Communications

Asset Building: Rhetoric Versus Reality – A Cautionary Note

In recent years, a ground swell of support by community leaders and school officials across the country emerged regarding the theory of asset building. One of the most visible promoters of asset building has been the Search Institute of Minneapolis, Minn. In the past five years, more than 300 communities launched communitywide interventions to enhance the assets of their youth based on reports from the Search Institute. The concept of assets and their components seems intuitively logical.

The Search Institute, an independent and nonprofit organization, describes their primary mission as promoting the well-being of children and adolescents. It accomplishes this mission in a variety of ways. For example, it "conducts scientific research studies of children and adolescents." It disseminates the research findings in the books, reports, and newsletters it publishes. To date, the Institute has published three studies in refereed professional journals, two of which were published last year.

The first article reported on data provided to the Search Institute communities that self-selected to assess assets of youth in their communities. Thus, the data were derived "from relatively small, isolated, primarily white, 'place' communities (fewer than 27,000 residents) not within major metropolitan areas." Subjects came primarily from the Midwest, with communities averaging 4,000 residents, and 98% were White. This process did not provide a random sample of students and certainly not a representative sample of US youth or their environments. Thus, any broad conclusions regarding assets for America's youth based on such a sample is unwarranted.

The second article described the Search Institute's 156-item survey instrument. "Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors," which measures 40 developmental assets and several other subscales. The article also reported survey results from a sample of volunteer communities (n=213) with 99,462 students in grades 6 through 12. Mean assets for the 213 communities ranged from 16.7 to 20.1, from a possible 40 assets. The authors indicated that their data probably overestimated students' assets. They further noted that the volunteer communities probably gave higher priority to their youth than did the average community. Such a low level of assets evident in such assessments implies that other important assets may be missing from the instrument or, if the assets are being measured correctly and are important to high risk behavior, then American youth are in dire straits. A cursory examination of the instrument indicates that, under the section on support (external assets), six items measure family and other adult support, but no items measure peer support. Yet, people who work with youth would acknowledge the importance of peer support among youth.

The third article extended the analysis of data initially presented in the second article. In this article, the authors explained the basis for the validity of their instrument as "face validity" based on a comprehensive review of literature. They indicated that, when they conducted a principal components analysis with varimax rotation, using eigenvalues of at least 1.0, they identified 16 factor solutions (16 categories). Their construction of the instrument was supposed to produce an instrument composed of eight categories. The authors concluded that other assets "... could be as, or more important than, some of those that we measure..." Again, these data and comments raise questions about the validity of the instrument.

The third article also addressed reliability of the instrument. The authors assessed internal consistency with a Cronbach's coefficient alpha for subscales with two or more items. Of the 27 subscales with two or more items, six had reliability coefficients of .50 or less, indicating weak internal reliabilities. More important than weak internal reliability for some sections of the instrument is the issue of test-retest reliability. The instrument being used as a pretest to assess assets in communities. The communities then attempt interventions to improve student assets before the instrument is given again as a post-test. Thus, a more appropriate form of reliability would be test-retest or stability reliability. Test-retest reliability estimates the stability of measures repeated over time. The authors have not yet assessed stability reliability for users of the instrument for grade levels 6 through 12. The current survey instrument has 156 items. Having spent 25 years surveying elementary, junior high, and high school students, I suspect that an instrument of that length lacks adequate stability reliability, at least at the elementary and junior high school levels.

The Search Institute identifies two categories of assets: internal and external. Internal assets include "commitments, values, and competencies that help an individual thrive competently and responsibly when on 'one's own.'" External assets include issues of support, control, and structured time use. The Institute asserts that if youth have more assets, they are less likely to be at risk for use of illicit drugs, antisocial behavior, and risky sexual behavior, to name a few. Thus, if schools and communities can measure assets, then they can move to enhance the deficient assets for youth, reducing their at-risk status. The problem with the concept of assets and high-risk behaviors is that all the data are correlational. No published study has shown that a major intervention to change assets in youth makes them less likely to be at risk.

The 1998 national conference of ASHA in Colorado Springs, Colo., featured as one of its keynote speakers Peter Scales, PhD, senior researcher with the Search Institute. His conference presentation was published in a recent issue.
of the Journal. Dr. Scales joined the Search Institute staff relatively recently. Thus, our concerns lie not with Dr. Scales but with the commercial orientation (selling surveys and books) of the Search Institute and the limited research published in refereed journals by the Search Institute regarding asset theory. In a brief discussion with Dr. Scales following his presentation at the ASHA convention, he confirmed the Search Institute had research problems they were in the process of trying to rectify. This situation seems like a "carr before the horse" issue. Appropriate research on assets and their measurement should have been conducted and published before the wholesale marketing of the instrument to communities.

In 1990, the Search Institute introduced the concept of 30 developmental assets measured by a 152-item student self-report instrument called the Search Institute's "Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors." Recently, the Search Institute expanded the assessment to include 40 assets measured by a 156-item "Attitudes and Behaviors" instrument. The Institute indicated, "The changes were made based on the insights of communities launching asset-building movements, as well as the work of researchers." These "insights" from communities and researchers seem to have been sufficient to increase from 30 assets to 40 assets (not 37 or 41 assets, but an even 40). Such a change in the number of items may preclude combining data from 30 assets with data assessing 40 assets since the instruments are not measuring the same items.

It seems a bit too commercial, if your primary goal involves promoting the well-being of youth, to constrain research using your survey instrument. The survey instruments cost $2 each, and they must be purchased from the Search Institute in units of 25 to 5,000 copies. Purchasers also must pay to have data from their surveys analyzed; an initial report costs $700. Further, individuals cannot analyze their own data; it is prohibited in a contract they must sign with the Search Institute.

While speaking at the ASHA conference, Dr. Scales referred to the Search Institute's "research" on more than one-half-million students on which they have survey data. When you explore this "research," you find that they have not designed studies to test their asset theory. Instead, they used the thousands of completed student survey instruments provided by community agencies and schools to aggregate the data. For example, they suggest that students with 0-11 assets are 3 times as likely as those with 21-25 assets to have early sex experiences. In other words, they simply added assets assuming that all assets have the same effect on all students. Yet, their own research indicates that different assets are better predictors of various risk behaviors. It seems illogical to assume that the same assets have the same effect on both genders, at all ages, among those in different socioeconomic strata, and in various racial/ethnic groups.

Finally, a more subtle but troublesome result of asset building theory as promoted by the Search Institute has been its negative impact on the nation's most significant, longitudinal adolescent health survey -- the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS). In some areas of the country, local conservative groups are requesting that asset building questions be added to the YRBS, sometimes to the exclusion of YRBS questions, such as the more sensitive sexuality questions. In other areas, some groups are now declining to conduct the YRBS because they decided to conduct the asset assessment survey by the Search Institute. To have the Search Institute survey replace the YRBS represents a serious setback to the national longitudinal assessment of key adolescent risk behaviors.

All the time and financial resources spent on unproven health education assessments and subsequent interventions precludes those resources being used in more useful ways, on approaches known to reduce youth risk behavior. Currently, we have little research from the Search Institute on assets to confirm the validity and effectiveness of their work, especially in comparison to established measures such as the YRBS.

References

2. Search Institute Fact Sheet. Minneapolis, Minn: Search Institute; no date.

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