CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this report is to analyze the critical factors that support youth ages 12-25 in thriving throughout life and through critical life stage transitions[1] through reviewing evidence pertaining to the: (i) nature of these critical factors; (ii) theoretical frameworks supporting these factors; (iii) outcomes linked to these factors; (iv) interventions supporting growth of these factors; and (v) contextual influences on the relationships among factors, outcomes, and interventions with a focus on the GTA and Ontario. This research is founded on three beliefs: (i) youth face significant challenges if they do not have access to the supports, services, and opportunities they need to thrive; (ii) youth have significant assets upon which to build; and (iii) a coherent evidence base is required to determine the optimal nature of these supports, services, and opportunities. These beliefs are captured within the Request for Proposals (RFP) that initiated this report and represent the philosophies of the partners in this work (the funders and the researchers). They underlie the methodologies, foci, and analyses of the data.

The study was commissioned by the YMCA of Greater Toronto and United Way Toronto to update a research foundation for practice and programming decisions. Five reports initially framed this report: (i) *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development* (Eccles & Gootman, 2002); (ii) *Review of Roots of Youth Violence* (McMurtry & Curling, 2008); (iii) *Youth Impact Plan: Evidence Review* (Cohen & McDonough, 2012); (iv) *Stepping Stones* (Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2012); and (v) *Stepping Up* (Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2013). The current report is one part of a comprehensive initiative to develop evidence-based resources for youth-serving agencies in creating, measuring, and improving their programs.

Methodological Overview

We used several methods (see Chapter Two) to conduct this research, beginning with a major search of the literature databases (ERIC, PsycINFO, PubMed, Queen's Summons, and Google Scholar) with relevant inclusion/exclusion keywords as determined through our collaboration with the Advisory Committee for this project.[2] Through this search, we identified 257 articles from recent (2000-2013) peer-reviewed, academic sources ("black literature") and 223 articles from recent non- peer-reviewed sources ("grey literature"), encompassing both intervention and non-intervention literature. The intervention literature was rated using a Standards of Evidence Criteria, which was created in collaboration with the funder's Advisory Committee for this purpose, with the non-intervention literature analysed for content (e.g., purpose, findings, research method, keywords) to select articles with the best evidence. Using this literature and our analysis of three major theoretical frameworks (Developmental Assets™, Five Cs, Self-Determination Theory), we identified critical factors that appear key for youth development and achievement as they help youth experience positive cognitive/learning, behavioural/social, and psychological/emotional development and well-being, and navigate through life stage transitions. Interventions that have been developed to promote youth thriving were evaluated based on these critical factors. Thriving, defined as intentional and purposeful optimal youth development across a variety of life domains (Heck, Subramaniam, & Carlos, 2010), can be seen through: 1) school success, 2) leadership, 3) helping others, 4) maintenance of physical health, 5) delay of gratification, 6) valuing diversity, and 7) overcoming adversity (Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000).

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[1] We use critical factors as a generic term that represents concepts such as needs, assets, and resiliency without subscribing to any particular framework.
[2] An Advisory Committee was established with representatives from community-based organizations, academic researchers, and provincial government.

Background and Significance of the Review

This review builds upon five framing reports. *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development* (Eccles & Gootman, 2002) is a comprehensive review of available data on community programs to promote positive outcomes for adolescents. In collaboration with a committee of experts, Eccles and Gootman developed a set of core concepts. The acquisition of personal and social assets—in the domains of physical, intellectual, psychological and emotional, and social development—lead to positive adolescent development (see Appendix Chapter 1 for a summary of assets in each domain). Adolescents with more personal and social assets in each of these domains have a greater chance of both current well-being and future success. Personal and social assets are enhanced by positive developmental settings.

Eight features of settings promote adolescent development of these assets: physical and psychological safety; appropriate structure; supportive relationships; opportunities to belong; positive social norms; support for efficacy and mattering; opportunities for skill building; and opportunities for integration among family, schools, and community efforts. The more settings wherein adolescents experience these features, the more likely they are to acquire the personal and social assets linked to both current and future well-being.

Community programs for youth should take adolescent developmental changes into account when promoting these assets (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Programs are developmentally appropriate when they provide greater opportunities for autonomy, participation in program decision-making, leadership, and exposure to intellectually challenging material as youth mature. Community programs for youth should be based on a developmental framework that supports the acquisition of personal and social assets in an environment and through activities that promote both current adolescent well-being and future successful transitions to adulthood. However, more comprehensive longitudinal and experimental research would focus on a wider range of populations to understand which assets are most important to adolescent development, which patterns of assets are linked to particular types of successful adult transitions in various cultural contexts, and which program elements contribute in which ways to successful outcomes (Eccles & Gootman). The current *Critical Factors for Youth Thriving* review continues the synthesis of Eccles and Gootman's report conceptualizing in the ARC model a simplified framework from the major theories, assets, and program features identified in their review.

