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## Seeking and Finding Positive Youth Development Among Zulu Youth in South African Townships

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A cross-sectional study explored the presence and power of developmental assets in a sample of youth from rural South African townships. Learners (female = 58%;  $M_{\text{age}} = 17.1$ ;  $N = 505$ ) attending three township high schools completed self-report measures of developmental assets and thriving outcomes. Participants reported contextual assets (e.g., family, school, community) in the vulnerable ranges, with gender, family structure, and school type accounting for some differences. Correlation and regression analyses revealed that five asset contexts (family, school, community, personal, social) were uniquely predictive of thriving outcomes. Discussion focuses on contextual expressions of positive youth development among Zulu township youth in challenging environments.

Beginning in the early 1990s, a new vision and vocabulary for discussing the development of young people emerged. These innovations were framed by developmental systems theories that were engaging the interest of developmental scientists, most notably the notion of developmental plasticity (i.e., the ability of the individual to change in positive, adaptive ways; Lerner, 2002). Moreover, these innovations were propelled by the increasingly collaborative contributions of researchers focused on the second decade of life (e.g., Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006; Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003; Lerner, 2002), practitioners in the field of youth development (e.g., Pittman, Irby, & Ferber, 2001), and policymakers concerned with improving the life chances of diverse youth and their families, in both developed (Schwartz & King, 2012) and undeveloped (Scales, Roehlkepartain, & Shramko,

2016) contexts. This field has become known as positive youth development (PYD).

A young person's ability to thrive is predicated on the interaction between individuals and the contexts in which they live (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). A significant step forward in understanding the interaction between a young person and his or her ecological contexts was the operationalization of *developmental assets* (Benson, 1990; Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998), a framework that reflects the bioecological approach by examining young people's external assets (largely relationship centered, focusing on experiences of support, empowerment, etc.) and their internal strengths (including commitment to learning, positive identity, etc.). Research using the developmental assets paradigm has been conducted with over five million children and youth. Results indicate a linear relationship between the number of developmental assets reported and the presence of thriving behaviors (e.g., school success, helping others; Benson et al., 2006; Benson, Scales, & Syvertsen, 2011; Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000).

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*PYD in World Areas*

Studies on developmental assets among youth from varied global settings, including the Global South, are emerging (Scales, 2011; Scales, Roehlkepartain, & Fraher, 2012; Scales et al., 2013, 2016). Of note to the present study, which focuses on Zulu youth in South Africa (SA), positive developmental assets are implicated in the resilience processes that support Black young people to adjust well to structural adversity. Their resilience is enabled by external assets such as kinship systems and caring teachers, as well as internal assets such as enactment of empowering *Ubuntu* values (e.g., respectful interdependence) and investment in education (Phasha, 2010; Theron, 2016; Theron & Theron, 2010). External assets are shaped by contextual realities: In under resourced, rural contexts, for example, kinship systems are largely matriarchal, given men's exodus to urban areas in search of employment (Theron, 2016).

For countries such as SA, where social and political change is dynamic and unsettling, the present study's explication of developmental assets helps raise understanding of what internal and environmental strengths youth can draw on to flourish in culturally and contextually appropriate ways (Masten, 2014; Ungar, 2011). This also redresses the reality that most research in SA has underemphasized the cultural and contextual roots that lead to positive outcomes for children (Schwartz, 2015; Theron & Phasha, 2015; Theron & Theron, 2010).

The present study included a sample of 505 high school students from three semirural townships outside of Durban (KwaZulu-Natal province) who were invited to complete self-report questionnaires on developmental assets and thriving. Their responses were analyzed to answer two questions: (a) What developmental assets are present among young and midadolescent Zulu youth in semirural SA townships? (b) How do the self-reported developmental assets predict concurrent thriving (e.g., school success, leadership)?

**Method***Context*

In SA, Apartheid policy mandated Black people to live in racially segregated, structurally inferior communities (called townships). Similar to Brazilian favelas, multiple adversities characterize townships, including poverty, violence, inadequate/no service provision (e.g., water, sanitation, refuse removal), resource-poor schools, elevated communicable disease rates (e.g.,

HIV, TB), and scant employment opportunities (Mathews, Jamieson L., & Smith, 2014). Despite such structural inequity, townships can offer a rich source of community, often vibrant with spiritual, social, and emotional connection and support (Theron, 2016).

