

Thriving and Sparks



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Overview

For most of the history of the psychology of adolescence, the predominant criterion for judging adolescents' developmental success has been whether young people avoid mortality and morbidity in the form of a litany of specific risk behaviors, ranging from avoidance of school failure, to avoidance of substance abuse, antisocial behavior and violence, and irresponsible sexual behavior. Only in the last 30 years has the movement called Positive Youth Development (PYD), with its focus on promoting desirable attitudes and behaviors and not only preventing undesirable ones, gained such sufficient traction that PYD can now be said to be the principal theoretical and applied framework for understanding and working with adolescents (see Scales et al., 2022 this volume). In this entry, the authors describe the development of and new directions for a comprehensive theory and measurement of a relatively newer element of PYD, adolescent *thriving*, as

advanced by Benson and Scales (2009), including the central role of a young person pursuing their deep passions and interests – their “sparks,” the metaphor used to describe the internal animating force that propels development forward. With a series of both quantitative and qualitative studies, both nationally representative and more purposive, a foundational understanding has been established that, when youth have sparks and a thriving orientation that includes relationship support for development of their sparks, numerous developmental and social benefits are experienced, both by young people and by the contexts they inhabit. Unfortunately, it also has been shown that only a minority of young people in the USA experience both sparks and high levels of support to develop those deep interests, such that only a minority can truly be said to be thriving.

What does it mean to say an adolescent is “thriving?” We have tried to answer this question throughout this entry, as well as to point out the complexities in answering with cultural validity and accuracy. Those complexities, in turn, lay bare the ongoing nature of the discussion about what “thriving” really means, how best to measure “it,” and how best to promote the most equitable and broad opportunity for all youth to thrive.

As has been previously noted (Benson & Scales, 2009), the term itself is a fairly recent addition to the vocabulary of adolescent psychology, having typically been used largely in reference to newborns, and the degree to which, through the APGAR tests, they exhibit the salient

Peter L. Benson: deceased.

defining signs of neonatal wellness. For adolescents, the predominant criterion for judging developmental success, for most of the history of the psychology of adolescence, has been, until quite recently, whether young people avoid mortality and morbidity in the form of a litany of specific risk behaviors, ranging from avoidance of school failure, to avoidance of substance abuse, antisocial behavior and violence, and irresponsible sexual behavior. Only in the last 30 years has the movement called Positive Youth Development (PYD), with its focus on promoting desirable attitudes and behaviors and not only preventing undesirable ones, gained such sufficient traction that PYD can now be said to be the principal theoretical and applied framework for understanding and working with adolescents. Indeed, it was not until the 2006 edition of the *Handbook of Child Psychology* that a chapter on positive youth development was ever included (Benson et al., 2006).

PYD asks not only what conditions prevent negative youth outcomes, but also what conditions promote healthy, caring, successful youth (Scales, 2017)? Although a welcome balancing weight to the traditional view of young people as reflecting largely potential problems to be prevented, even a PYD frame of reference can limit the field's vision of development to what is "good enough" for young people to do "okay." In this vein, it has been argued that much of the implicit connotation of the term "competence" in the psychological literature, although intended as a positive description, has the unfortunate consequence of focusing attention on adolescents' "okay-ness" or adequacy more than on their *optimal* development (Benson & Scales, 2009). Similarly, the concept of resilience only takes us part of the way in its emphasis on overcoming threats to development, or returning to a status of adequacy (Masten & Obradovic, 2006).

Search Institute has articulated and studied the framework of developmental assets since 1990, and the framework of developmental relationships since 2013, theory-based models that link features of ecologies with personal skills and capacities, "guided by the hypothesis that external and internal assets are dynamically interconnected

'building blocks' that, in combination, prevent high risk health behaviors and enhance many forms of developmental success (i.e., thriving)" (Benson et al., 2006, p. 906), with relationships at the center (Scales et al., 2022 this volume). The 40 developmental assets are grouped heuristically into eight categories of support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time (relationships and opportunities adults and peers provide for young people); and commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity (values, skills, and self-perceptions that young people develop in their gradual movement toward self-regulation). More than 2000 studies, both those of institute researchers and of other scholars, have been reviewed and synthesized to show that the specific 40 assets described by Search Institute, and similar asset-like constructs named by other researchers, are associated with a host of risk prevention and health and resilience promotion outcomes, both cross-sectionally and longitudinally, in early childhood (VanderVen, 2008), middle childhood (Scales et al., 2004), and adolescence (Scales & Leffert, 2004). Throughout the last three decades, studies have repeatedly connected young people's experience of the developmental assets and developmental relationships with various indicators of *thriving* (see Scales et al., 2022, this volume), but the authors' conceptualization of thriving also has evolved considerably over that period.

