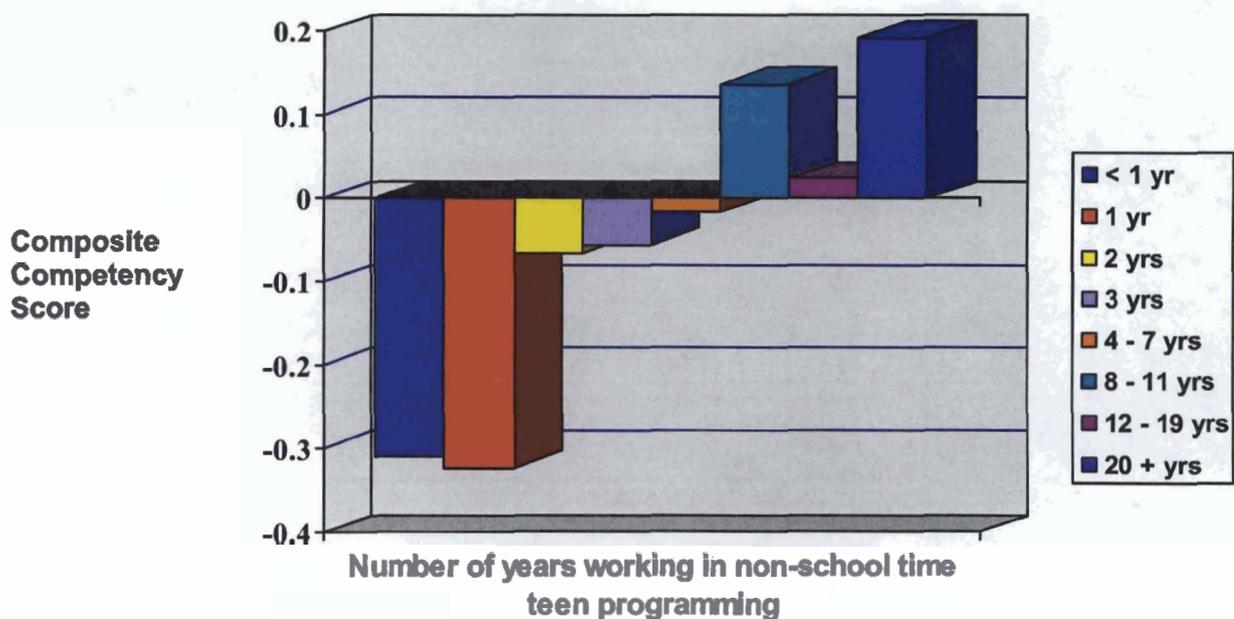


How does experience and education background relate to level of self-reported competency?

Work experience, street experience, and formal education were compared to youth program staff self-reported overall competency level. With the exception of those who said they had worked in non-school time programming for 12 – 19 years, there was a clear relationship between length of time worked and increase in rating of overall competency level (Figure 5). In addition, people who work full-time tended to self-report a higher competency level than part-time workers or those who volunteer their time to work with youth. All eight competency scales were collapsed to create one overall competency scale.



Figure 5. Self-reported competency and years working in non-school time teen programming.



Youth program staff who said they had “some college” or “a community college degree or certificate” rated their overall competency level higher than those who had high school education or GED and those having higher degrees (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Self-reported overall competency and level of formal education.