*Procedure*

The KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education approved the study, and all parents were asked for signed permission for their children to participate in the paper-and-pencil survey. Developmental assets questions were translated into Zulu (see Supporting Information). To protect anonymity, schools will be randomly identified as High School A, B, and C. High School A is situated in a rural township (i.e., connected by dirt roads, populated by small farms or growing plots). Although only several miles from an urban center, its rurality is synonymous with extreme resource and service deprivation. High School A is classified as a Quintile 1 school, meaning school fees are waived and students receive a government-subsidized meal at school. High School B is also in a rural township but has better roads, has more stable access to power and water, and does not receive school fees or meal subsidies. High School C is a semiresidential school the furthest distance from any urban setting. It boasts strong graduation results and notable alumni.

On the day of data collection, parent consent forms were collected from learners. A total of 556 parent consent forms were returned; 532 indicated parental/guardian consent to participate (71% of consent forms provided, 96% of those returned), and 24 declined to give consent. Questionnaires were distributed to learners in their respective classrooms. Questionnaires were written in English, though the major self-report scale (Developmental Assets Profile [DAP]) was translated into isiZulu. All data were collected between September and November 2013.

*Sample*

Questionnaires were completed by 505 learners (58% female; 77% not living with both parents; 53% of parents had not completed high school): High School A ( $N = 221$ ), High School B ( $N = 154$ ), and High School C ( $N = 130$ ; see Supporting Information for more robust description of sample).

*Measures**Developmental Assets Profile*

The DAP (Search Institute, 2005; Scales, 2011) is brief (58 items), requires basic literacy (U.S. grade

5.7) and is a reliable and valid measure in the United States (Search Institute, 2005) and globally (Scales et al., 2016) of young people's developmental assets in the personal, social, family, school, and community contexts. In 50 data sets from 30 countries other than the United States, nearly 70% of DAP scale alphas are acceptable to excellent (.70s–.90s) and another 20% are promising (.60–.69). In addition, 90% of the associations of the DAP with PYD outcomes in these developing countries are above a “substantively meaningful” level (Scales, 2011; Scales et al., 2012, 2016; What Works Clearinghouse, 2008), with effect sizes in the moderate to strong range ( $d \geq .25$ ) suggesting promising cultural validity.

### Thriving

Thriving was measured by four outcomes: academic success, school confidence, health-seeking behavior, and community engagement. Prior South African studies have reported these outcomes as integral to the resilience of young people marginalized for their race (i.e., Black), socioeconomic disadvantage, and geographical location (e.g., rural/urban townships; see Phasha, 2010; Theron, 2016; Theron & Theron, 2010). Items contributing to each measure were standardized and are described below with corresponding internal reliability (Cronbach's alpha) or correlation (Pearson's  $r$ , for two-item measures) coefficients. Of note, the correlation coefficients and internal consistency alphas for the thriving indexes are in the fair ( $\alpha \geq .60$ ;  $r \geq .35$ ) ranges, suggesting that although there is reasonable statistical agreement among the items, the indexes are not strongly homogeneous in their structure. For academic success ( $\alpha = .64$ ), three questions asked participants to rate if they could read, write, and do enough math to be successful using a 4-point Likert-type scale for each (1 = *never/rarely* to 4 = *almost always*). Also, using a 4-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*), school confidence ( $r = .45$ ) was measured by asking participants to rate two statements: “I can figure out how to do my best schoolwork, even if it is hard” and “I can master what is being taught in school this year.” For the health-seeking behavior ( $r = .59$ ), participants used the same scale to respond to two statements: “I know where to go to get a health examination or medicines” and “I know how to get to a doctor or medical care when I need it.” Finally, community engagement ( $r = .38$ ) was estimated via participant responses to two questions: “How much can you do things to help

solve problems in your community or village?” (1 = *there is little I can do* to 3 = *I can do many things to help*) and “How many hours do you spend in a typical week to volunteer or do something without pay to make your community a better place?” (1 = *0 hr* to 4 = *3–5 hr*). The four thriving measures are analyzed individually in all subsequent analysis.