In a series of publications, the concept of thriving as an expression of young people's developmental best was gradually elaborated. Thriving was initially described as how well young people were doing on a series of positive indicators, including good grades as a measure of school success, how much they help others, whether they value diversity, how much they can overcome adversity, whether they exhibit leadership, maintain physical health, and can delay gratification (Benson, 1990; Scales et al., 2000). These indicators were selected for their face validity in meeting Takanishi et al.'s (1997) primary criterion for successful adolescent development, that of attaining social competency for adult roles and responsibilities.

Thus, despite the use of the term “thriving,” this early exploration of thriving, though accenting positive outcomes, still was rooted in a notion of competence, of adequate more than optimal development. And although since 1990 the Search Institute definition of thriving included clearly prosocial indicators, such as helping others and valuing diversity, it was not until 1998 that institute researchers drew out an explicit connection between individual and social well-being (Benson et al., 1998), a connection that Lerner and colleagues would later stress even more centrally in their discussion of thriving as the basis for personhood and civil society (Lerner et al., 2002). Search Institute’s early studies using these indicators showed that there was a strong connection between the accumulation of developmental assets and thriving: The more assets young people reported, the more likely they also were to report these indicators of thriving (Benson, 1990; Benson et al., 1999; Scales et al., 2000).

From 2002–2005, a partnership among Search Institute, Tufts University’s Institute for Applied Research in Youth Development, Fuller Theological Seminary, Stanford University’s Center for Adolescence, and the Thrive Foundation for Youth – the Thriving Indicators Project (TIP) – greatly advanced the conceptual basis and measurement of thriving. King et al. (2003) captured the first 2 years of these collaborations in describing several “meta-heuristics” that had emerged to guide the institute’s evolving theorizing about thriving. Among these propositions, it was posited that thriving: (1) involves the person–context relationship; (2) is a holistic process; (3) is a developmental concept; (4) is a process versus an end state; (5) is prescriptive or value-laden; (6) involves both positive and negative aspects of growth; and (7) incorporates cultural and contextual diversity.

King et al. then named several newer indicators of thriving that reflected these metaheuristics, including personal growth, fulfillment of one’s potential, having a future orientation, meaning and purpose, emotional well-being, psychological well-being, social well-being, and individual characteristics such as initiative or caring. As part of the TIP, the researchers also collaborated

to conduct studies with youth, parents, and youth development professionals, asking them to define “thriving” in adolescents. The results yielded 77 key concepts that expressed these samples’ perspectives on thriving, reinforced and modified earlier thinking, and helped shaped further measurement (King et al., 2005).

We wrote in one of our foundational papers in the *Journal of Positive Psychology* (Benson & Scales, 2009) that “status” indicators of well-being are important, but that these provide little insight on how a life of hope and generosity and engagement evolves or develops across time. The question here is whether, from early, to middle, and late adolescence, a young person is on a *pathway* to a positive future. We had begun to think of our aim in the study and promotion of thriving as building an understanding of positive *trajectories* of development through which, across time, young people become persons who flower, embrace life, and make full use of their special gifts. *Thriving, then, represents a dynamic and bidirectional interplay of a) a young person intrinsically energized by discovering their specialness and b) the developmental contexts (people, places) that know, affirm, celebrate, encourage, guide, and benefit from its expression.*

This shift in thinking, and the new-generation measurement indicators of thriving that began to emerge, was given energy by our exhaustive review of the research literature; a not inconsiderable review of philosophical literature on what living well, happiness, and a “good life” mean (King et al. 2003); and a series of connected empirical studies, both with national and local samples, in which we asked thousands of adolescents, parents, and youth program practitioners to describe a youth who was “doing well.” Going into those studies, including two published in the *Journal of Early Adolescence* (King et al., 2005; Theokas et al., 2005), we had conceptualized thriving more as a destination than a journey. Through these subsequent studies, we reframed thriving as a journey more than as a destination. When we asked practitioners, parents, and youth about what it means to thrive, they described characteristics that are qualitatively different from the traditional “status” definitions of

thriving. They, and their parents, and youth program practitioners, talked about things like: being optimistic about their future prospects, having a passionate interest in an activity or ideal that gives them energy; an intrinsic desire to explore new things; a sense of responsibility to help others; and a sense of purpose. And they talked about the role of faith and spirituality in shaping their everyday thoughts and actions in positive ways. People talked about these as things that motivate young people to embrace the developmental journey, find their way, discover new horizons, and persevere to overcome obstacles along the way.