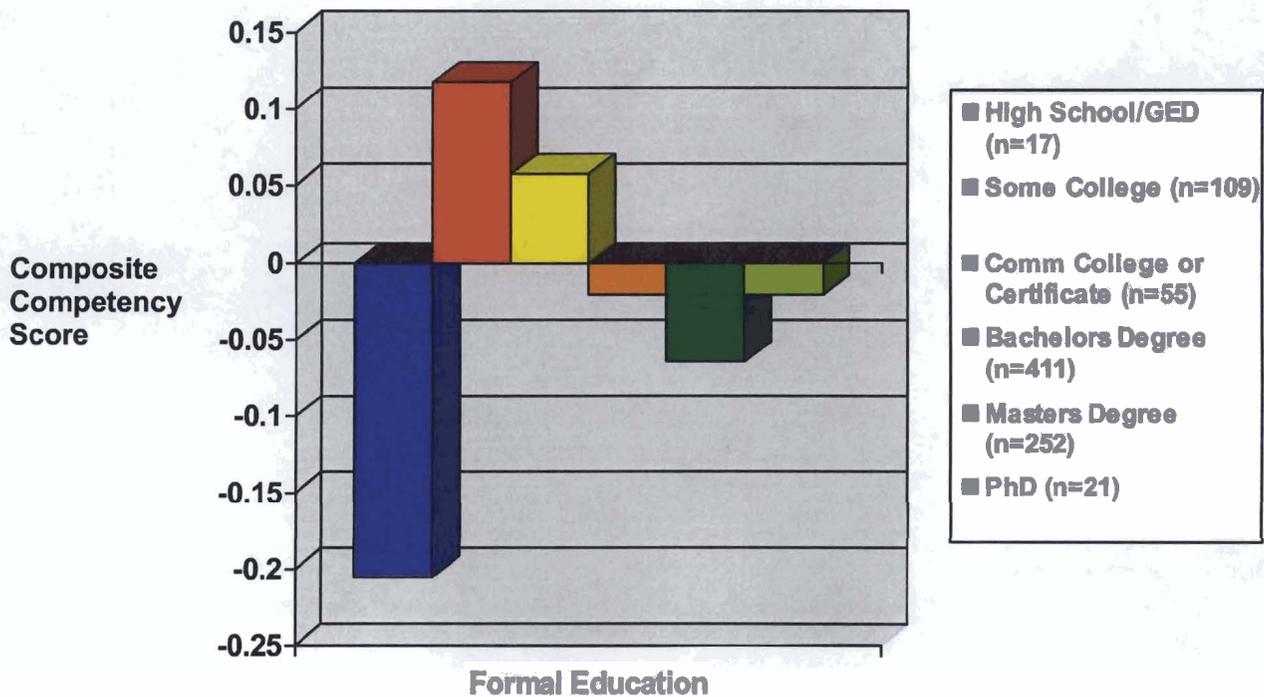
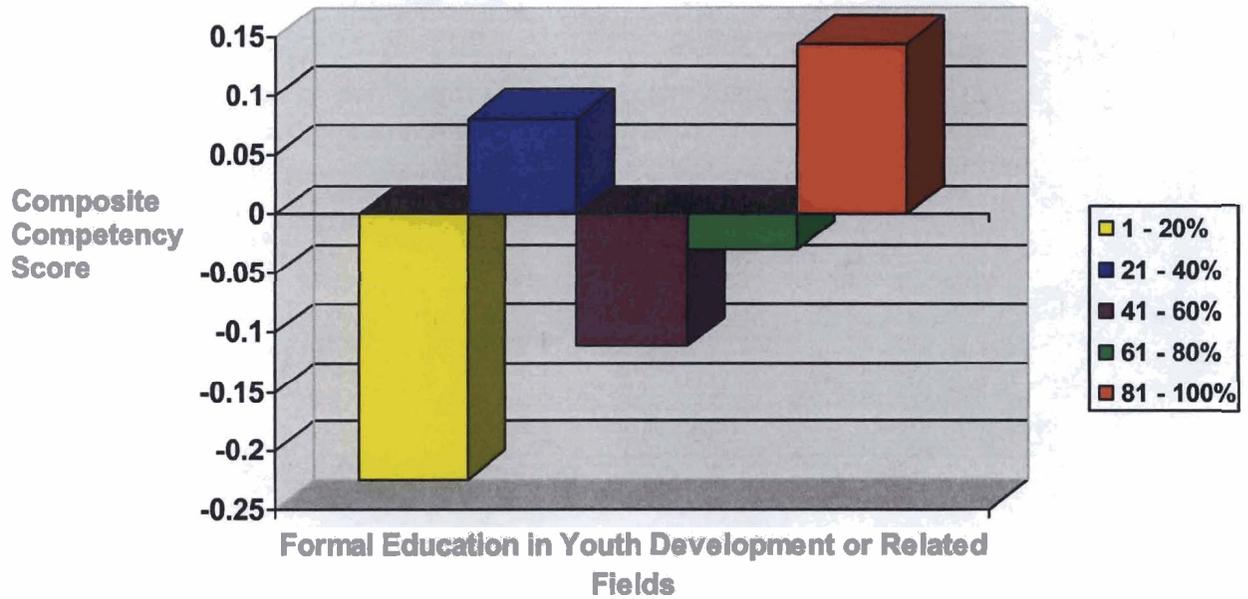