## Results

### Developmental Assets

The mean of the DAP total asset score is constructed based on a range from 0 to 60 and is interpreted as follows (Search Institute, 2005): good = 52–60, adequate = 42–51, vulnerable = 30–41, and highly vulnerable < 30. The mean for the present Zulu youth sample was 36.3. As can be seen in Figure 1, when compared with other world areas similar in sample size and age of respondent (Scales et al., 2012), Zulu youth scored on the lower end of mean total asset scores and equal with Rwanda (Figure 1; Scales et al., 2012). At the context area level, Table 1 shows that mean scores were calculated from lowest to highest as follows: Community context was the least and the family context the most commonly reported ( $M = 15.6$ ), suggesting that youth in this sample reported lower community support, empowerment, and positive use of time compared to their experience of safe, warm, and supportive family environments.

Mean scores for all DAP variables (DAP total asset score and context assets) are presented in Table 1 and include analysis of variance results for gender, family structure, and school. There were no significant differences found between any of the demographic variables on the DAP total asset score.

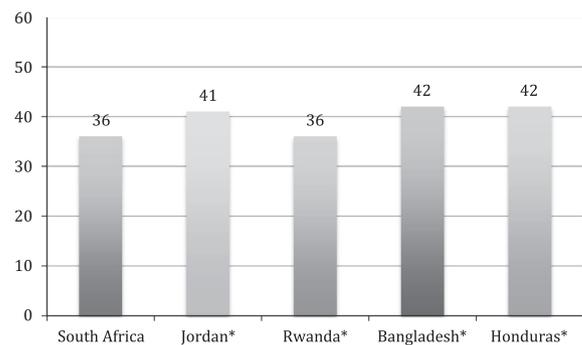


Figure 1. Developmental Assets Profile total asset score, by country. \*Previously measured in Scales et al. (2012).

Table 1  
*Developmental Assets Profile (DAP) and Gender, Family Structure, and School Differences*

DAP (Cronbach's $\alpha$ )	Gender		Family structure			School		
	Male	Female	Mother/ father	Mother only	Other	A	B	C
DAP total score <i>M</i> = 36.3 (.93)	35.7	36.8	36.6	36.8	35.9	29.8b	41.1a	41.5a
Context view								
Personal <i>M</i> = 18.9 (.90)	18.5	19.2	19.1	18.9	18.9	15.0b	21.7a	22.0a
Social <i>M</i> = 18.8 (.89)	17.9	19.3*	19.1	18.9	18.5	14.7b	21.2a	22.5a
Family <i>M</i> = 20.0 (.90)	19.4	20.8*	21.3a	20.4	19.3b	16.5b	22.8a	23.3a
School <i>M</i> = 18.6 (.88)	18.5	18.7	18.1	19.1	18.4	15.5b	21.0a	20.6a
Community <i>M</i> = 15.6 (.85)	15.7	15.5	15.6	15.7	15.3	13.6b	17.5a	16.6a

\* $p < .05$ . a > b ( $p < .01$ ).

Women ( $M = 20.1$ ) reported significantly higher family context than did men ( $M = 19.4$ ), and family context was also rated significantly higher by youth living with both parents ( $M = 21.3$ ), compared with those who reported living with "other" household members ( $M = 19.3$ ).

Complementing the contextual differences in the three township settings described earlier, there were significant differences in the developmental assets—DAP total asset score and DAP context areas—reported by students attending the three participant schools. In every comparison, High School A scored significantly lower ( $p < .01$ ) on developmental assets than both High Schools B and C. Thus, rather than being able to consider all responses to the DAP scales equivalent, it is apparent that participants from school A have self-reported overwhelmingly lower developmental strengths. Therefore, in predicting thriving and risk, school was entered first in all correlation and regression analyses to control for these differences.