As a result of these collaborations, by 2005, in a chapter for the *Encyclopedia of Applied Developmental Science*, Scales and Benson (2005) noted that the early thriving indicators used in the 1990s, though defensible, were not sufficiently grounded in a comprehensive and explicitly articulated theory of thriving. Moreover, those researchers began describing thriving not simply as a point-in-time outcome, but as a developmental process: “thriving may also be understood as a developmental process of recursive cause-and-effect engagement with one’s ecology *over time* that repeatedly results in optimal outcomes as viewed at any *one point* in time” (Scales & Benson, 2005, p. 16, emphasis in original). Simultaneously, Lerner and colleagues strengthened understanding of the relationship between the developmental assets and thriving through a series of factor analyses (Theokas et al., 2005) and, as well, extended the conceptualization of thriving in relation to developmental systems theory and the improvement in civil society (Lerner et al., 2002, 2003). At the same time, Damon and colleagues were exploring the relation of purpose, specifically “noble purpose,” to thriving (Damon et al., 2003). All of these efforts from the TIP collaboration significantly contributed to the comprehensive theory and measurement of thriving advanced by Benson and Scales (2009), including the central role of a young person pursuing their deep passions and interests – their “sparks” (Benson, 2008). Spark is the metaphor used to describe the internal animating force that propels development forward.

Search Institute’s work on thriving has focused on this central component of thriving, the idea of a young person’s sparks, and how much support they experience from parents, other adults, and friends to identify and nurture their sparks. In a series of studies, researchers initially inquired about sparks by describing them this way to young people:

When people are really happy, energized, and passionate about their talents, interests, or hobbies, we say they have a “spark” in their life. This spark is more than just interesting or fun for them. They are passionate about it. It gives them joy and energy. It is a really important part of their life that gives them real purpose, direction, or focus.

In 2005, Search Institute conducted a nationally representative Gallup Poll of more than 2000 12–17-year olds and 2000 of their parents (as described in America’s Promise Alliance, 2007, and Scales et al., 2008). A brief measure of thriving was represented by two questions. The first was “I have a special talent or interest that gives me joy and energy, and is an important part of who I am.” Results enabled the estimation of the proportion of young people nationwide who have the kind of “spark” that reflects thriving youth. These two dimensions of spark (interests that provide joy and energy, as well as importance to identity) may have lifelong relevance. The Harvard Study of Adult Development followed both socioeconomically advantaged (Harvard graduates) and disadvantaged (inner-city) samples of men from adolescence to age 75 and found a similar pair of factors – enjoyable activities and a sense of purpose – related more to happiness in retirement than good health and a large income did (Vaillant et al., 2006).

Search Institute also worked with Harris Interactive, a division of the Louis Harris polling firm, to design a 12-question quantitative survey on thriving (one question, asking adolescents to describe the nature of their sparks [e.g., creative arts, sports, and reading], was open-ended). A national sample of more than 1000 11–17-year olds drawn from an ongoing online panel participated in this survey in 2005. This survey provided data on issues such as how often young people experience and get to express their sparks, how

much specific life contexts – family, friends, school, religious congregation, youth organizations, and neighbors – help them develop their sparks, whether young people perceive themselves as being on the way to a happy and successful future, and whether they feel a sense of purpose in their lives.

Search Institute also worked with Harris Interactive and the Best Buy Children’s Foundation, to conduct the Teen Voice 2009 and 2010 online studies of 15 year olds’ sparks, sense of empowerment, and relationships and opportunities (Scales et al., 2009). A representative sample of 1817 US residents age 15 was surveyed online in the first study, and 1860 in the second. Data were weighted by Harris Interactive researchers to reflect the population of 15 year olds in the USA according to three race/ethnicity groups: Hispanic/Latina/o, Black/African American, and White/Other (including Asian/Pacific Islander). Each group was weighted according to key demographic variables (gender, race/ethnicity, region, and parents’ highest education [a proxy for household income]). These variables were weighted to known parameters in the USA. A postweight was applied to bring the data from all three groups in line with their proportion in the total population of 15 year olds in the USA, based on race/ethnicity, and gender.