Figure 7. Self-reported overall competency and percentage of formal education in youth development or related fields.

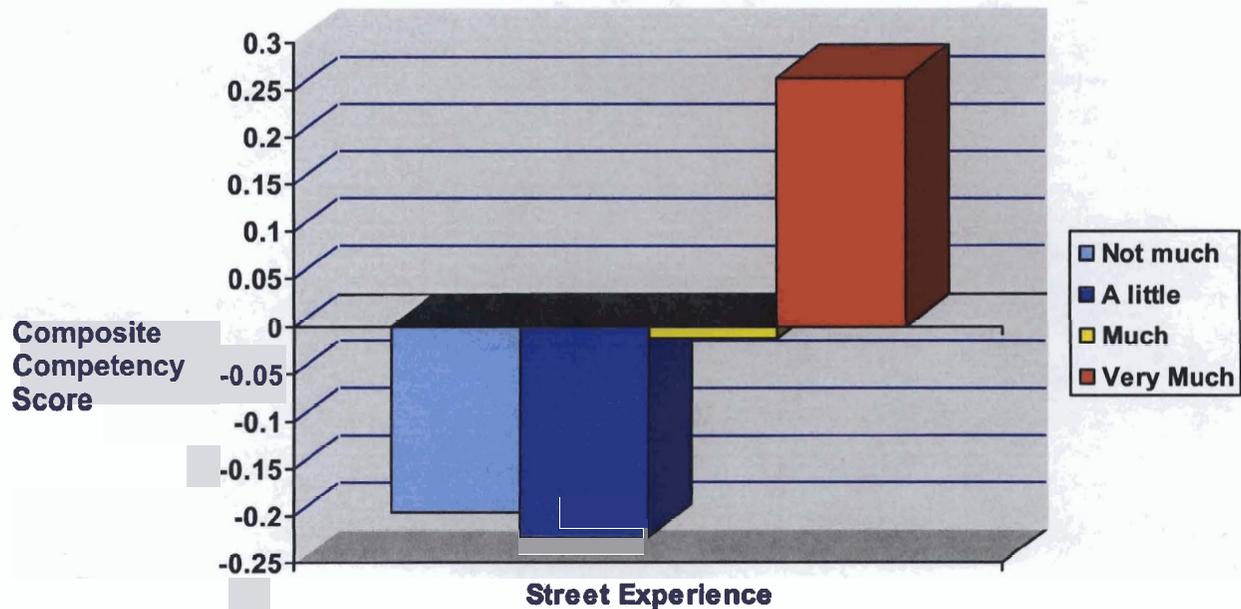


Overall competency also was rated higher by program staff who said that more than 80% of their formal education was in youth development or related fields (Figure 7).



Program staff also were asked about the amount of “street experience” (i.e., life experience similar to the youth in their programs) they possessed. Most (62%) reported having “much” or “very much” street experience.

When asked about the level of street experience youth program staff brought to their work, those who said they had “very much” street experience rated their overall competency higher than those who had “much”, “little” or “not much” street experience (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Self-reported competency and street experience.

Another way that individuals often learn job skills is from more experienced staff members or colleagues. In this study, however, youth program staff who reported not learning much about how to do their job from more experienced staff members or colleagues rated themselves almost as high or higher in all eight competency areas than those who said they learned very much from more experienced staff or colleagues.