### Thriving

Partial correlation analyses (controlling for school type) were completed for the five DAP context asset variables—*personal*, *social*, *family*, *school*, and *community*—and the four thriving outcomes (i.e., academic success, school confidence, health behavior, and community engagement). As seen in Table 2, higher self-reported scores across all five contexts assets were significantly and positively correlated with the

four thriving variables—*academic success*, *school confidence*, *health-seeking behavior*, and *community engagement*, albeit sometimes at relatively small magnitude (e.g., family context and school success,  $r = .11$ ); community context and health-seeking behavior,  $r = .11$ ).

Four hierarchical regressions (controlling for school) were completed to explore the amount of variance accounted for in each of the thriving variables. School was entered in Block 1 of each regression, whereas in Block 2, the five DAP context asset variables were entered via the stepwise method. Results with unstandardized *B* coefficients, standard errors, and beta weights are shown in Table 3. Each of the four thriving outcomes—academic success, school confidence, health-seeking behavior, and community engagement—was uniquely and significantly predicted by a single DAP context assets variable. School context predicted academic success ( $B = .208$ ,  $p < .001$ ), personal context

Table 2  
*Partial Correlations of Developmental Assets Profile Context and Thriving Variables (Controlling for School)*

	Academic success	School confidence	Health- seek behavior	Community engagement
Personal	.19 (.000)	.22 (.000)	.12 (.012)	.22 (.000)
Social	.16 (.001)	.19 (.016)	.17 (.001)	.17 (.000)
Family	.11 (.027)	.16 (.001)	.11 (.027)	.14 (.003)
School	.20 (.000)	.19 (.000)	.15 (.002)	.18 (.000)
Community	.16 (.001)	.16 (.001)	.11 (.028)	.31 (.000)

Table 3  
Stepwise Regressions: Developmental Assets Profile Context Assets Areas and Thriving Indexes

	Model 1			Model 2		
	B	SE B	$\beta$	B	SE B	$\beta$
Academic success						
School	.073	.040	.086	.010	.042	.012
Context asset: school				.225	.054	.208**
R <sup>2</sup>		.007				.045**
School confidence						
School	.012	.038	.015	-.075	.042	-.096
Context asset: personal				.252	.055	.243**
R <sup>2</sup>		.000				.047**
Health-seeking behavior						
School	.115	.042	.113**	.029	.048	.034
Context asset: social				.223	.065	.191**
R <sup>2</sup>		.018**				.044**
Community engagement						
School	-.182	.043	-.198**	-.243	.042	-.265**
Context asset: community				.391	.058	.310**
R <sup>2</sup>		.039**				.131**

\*\* $p < .001$ .

predicted school confidence ( $B = .243$ ,  $p < .001$ ), social context predicted health-seeking behavior ( $B = .191$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and community context predicted community engagement ( $B = .310$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

### Discussion

We examined the self-reported developmental assets of Zulu youth, living in rural, resource-poor townships in SA, and the relation of those assets to several thriving outcomes. Zulu youth experienced a vulnerable level of assets, on a par with results from Rwanda, which the OECD ([www.oecd.org/dac/stats](http://www.oecd.org/dac/stats)) classifies as one of the least developed countries. Contextual realities likely account for underreported assets such as access to extracurricular activities and safety: In townships, facilities for extracurricular activities are limited, and violence is prevalent (Dass-Brailsford, 2005; Govender & Kilian, 2001). Contextual deprivation diminishes assets. For example, low community assets likely reflect increasingly fractured communities, particularly given growing inequality, despite SA's democratization in 1994. This fracturing is associated with the tendency of the emerging Black middle class to westernize and neglect Ubuntu values (e.g.,

respectful interdependence) that have previously underpinned cohesive communities (Ramphele, 2012). Similarly, family context was rated significantly higher by young people living with both parents. This is worrying, given current statistics that only 24.4% of children in KwaZulu-Natal (mostly Indian and White) live with both parents (Hall, Meintjes, & Sambu, 2014). For a variety of reasons (including deepening economic decline and/or AIDS-related deaths), the majority of children—especially Black children—live with their mother only or other household members, challenging African young people's optimal development (e.g., Chukwudozie et al., 2015; Mpofu, Ruhode, Mhaka-Mutepfa, January, & Mapfumo, 2015).