These studies and collaborations led to a broader and deeper theory, grounded in developmental systems theory, which defines thriving as having three interconnected parts:

1. Thriving is the interplay over time of a young person’s sparks and support from their contexts to develop and nurture those sparks.
2. Thriving is a balance between continuity and discontinuity of development over time that is optimal for the individual–context system.
3. Thriving reflects both where a young person is at the moment and whether they are on a path toward creating a person–context system in which they as individuals and the contexts they are in (e.g., families, schools, and communities) are mutually benefiting (Benson & Scales, 2009).

An important implication of this conceptualization of thriving is that it describes a complex balance and potential for change among person and context, progressive or discontinuous development, and outcome and process. Therefore, young people are described as more or less *thriving oriented* rather than as thriving or not thriving.

How Do Young People Themselves Describe Thriving?

With the market research firm Just Kid, Inc., institute researchers also designed a 3-day long Internet-based bulletin board discussion in 2006 among teenagers on the subject of thriving. About 405 teenagers aged 15–17 participated, including about 20% who were Black/African American or Hispanic/Latina/o. This dataset provided a rich resource for examining how young people themselves describe thriving. Initially, the data were searched for uses of keywords that research staff generated. This strategy produced mixed results. A few of the words produced many “hits” in the data file, but some were less effective. Thus, a more informal, manual content analysis was conducted to note patterns of words surfacing in the language of young people themselves and generated a new list of keywords. *Bolded keywords occurred both in the a priori list and the list of terms used by youth themselves, with CAPS denoting words found at least 400 times in the 405 discussion transcripts:*

1. **ADVICE**
2. **Care about**
3. **Commitment**
4. Drive
5. **Emotion**
6. **Encourage**
7. **FOCUS**
8. **GOAL**
9. **GOOD AT**
10. **Guidance**
11. Obstacles
12. **PASSION**
13. Plan/path
14. Relationship

15. **SACRIFICE**
16. Spark
17. **SUPPORT**
18. **Talent (in youth transcripts)**
19. **Weakness**

The capitalized terms suggest that young people's most commonly expressed ideas about spark and thriving are quite similar to the researchers' terms, even if they do not use the words spark and thriving without prompting. Sparks involve something they are *passionate* about, help *focus* them, and help them move toward achieving a *goal*, which reflects a sense of purpose, even if the word "purpose" is not used much. They want and seek out *support* to help them develop and get *good at* their spark, support that may include *advice* for nurturing the spark. And they often have to *sacrifice* in order to continue to be involved in and develop that spark.

There is a clear distinction between those with spark and those without, particularly in terms of the passion with which they talk about their spark as well as the great lengths they go to pursue their spark. Teens with spark have a passion and drive to succeed and want to make "it" (their spark) happen no matter what obstacle/barrier faces them. Encouragement from parents, as well as other adults and peers, appears to be a critical determining factor in whether young people choose to pursue a potential spark. However, the availability of guidance, quality resources (teachers, coaches, facilities, money, etc.), and recognition for successes/skills are all factors that help a child's spark to really thrive.

Young people with spark appear to have richer, more meaning-filled lives, since their focus on their spark keeps them out of trouble, and keeps them motivated to succeed in many areas of their life (academic, social, and personal). Adolescents in both supportive and unsupportive environments (as measured by their reports of getting overall support from parents, adults at school, religious organizations, neighborhoods, etc.) can have spark but are likely to pursue it in different ways. Those in an unsupportive environment were more likely to look at their spark as a means to a long-term career, versus young people

in a supportive environment, who looked at their spark as a means of enjoying the here and now.

Young people with clear spark use rich terms to describe how they feel about their spark, e.g., relish, love, reason to smile, fires me up, etc. The language used in their online responses is very close to what one would expect from someone describing a love interest and/or an important relationship. Young people with spark appear to be more emotionally attached to the subject of their interest and see their spark as an evolving/growing relationship that they have. As a result, these young people feel spark is not something that you go out and get, but something you have to find and/or recognize when it finds you. Since spark is an emotionally driven love or passion, young people recognize that finding one's spark is a process. This is described as growth from the inside-out: Spark comes from inside of a person. And when it is expressed, it gives one joy and energy. It is the very essence, the thing about one that is good, beautiful, and useful to the world. It is, in that sense, spiritual.