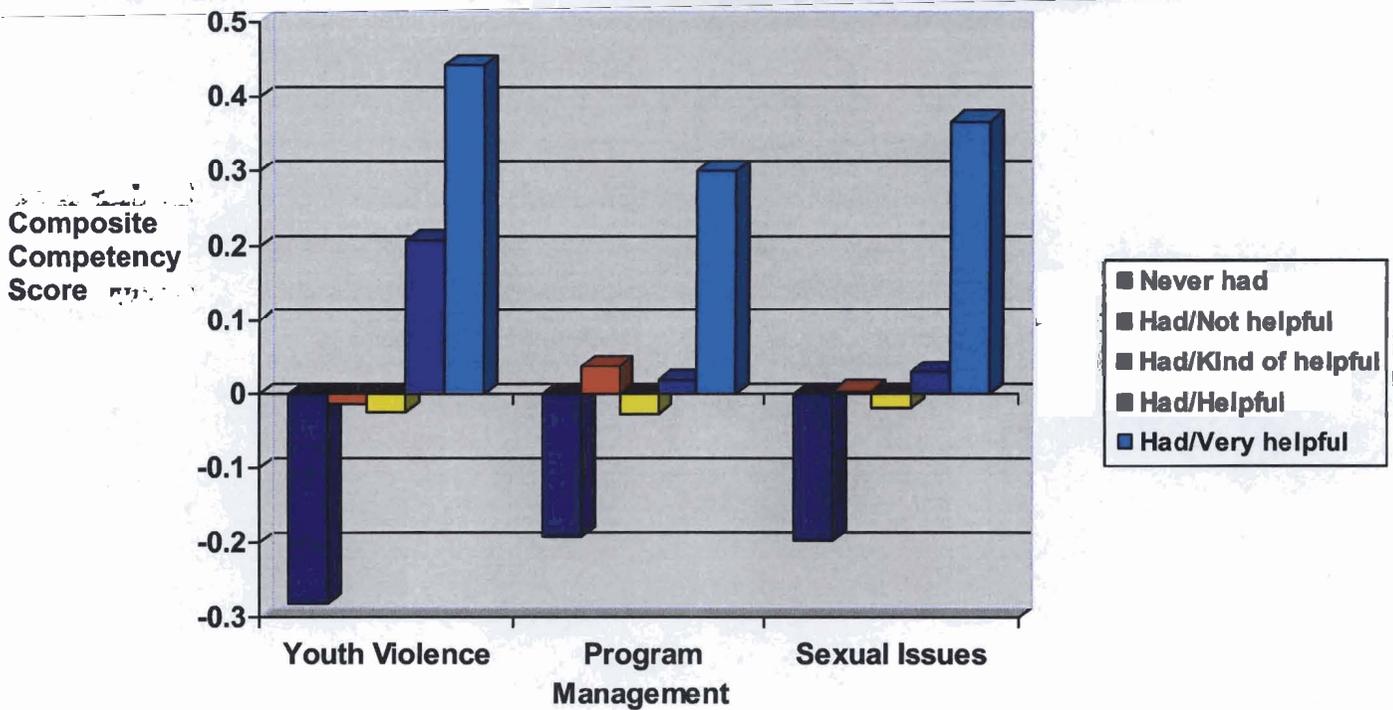
How does usefulness of training experiences relate to level of self-reported competency?

Self-reported competency ratings were compared with whether or not program staff had received specialized training and how helpful that training was. Respondents were queried on the following training topics:

- Youth safety issues within your program
- How youth develop over time
- Risk and protective factor
- Conflict management
- Team building
- Youth violence
- Substance abuse prevention/intervention
- Discipline/Behavior management
- Diversity training
- How to manage a youth program
- How to conduct activities with youth
- Sexual-related issues
- Program evaluation and impact
- How to include community partners in your program
- The mission, the goals, the objectives of your program

In general, program staff who received training and rated that training as helpful or very helpful, also rated their overall competency level higher than those who had received no training at all or said the training was not helpful. There were, however, three training areas that produced higher overall competency ratings as a result of training, regardless of how helpful it was rated. Program staff who received training in managing youth violence, youth program management, and sexual issues (Figure 9) rated their overall competency higher than those who had no training on these topics, regardless of whether that training was rated as being helpful or not.