In SA, race, the enduring legacies of Apartheid (e.g., structural violence and economic disadvantage), and geographic location intersect to produce a life experience that is developmentally stacked against positive growth. Still, this sample of Zulu youth possesses strengths. Although "vulnerable" in their collective personal and relational assets, a significant percentage scored in the good or adequate levels (external 31.5%, internal 43.4%), thus reflecting developmental relationships (Pekel, Roehlkepartain, Syvertsen, & Scales, 2015), opportunities, and personal strengths. Similar to youth in other disadvantaged settings, such as refugee camps (Scales et al., 2015), who also display such strengths, this sample of Zulu youth confirmed the predictive relationship of assets with thriving. These results demonstrate that even powerfully negative macrolevel environmental influences do not inevitably thwart PYD—individual youth still have plasticity or the potential for change (Lerner, 2002).

The current study also exposed the centrality of school context to future enablement of developmental assets. Although the three high schools were likely representative of those common to many South African townships, it was clear that High School A housed learners who did not experience levels of developmental or contextual assets commensurate with the other two schools. It is possible that the pervasive deprivation that characterized High School A (more so than B and C) confounded thriving and promoted risk behavior and civic disengagement. This hypothesis prompts two caveats. First, generalizations between township schools need to be considered with great caution. As noted in other studies, some SA township schools do champion resilience and promote asset development (Mampane & Bouwer, 2011; Theron, 2016). Second, we need wide-scale emulation of township

schools that are doing it right, so to speak. Supporting all schools to be enabling, optimal developmental spaces is an urgent agenda and, as such, demands social ecological plasticity, including transforming schools in ways that will nurture increased thriving behaviors and decreased risk taking. This is all the more urgent in SA given the inferior quality of schooling typically available to young people, particularly those in marginalized communities such as rural townships (Langa, 2013; Osman, 2015).

Overall, our results show that all contexts matter. Every context (i.e., family, school, community, personal, social) was meaningful in predicting at least one thriving and/or risk outcome (see Table 2). Focusing on only one context, to the exclusion of others, ignores the ecological reality that youth do not live in only one environmental niche but rather in multiple systems that collectively help shape their developmental paths. These results support the recent movement in international youth development circles (e.g., USAID's youth development policy—United States Agency for International Development [USAID], 2012) away from the traditional single-sector, single problem focus, and toward a comprehensive, multidimensional, person environment, and asset-based approach.

#### *Strengths and Limitations*

The present study was designed to be exploratory on several levels. First, it was novel in that it appears to be one of very few studies to gather samples of township youth and invite their participation in a study exploring developmental and contextual strengths. Participants were enthusiastic in their willingness to complete questionnaires, possibly because other opportunities for such engagement likely focused on what they “didn't have” (deficit approach) versus what they “did have” (strength approach). Second, this study was a rare exercise in operationalizing developmental assets or strengths via the DAP in southern Africa. Developmental scientists are often interested in how particular theories or constructs are interpreted by children and youth in other world areas (e.g., Ebersöhn & Eloff, 2006), and this study seemed to successfully estimate the presence of strengths and assets using this brief DAP self-report measure. Nevertheless, only self-reported data were collected; there was no cross-validation of the youth voices captured. Second, more variability in Zulu youth samples both in and outside the school population is necessary for our results to have greater external validity. Finally, the

four thriving measures do not adequately capture the full range of what thriving or risk look like, in general (e.g., Betancourt, Meyers-Ohki, Charrow, & Hansen, 2013; King et al., 2005), or specifically for Zulu township youth.

#### *Implications*

Intentional efforts to change developmental circumstances for youth can have dramatic results. Individuals have developmental plasticity, but their social ecology can and must change for the better as well. The voices of the hundreds of Zulu youth represented in this study are crying out loud: Developmental strengths are indeed present and powerful, and these are amplified in communities that care. Applied developmental researchers would do well to listen to these loud voices and employ our academic, social, and political resources to ensure that youth are given the opportunity to harness the personal and social resources that will allow them not only to survive but thrive.

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### Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's website:

**Data S1.** Expanded Sample and Results