Thriving and Spiritual Development

In that light, it is not surprising that youth spiritual development was another line of inquiry that informed and expanded our thinking about youth thriving. With multiyear support from the John Templeton Foundation, we conducted a large international study of youth spiritual development (Benson et al., 2012), with more than 100 advisors from 32 nations and 11 major religious traditions, and more than 6700 youth ages 12–25 from eight countries (Australia, England, Wales, Canada, Cameroon, India, Thailand, Ukraine, and the USA), that greatly expanded the usual limited sampling of spiritual development studies from its predominant Western and Christian traditions. One of the major focuses of the study was to examine whether spiritual development can occur without explicitly religious engagement. Results supported that hypothesis, with 64% of the youth worldwide engaging in spiritual development processes without significant religious engagement. Factor analysis yielded several

dimensions of these more universal developmental processes that are part of spiritual development and resonate with the previously discussed themes reflecting a thriving orientation, including connecting with others through prosocial beliefs and actions, discovering meaning, mindfulness (staying in the present moment), and alignment of one's values with real-world actions. Through this research, we concluded that "the animating engine in spiritual development consists of an interlocking set of developmental processes that are often informed by religion but are not identical with it. In this way, the study of spiritual development is first and foremost the study of universal developmental processes and how and why they change over time. Religious and spiritual traditions then become of interest as potential influences on development" (Benson et al., 2012, p. 467).

Further analyses showed that with each improvement in a youth spiritual development index, from low to medium to high, youth around the world had strongly linear improvement in well-being at each successively higher level for these outcomes: purpose and meaning, self-awareness, empathy, forgiveness, gratitude, positive emotionality, sense of having a hopeful future, coping, and a seven-item measure of thriving reflecting the components below in Table 1, as well as higher levels of volunteering, environmental stewardship, being highly engaged at school, and lower levels of substance abuse (Scales et al., 2014).

The Components of a Thriving Orientation

Through all this work, we have come to define "Thriving Orientation" as a propensity to think, feel, and act in ways that fuel continuous growth and optimal development. Those with a Thriving Orientation may, at any one point in time, be "doing well." More importantly, they are on a life journey that increases the odds that, *over time*, they will grow to be all they can and want to be. Some elements of a Thriving Orientation reside inside individuals (e.g., openness to

Thriving and Sparks, Table 1 Search Institute's brief dimensions of youth thriving orientation

Thriving dimension	Definition
Sparks identification and motivation to develop	Young person can name, describe interests and sparks that give them energy and purpose, and is motivated to develop their sparks
Openness to challenge and discovery	Young person has intrinsic desire to explore new things and enjoys challenges
Hopeful purpose	Young person has a sense of purpose and sees self as on the way to a happy and successful future
Transcendent awareness	Young person affirms importance of a sacred or transcendent force and the role of their faith or spirituality in shaping everyday thoughts and actions
Prosocial orientation	Young person sees helping others as a personal responsibility and lives up to values of respect, responsibility, honesty, and caring
Positive emotionality	Young person is positive and optimistic
Intentional self-regulation	Young person employs an effective balance of goal setting and pursuing strategies, including persevering and making adjustments when original goals are not attained
Developmental relationships	Young person experiences chances to grow and develop their sparks, as well as encouragement and support in pursuing their sparks, from multiple life contexts

challenge and discovery). Other elements involve actions they take in the world (e.g., setting goals, helping other people) and interactions with others (e.g., relationships with supportive peers and adults) in the communities in which they grow up, and a commitment to values and principles beyond themselves. As such, a Thriving Orientation is an interdependent trajectory of optimal

development for individuals *and* their communities.

This thriving trajectory is a continuous cycle of bidirectional dynamics, such that:

- Actions by adults and peers in a young person's life. . .
- Affect who a young person becomes, and actions they take. . .
- Which, in turn, impact how adults and peers respond to them. . .
- Which affects ongoing actions by adults and peers in the young person's life. . .
- Which further impacts who a young person becomes, and actions they take. . .
- All of which shapes both the young person and the people and institutions with whom they interact over time

This discussion suggests that our notion of thriving orientation is theoretically anchored in the motivational framework of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and the importance of satisfying needs for autonomy, belonging, and competence. From this perspective, thriving orientation is a combination of intrinsic motivation to pursue specific chosen interests (sparks) + relational support for that pursuit (developmental relationships; see Scales et al., 2022, this volume) that leads to young people developing competence in the spark. In other words, thriving orientation is an intrinsically propelled, yet relationally supported positive life trajectory for youth.