Figure 9. Self-reported competency and level of training helpfulness.

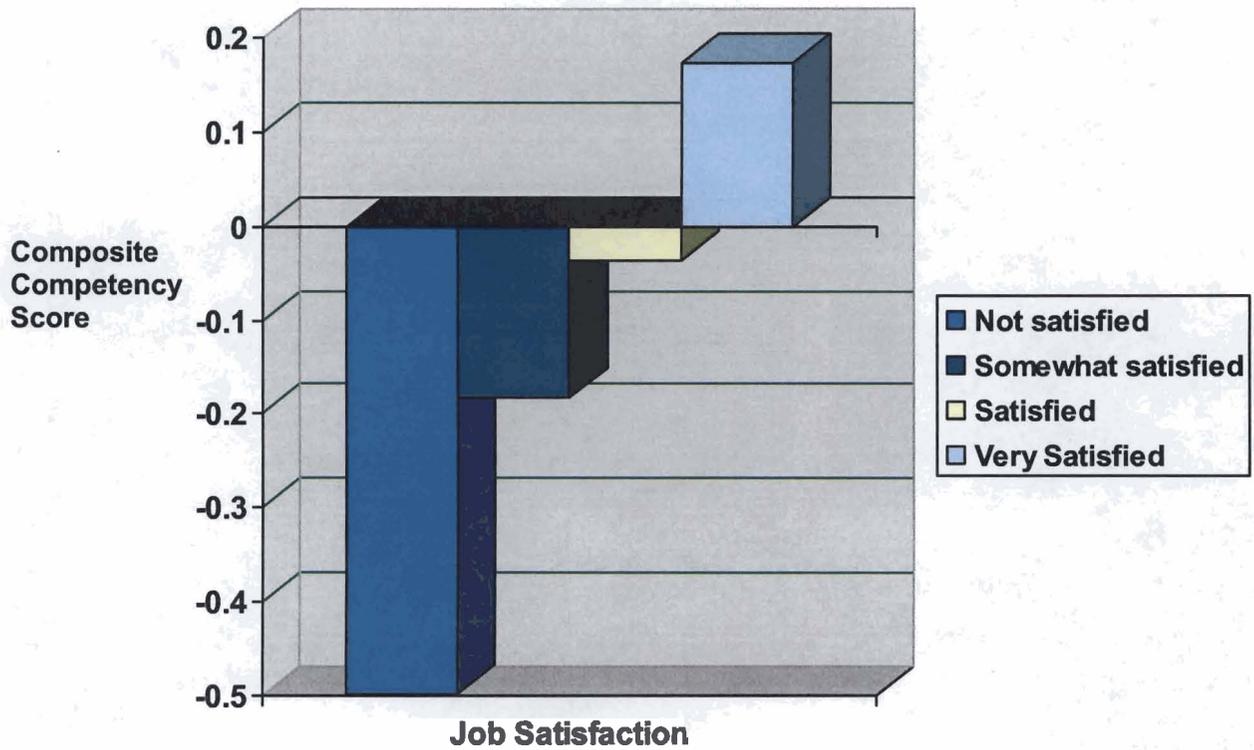


How does level of self-reported competency relate to job satisfaction and intent to continue working with youth?

Eighty-one percent of program staff said they were satisfied or very satisfied with their job. Likewise, 84% said it was likely or very likely that they would be working directly with youth five years from now. As might be expected, a statistically significant relationship exists between level of job satisfaction and intent to continue working with youth, with those who are very satisfied being most likely to see themselves working with youth in five years.



Figure 10. Self-reported competency and job satisfaction.