The *Roots of Violence* report (McMurtry & Curling, 2008) outlines the societal conditions that produce risk factors for violence involving youth. These conditions are the context for the *Critical Factors for Youth Thriving* review, with many barriers to thriving including poverty, racism, inaccessible and inadequate community design, failures of the education and justice systems, family issues, health issues, a lack of a youth voice, and a lack of economic opportunity. The *Roots of Violence* specifically recommends youth engagement as a key part of the strategy to improve the social context, with a focus on skill-building, a sense of belonging with at least one adult who provides nurturing and support, and youth voice in matters that affect them. These recommendations are directly reflected in the critical factors in our ARC model: autonomy, relatedness, and competence.

The program frameworks, critical factors, and interventions described in the *Critical Factors for Youth Thriving* review provide evidence and examples that build on the *Roots of Violence* recommendations for programs. Specifically, the evidence gathered in this report reinforces and examines program factors and designs that (a) address multiple risk factors; (b) operate across social settings (including family, schools, peer groups, and the wider community); (c) contain skill-based components that increase educational attainment and improve employment prospects; (d) build social competence skills because violent offending is linked to deficiencies in thought processes and poor problem-solving skills; (e) focus on the way school-based classes are run with their emphasis on behavioural skills; and (f) are culturally specific.

The United Way Toronto's *Youth Impact Plan: Evidence Review* (Cohen & McDonough, 2012) identified three strong contributors to youth well-being: engagement, educational attainment, and economic security. Four features underscore the success of programs taking a positive youth development approach: build strong relationships between youth and non-family adults; ensure youth have agency and engagement in decision-making and program design to influence their communities; promote skill building across physical, emotional, intellectual, psychological, and social domains; and clearly state high expectations for youth. *The Youth Impact Plan: Evidence Review* concluded that the success of particular interventions depended more on how the program was conducted than its content with program success more related to the application of positive youth development approaches than to a particular type of intervention.

Most program indicators and outcomes described in the evidence review were related to the content of the program and rarely measured asset development directly. Few programs attempted to evaluate their impact on factors such as competence, confidence, character, connection, or contribution (the 5 Cs). The link between the development of assets and the content of interventions was generally weak (Cohen & McDonough, 2012). Like Eccles and Gootman's (2002) review, the findings indicated a lack of rigorous program evaluation. Moving towards a collaborative approach to youth programming and a shared positive youth development approach would help to address this gap, an approach supported by the current review.

Stepping Stones: A Resource on Youth Development (Ministry of Child and Youth Services, 2012) for 12- to 25-year-olds was created through a multi-phased approach that included an open call for 13 research papers, a synthesis of current research, and an extensive youth and community engagement process. Developmental maps described key developmental events for early adolescents, adolescents, and young adults with corresponding suggested supports for each stage. Tips for implementation of the supports complemented these maps. As *Stepping Stones* was published as a user-friendly resource for practitioners, its usefulness for the purposes of this review was limited, although, when applicable, we have referenced directly the research papers that helped inform its development.

Stepping Up: A Strategic Framework to Help Ontario's Youth to Succeed (Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2013) identifies 20 evidence-based outcomes and related indicators across seven themes that are important to enhancing the well-being of young people (see Appendix Chapter 1 for a summary). The Ontario government has committed to tracking and reporting on these outcomes annually. *Stepping Up* received input from the 18 provincial Ministries that have programs affecting youth, building upon the past consultations and research done for the *Roots of Violence* Report and *Stepping Stones* resource. The framework has seven guiding principles: a positive-asset based view of youth; targeted support for those who need it; collaboration and partnership; meaningful youth engagement and leadership; diversity; evidence-informed choices; and transparency. In addition, the framework outlines seven themes thought to be important when considering the development and thriving of youth ages 12-25 throughout life and critical life stage transitions: (i) health and wellness; (ii) strong, supportive friends and families; (iii) education, training, and apprenticeships; (iv) employment and entrepreneurship; (v) diversity, social inclusion, and safety; (vi) civic engagement and youth leadership; and (vii) coordinated and youth-friendly communities.