Based on this extensive theoretical work and research studies, our model of thriving breaks this notion of a Thriving Orientation into eight components. When they have a Thriving Orientation, young people:

- Know and are motivated to develop their deepest interests, talents, and passions (what we call their “sparks”)
- Are open to challenge and discovery
- Have a sense of hopeful purpose
- Have an awareness of and connection to something greater than themselves

- Have a prosocial orientation (they intentionally do things that contribute to a greater good beyond themselves)
- Can set goals and adjust strategies as they pursue them
- Are generally positive and optimistic
- Have ongoing relationships with others who support development of their intrinsic sparks by how they: express care, give support, challenge them to grow, expand their possibilities, and share ownership of their relationship (Search Institute, 2014)

Using this elaborated theory, and with support from the Thrive Foundation for Youth, from 2004 to 2015 Search Institute developed and pilot tested a set of empirical markers of a thriving orientation, and created the *Thriving Orientation Survey* to measure the incidence of those markers in adolescents. Exploratory factor analysis with a field test sample of more than 2500 middle and high school youth in a suburban Ohio school district empirically supported 86% of these theoretical constructs (described in Benson & Scales, 2009). Subsequent studies yielded a briefer thriving orientation measurement tool of 40 items measuring eight constructs, as shown in Table 1, along with measures of several positive youth development outcomes, including life satisfaction, positive health perceptions, contribution to the social good, school success, valuing diversity, and leadership.

Findings About Sparks and Thriving Among American Youth

Extent of Sparks and Thriving

Together, these varied sources of data revealed quite a bit about the landscape of thriving and particularly about sparks, among American adolescents. First, when one combines the measure of having sparks and the measure of support for sparks, into a brief proxy for thriving, it can be concluded that most youth probably do not experience this dimension of a thriving orientation (see Table 2). Although the component elements of

Thriving and Sparks, Table 2 Percentage of thriving youth: National Promises Study and 2005 SI-Harris Poll

Study	Special talent/interest	Adult support	% Have spark	% Thriving
National promises study (12–17 year olds)	54 (completely like me)	80 (three or more adults)	–	Talent × support = 47
Harris (11–18-year olds)	79 (yes–no)	59 (at least “some” adults)	69% (with a special talent strong enough to be a spark)	Spark × support = 41

“thriving” (talent/spark plus support) used different wording in the National Promises Study and brief Harris surveys, and produce different percentages having the components, the percentage of youth having the “thriving” variable resulting from combining the two components is very similar: 47% for NPS and 41% for Harris. This suggests reasonable confidence in saying that, by this definition of spark plus support, no more than about half of American teens probably are “thriving.” In the Just Kid sample as well, 66% said they had a spark or sparks that “fire” them up, and give them joy, energy, and purpose. Similarly, in the Teen Voice 2010 study, 80% said they had a spark, but only 51% said it was important to them and they took time to develop it (Scales et al., 2010). Thus across several different studies, whether national or more purposive samples, the most common result is that about two-thirds of adolescents can name a *spark*. But further exploration shows that not all of those youth have *support to develop* their sparks, so that the proportion who can be said to have that aspect of *thriving* is substantially less.

More recently, in a 2022 unpublished analysis of data from Syvertsen et al.’s (2016) study of youth in Student Conservation Association programs, we used a modified version of the Thriving Orientation measure shown in Table 1 (positive emotionality was not measured). Among the 494 youth ages 14–19 who had sufficient data on all variables, 58% met the criteria for having a Thriving Orientation (having six to seven of the seven indicators in Table 1). There were significant demographic differences, with more affluent, female, and White participants much more likely to report a Thriving Orientation (higher-income 71% v. lower-income 52%, female 62% v. male

54%, and White 64% v Black/African American 48%). The 58% of youth who had this more comprehensive measure of thriving is greater than the percent in the other studies cited who said they had a spark and support to develop it. But these were youth who self-selected into this nature conservation program because it was likely already an interest of theirs. Doubtless the percentage with a Thriving Orientation would be much lower if calculated on a truly representative national sample of US youth.