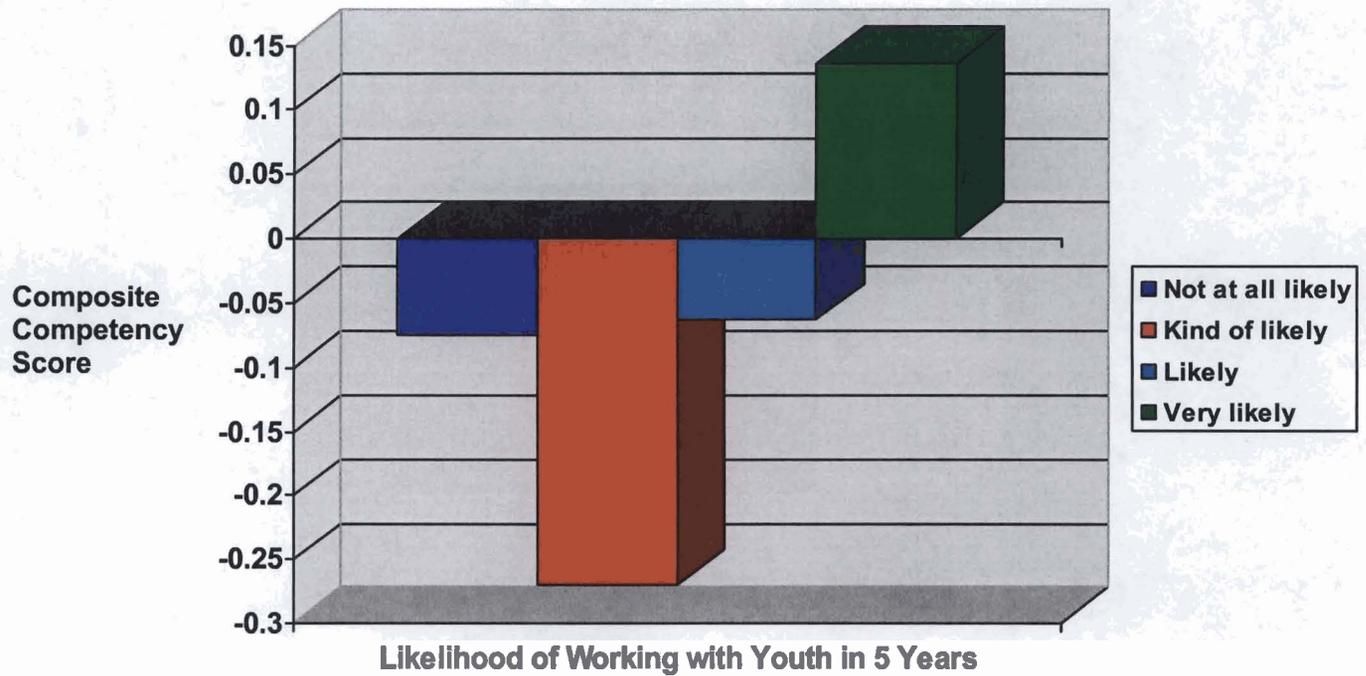
A comparison between level of satisfaction and self-reported competency ratings revealed that youth program staff who said they were very satisfied with their jobs also rated themselves as having high levels of competency (Figure 10).



A similar comparison between the likelihood of working with youth five years from now and level of self-reported competency indicates that youth program staff who see themselves as very likely to be working with youth five years from now also rate themselves as having high levels of competency (Figure 11).



Figure 11. Self-reported competency and likelihood of working with youth 5 years from now.



Conclusion

Recruitment, selection, and retention of qualified people to work directly with youth have been an ongoing challenge to the child and youth care field. Considered by many as being an entry level job that prepares an individual for a higher status professional position, the field is plagued by high turnover, low pay, and lack of professional distinction (Thomas, 2002). In recent years, leaders in child and youth care organizations have suggested the need for establishing standards of practice that would advance the development of the profession. Key elements of these standards of practice would include professional training programs, specification of educational qualifications, and the definition of professional boundaries and areas of competence (Thomas, 2002). Professional and specialized training needs to be innovative and accessible to everyone interested in a career as a youth development professional (Yohalem, 2003) and should include theory as well as give emphasis to the importance of practical experience (Walker, 2003).



“In recent years, leaders in the child and youth care organizations have suggested the need for establishing standards of practice that would advance the development of the youth development profession.”