The *Critical Factors for Youth Thriving* review continues the work by Eccles and Gootman (2002) by bringing together the strongest evidence between 2000 and 2013, combined with a simplified and overarching model to assist in the development of a common framework called for by all these foundational reports. Youth engagement was an additional recurring recommendation in all of the foundational reports. *Critical Factors for Youth Thriving* provides evidence and a theoretical conceptualization for the role of youth engagement in facilitating the three critical factors.

Theoretical Overview

Since the recognition of adolescence as a formative life course transition in the 20th century, policy-makers, researchers, and social scientists have been developing their understanding of what youth need to thrive. Since the 1950s, literature from the mental health and criminal justice models has tried to address the issue of delinquent behaviour (Damon, 2004). Policies based on those approaches have been effective in reducing juvenile crime (Eccles & Gootman, 2002) and have extensively expanded in an attempt to address issues such as substance abuse, graduation rates, and teenage pregnancy (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004). Community psychology emerged in the 1960s in response to the reactive deficit model pervading these initial models by emphasizing strength development (Trickett, Barone, & Buchanan, 1996). In the mid-1980s, the focus moved from the "causes" of delinquency to the etiological factors that influence social development (Hawkins & Weis, 1985). Instead of examining ways to respond to existing crises, interventions were developed to support youth to avoid particular problem behaviours.

While early preventative literature was often concentrated on a single measureable behaviour, the focus has shifted from single factors to the co-occurrence of predictors of multiple behaviours (Catalano et al., 2004). A variety of frameworks from a range of areas of study has been developed over the past three decades to provide more comprehensive pictures of what helps youth thrive. For example, according to the social development model, factors directly relating to family (attachment to parents) or indirectly relating to family (moral order) influence delinquent behaviour (Hawkins & Weis, 1985). A series of longitudinal studies in the 1980s represent the beginning of another line of research on resiliency (Werner, 1982). Instead of focusing on the inhibitors of youth success, resiliency research focuses on the factors that foster "flourishing in spite of every prediction to the contrary" (Damon, 2004, p. 16).

Resiliency research was successful in focusing the discussion around the positive attributes, but it did not create a fully scoped model of universal youth development. Benson (1997) at the Search Institute extended the field by creating "developmental assets": a model that includes internal and external components that represent what youth require to thrive. The Developmental Assets™ model has been used for the development of comprehensive approaches to research and practice by focusing on the unique talents, strengths, and potential of each individual.

While the Developmental Assets™ model provides a list of 40 assets for thriving, equally divided between internal and external assets, the Five Cs Model focuses on five core internal principles: competence; confidence; connection; character; and caring/compassion (contribution is sometimes added as a sixth C when the previous five Cs are satisfied; Armour & Sandford, 2013; Lerner, Lerner, et al., 2005). Youth with higher levels of the five Cs tend to have better outcomes (Bowers et al., 2010).

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) outlines three innate psychological needs (autonomy, relatedness, and competence) to explain youth thriving (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Autonomy relates to the extent that an individual feels that circumstances are under volitional control. Relatedness concerns constructive relationships with others in one's environment. Competence is based on self-appraisals of ability to achieve desired outcomes. A more comprehensive analysis of contemporary frameworks that have been developed to support youth programming can be found in Chapter 3.

This report looks to consolidate decades of evidence and theory to create a model by which program designers can create impactful programs to support adolescent development through examining the most salient theoretical premises of Developmental Assets™, the Five Cs Model, and Self-Determination Theory to create a youth thriving model by discussing three critical factors: autonomy,

relatedness, and competence. The evidence for autonomy, relatedness, and competence as critical factors for thriving is robust.

Autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1985) is a critical factor for having one's behaviour be self-sanctioned; autonomy is demonstrated when behaviour is regulated and choices are made with a high level of volition. *Relatedness* is a critical factor for being connected within beneficial relationships; relatedness is demonstrated when secure and caring attachments are developed with others (Deci & Ryan, 2000). *Competence* (Deci & Ryan, 1985) is a critical factor for being effective; competence is demonstrated when optimal challenges engage the capacity of skill and illicit an extension of skills. Optimal challenge occurs when the challenge of an activity is highly balanced with an individual's abilities to successfully perform the task. Satisfaction of all critical factors is associated with success in a range of environments and greater personal achievement (Jang, Reeve, Ryan, & Kim, 2009).