In this current study, we examined the characteristics of the people who directly work with youth in non-school time programs, looking specifically at the relationship between youth program staff *experience, training, and educational background*, and staff's *self-reported competency* in implementing the features of positive developmental settings as outlined by the NAS report. A clear implication from these findings is that competencies are critical to job satisfaction and an individual's intent to continue working in the youth development field. Future research should focus on how to recruit individuals likely to choose youth development work as a career rather than as a step to other careers, and how to build staff competencies. The robust measures developed for this study could be used in future studies to further examine these issues.

Conclusion (cont'd)

Current results indicate that youth program staff with formal education in youth development or related fields and brought with them a high level of street experience rated themselves high in overall competency level. These findings indicate the importance of hiring people who are educationally and experientially prepared to work with youth. Additionally, attending professional training sessions appear to be related to competency improvement. Expanding competency training, especially in Skill Building and Community Integration which were the lowest ranked competency areas, could assist staff in building competencies that would augment existing skills, and potentially increase the effectiveness of the program.

“These findings indicate the importance of hiring people who are educationally and experientially prepared to work with youth.”

“Given that youth work is a highly relational profession, females may experience a greater sense of self-actualization in this type of work setting than males.”



Interestingly, we found that males consistently rated themselves lower than females in all eight competency areas. The literature on gender differences may provide some insight into this finding. For example, in a study that looked at gender differences in job design and satisfaction, Carlson and Mellor (2004) suggested that the job experience may differ for males and females based on relational self-definition and self-actualization needs, with females placing greater importance than males on interpersonal relationships (e.g., working with people and helping others). Another study looked at gender differences in motivation and job satisfaction in urban forestry/arbiculture professionals (Kuhns, Bragg, & Blahna, 2004). In that study, females most often reported entering the profession because of love of trees, plants, and the outdoors, whereas males reported income/employment potential as the main reason for entering the profession. Given that youth work is a highly relational profession, it may be more appealing to females than males. Females may experience a greater sense of self-actualization in this type of work setting than males, and as a result rate themselves as having higher competencies.

Conclusion (cont'd)

Several limitations to this study should be noted. First, given the self-selected nature of the sample, youth program staff who took time to complete the survey may be individuals most invested in the youth development field. Also, the findings of the study are based on self-reported competency ratings. Future research should include multiple data sources to observe competencies rather than relying solely on self-report measures.

“Individuals who rated their competencies highest were more likely to be satisfied with their jobs and see themselves in their jobs in the future.”



“In the current study, a total of 1,147 responses were obtained and include youth workers in nearly all the states in the country.”

Some debate exists on the validity and reliability of using Internet research methods. Two major advantages have been cited which support the use of Internet data collection methods over other forms of data collection methods. The first is that web-based surveys represent a relatively low cost survey method, which allow the researcher to collect data from a large geographic area and obtain a large sample size with little effort (Dillman, 2000; Birnbaum, 2001; Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, & John, 2004). In addition, research has found that internet samples are generally more diverse than more traditional samples with respect to gender, socioeconomic status, geographic location, age, and race (Gosling, et al., 2004). In the current study, a total of 1,147 responses were obtained and include youth workers in nearly all the states in the country. In addition, the link to this study was distributed only to youth program staff through a commercial survey website, which minimized the likelihood of individuals other than legitimate youth program staff participating. Another benefit is that data can be downloaded directly into statistical analysis programs, thus minimizing work time and potential data entry error (Gosling et al., 2004).

Summary

To advance the level of professional distinction and retention of qualified individuals in the field, it is important to promote the attainment of high competency levels. Our findings indicate that having youth development related formal education and specialized training programs leads to increased competency levels among youth program staff. These findings also show that individuals who rated their competencies highest were more likely to be satisfied with their jobs and see themselves in their jobs in the future. As the youth development field continues to move toward professionalism, the relationship between staff competencies, educational background, and training will continue to emerge as important issues.

“As the youth development field continues to move forward toward professionalism, the relationship between staff characteristics, recruitment, and retention will continue to emerge as important issues.”



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Table 1. Features of settings that promote personal and social assets in youth.

Feature	Descriptor
Physical and Psychological Safety	Safe and health promoting facilities; practices that increases safe peer group interaction and decreases unsafe or confrontational interactions.
Appropriate Structure	Limit setting; clear and consistent rules and expectations; firm-enough control; continuity and predictability; clear boundaries; and age-appropriate monitoring.
Supportive Relationships	Warmth; closeness; connectedness; good communication; caring; support; guidance; secure attachment; and responsiveness.
Opportunities to Belong	Opportunities for meaningful inclusion, regardless of one's gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disabilities; social inclusion, social engagement and integration; opportunities for socio-cultural identity formation; and support for cultural and bi-cultural competence.
Positive Social Norms	Rules of behavior; expectations; injunctions; ways of doing things; values and morals; and obligations for service.
Support for Efficacy and Mattering	Youth-based; empowerment practices that support autonomy; making a real difference in one's community; and being taken seriously. Practices that include enabling; responsibility granting; and meaningful challenge. Practices that focus on improvement rather than on relative current performance levels.
Opportunities for Skill Building	Opportunities to learn physical, intellectual, psychological, emotional, and social skills; exposure to intentional learning experiences; opportunities to learn cultural literacies, media literacy, communication skills, and good habits of mind; preparation for adult employment; and opportunities to develop social and cultural capital.
Integration of Family, School, and Community Efforts	Concordance; coordination; and synergy among family, school, and community.

Table 2. NAS features of positive developmental settings and corresponding survey items.

SCALE	SURVEY ITEM
Physical and Psychological Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keeping youth from hurting each other in the program • Keeping youth from hurting each other's feelings • Keeping youth from bullying each other • Managing conflict between youth • Making sure that the facility where we have our program does not have anything in it that might be dangerous to youth • Making sure kids who are different feel like a part of our program
Appropriate Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making sure youth are occupied when they are in our program • Making sure our program's rules are followed by youth • Managing the time of youth while they participate in our program • Providing youth with opportunities to do age-appropriate activities • Letting youth do things that interest them
Supportive Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening to youth • Building rapport with youth • Understanding a "youth" point of view • Relating well with youth from a variety of cultures and backgrounds • If a youth has a problem, I am easy to approach
Opportunities to Belong	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Getting youth to "buy in" to an activity • Including all youth in my program activities • Doing activities that reflect the culture and background of the youth in our program • Getting youth to feel like they are a part of a team or special group • Getting youth to feel like they are an important part of my program

Table 2. NAS features of positive developmental settings and corresponding survey items. (cont'd)

SCALE	SURVEY ITEM
Positive Social Norms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensuring that our program environment is a place where youth think it is "normal" to behave well • Ensuring that youth know that I have high expectations of them • Ensuring that youth know how they should and should not act in my program • Ensuring that youth act appropriately in my program • Ensuring that youth understand the importance of giving back to their local communities
Support for Efficacy and Matterering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encouraging youth to take on leadership in our program (i.e., activity planning) • Conducting activities with youth that are challenging to them • Looking at each youth's individual progress rather than focusing on group progress • Providing opportunities for youth to give back to their local neighborhood or community • Giving up some control of the program so youth can take on leadership roles
Opportunities for Skill Building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing activities that are designed to help youth learn life skills (e.g., healthy life-styles, goal setting) • Providing activities that are designed to help youth learn social skills (e.g., communication, conflict resolution) • Providing activities for youth to practice the skills they have learned in my program • Providing activities that reinforce what youth are learning in school • Providing feedback to help youth improve the skills they learn in my program

Table 2. NAS features of positive developmental settings and corresponding survey items. (cont'd)

SCALE	SURVEY ITEM
Integration of Family, School and Community Efforts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicating with the parents or guardians of the youth in my program • Providing referrals and resources to the youth and families in my program • Collaborating with other programs and agencies to enhance my youth programming • Using other community members and programs to help my work with youth • Communicating with teachers and school personnel regarding the youth in my program

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Dear Sirs,

Reference is made to your letter of the 15th inst.

concerning the above.

Yours faithfully,

[Signature]