Outcomes

For youth to thrive, they need to thrive in three domains: cognitive/learning, behavioural/social, and psychological/emotional. These domains are adapted from Pan-Canadian Joint Consortium for School Health (JCSH) report that identified similar domains: cognitive, behavioural, and affective (Morrison & Peterson, 2013). Outcomes represent success in these domains. Thus a comprehensive picture of youth thriving examines the three critical factors as they align with these three outcome domains (shortened to outcomes in this report; see Table 1.1).

Table 1.1: The intersection between critical factors and outcomes

Critical Factors	Cognitive / learning outcomes	Behavioural / social outcomes	Psychological / emotional outcomes
Autonomy			
Relatedness			
Competence			

Cognitive/learning outcomes refer to cognitive-related achievements such as higher achievement test scores, effective learning strategies, and commitment to lifelong learning. Collectively, autonomy, relatedness, and competence predict cognitive achievement (Reeve, 2002; Vansteenkiste, Zhou, Lens & Soenens, 2005) and successful adaptive learning (Vansteenkiste et al., 2005). *Behavioural/social outcomes* refer to success relating to interpersonal exchanges including positive social interactions, community involvement, and assumption of leadership roles. Satisfaction of the critical factors is a predictor of perceived social competence (Reeve, 2002) and meaningful engagement in civic activities (Joselowsky, 2007). *Psychological/emotional outcomes* refer to healthy intrapersonal achievements, for example, healthy self-image, contentedness, and low levels of depression. Satisfaction of the critical factors is a predictor of higher self-esteem (Reeve, 2002, Vansteenkiste et al., 2005), psychological well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and better coping (Vallerand & Bissonnette, 1992). The relationships between critical factors and outcomes are explored in Chapters 4-6.

Moving Forward to Our Goals

In moving forward to our goal of promoting youth thriving, it is insufficient to understand the historical and theoretical underpinnings of the three critical factors (autonomy, relatedness, and competence)

without additionally understanding the underlying influences that contextualize these factors, the transitions young people experience, and the range of interventions that may affect these factors.

Contextual Influences

Young people are products of their genetic inheritance and their environment, and the interactions between them. While some youth live on the streets, others live in affluent homes in affluent neighbourhoods. Some youth struggle with questions of sexual orientation and gender identity more than do others. Some youth face discrimination because of race, ethnicity, religion, and gender. Some youth cope with chronic health issues, whereas others cope with significant sudden health events. The experiences of young people vary across neighbourhoods within the GTA, between the GTA and the rest of Ontario, between Ontario and the rest of Canada, and between Canada and the rest of the world.

Transitions

Young people go through developmental changes from the age of 12-25. Early adolescents are undergoing pubertal changes and are confronted by a rapidly changing body. Middle adolescents are trying to navigate their future possibilities within a shifting social landscape. Late adolescents and young adults seek even greater independence than they have previously attained.

Transitions represent crucial junctures where environment and development intersect. Just as young people are moving from early to middle adolescence, they are moving from the elementary/junior high school system to the secondary school system. As they go from middle to late adolescence, they leave the secondary school system. After secondary school, destinations vary from post-secondary institutions to apprenticeships to the world of work. Additional transitions that may occur at any time during adolescence, although generally in late adolescence if they do occur, encompass, among others, moving in and out of systems of care, becoming a parent, entering a long-term relationship, understanding one's sexual orientation and gender identity, and moving out of the family home. Transitions of various natures are discussed in Chapter 7.

Evidence-based and Promising Interventions

In seeking interventions that best promote the critical factors, two types of data are most helpful. Scholarly literature provides information about evidence-based interventions that have undergone reviews by experts and have met the standards for publication by a particular journal. As such, these interventions carry a certain level of evidence and are generally viewed as "evidence-based." However, publication can be a lengthy process and often such published interventions do not align with the most recent thinking in the field. Furthermore, there may be a publication bias against innovative practices. Problems with currency and publication are alleviated by examining grey literature to find "promising" interventions, interventions with the best likelihood for success that have yet to accumulate traditional evidence of such success. Both evidence-based and promising interventions, as well as relevant studies and reviews of interventions, are examined in Chapter 8.

Synthesis

The information accumulated in the previous chapters is brought together in Chapter 9 to inform future initiatives from YMCA of Greater Toronto and United Way Toronto. We describe the key elements that will promote cognitive/learning, behavioural/social, and psychological/emotional success through interventions targeted at autonomy, relatedness, and competence. We provide information about the challenges to implementation of these elements in interventions for adolescents generally, for each subgroup of adolescents, and for young people in transition. We put forward the most comprehensive analysis currently possible to ensure youth success for young people in the greater GTA and beyond the GTA in other regions of Ontario, while suggesting directions for future research and practice.

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