Nature of Youth Sparks

Table 3 below shows how young people described their sparks in the Teen Voice 2010 survey (Scales et al., 2010). Similar lists of categories have been compiled in the other institute studies. Although the percentages naming sparks in the various categories differed across the studies, due to differences in question wording (e.g., see a somewhat different listing in Benson, 2008), these results consistently show that sports (more for boys) and the creative arts (more for girls) are the most common categories of the deep interests and passions that act as sparks in young people’s lives.

This is a particularly key finding given that schools are a principal provider of such connection to creative arts and sports, and yet, those activities are among the most vulnerable when schools and districts are faced with budget-tightening choices (Cavanagh, 2009; Zakaras & Lowell, 2008). For many youth, those sparks, supported through cocurricular after-school programs, are not only valuable in their own right through their linkage with positive developmental outcomes (see below) – they also are for many students a pivotal way in which they are

Thriving and Sparks, Table 3 Types of sparks, Teen Voice 2010 study

High on sparks index	Type of sparks (among those who have sparks)	(%)	
Yes			51
	Participating in sports, athletics, or other physical activities	26	
	Participating in or leading art, dance, drama, music, writing, or other creative activities	28	
	Using computers, electronics, or other types of technology	19	
	Studying, reading, doing research, or other ways of learning	7	
	Being in nature, caring for animals, or participating in outdoor recreation	6	
	Doing religious or spiritual activities, or learning about religions or spirituality	4	
	Being an entrepreneur, running a business, or inventing things	1	
	Doing construction, architecture, or other types of mechanics or engineering	2	
	Serving others, participating in politics, or working on social issues	2	
	Teaching, leading others, or public speaking	2	
	Other	3	
No			49

connected to the academic offerings and mission of school.

A second point worth noting from Table 3 is that, although sports and the creative arts are the “big two” areas of sparks, nearly half of young people’s sparks are not in those areas. Young people’s deeply felt interests and passions reflect a wide variety of pursuits, from business and inventing, to computers and electronics, religion and spirituality, animals, and involvement in social issues. In fact, more than 200 different types of sparks have been cataloged from the descriptions young people offer (Benson, 2008). Thus, if thriving is maximally to be promoted, it is important for families and communities to expose young people to, and maintain policy and financial support for, a wide variety of programs and opportunities that can enable youth to find and nurture their unique sparks.

Support for Developing Sparks

The brief 2005 online study with Harris Interactive also showed that although almost all young people report having at least a few adults who help them to develop their talents, most of those adults appear to be in their families. In that research, it was concluded that *no more than a third of young people said adults outside the family, in settings such as their schools, religious congregations, or*

youth organizations, help them develop their talents “a lot,” and hardly any youth said adults in their neighborhoods help them a lot. Older male teens ages 16–18 were especially unlikely to say they get a lot of help in developing their talents or interests.

The much more comprehensive Teen Voice 2010 study found essentially the same patterns. A key to helping grow a spark is to have people and places that know, care about, and nurture that spark. Among 15-year olds who say they know their own spark, only 68% indicated that their parents often or even sometimes encourage and support them in pursuing their spark. Just under half of these teens who know their spark said their friends encourage and support them (45%), and only the same percentage (45%) said they have grandparents and other family members who do.

More troubling, fewer than one-third of the youth with sparks said that teachers (32%), coaches, mentors, or other youth workers (27%), a religious leader (20%), or a neighbor (11%) helps them develop their spark. Thus, too many teens are left on their own to sort out how to cultivate their sparks. Just as troubling, too many people in teens’ lives miss the opportunity to build a nurturing relationship with teens around the things that really matter to them. The striking similarity in these results across the two different

samples, several years apart, and using somewhat differing question wording, suggests the finding of too-limited support being experienced by the nation's youth for spark development, especially from adults outside their families, is probably valid.

In a reanalysis of the 2010 Teen Voice dataset, Ben-Eliyahu et al. (2014) found that relational support for developing sparks varied depending on how intensive young people's sparks were for them. Latent Profile Analysis yielded three profiles, describing high, medium, and low levels of spark. High spark youth were significantly more likely to report receiving encouragement, financial help, and transportation help to pursue their spark, across extended family, friends, school adults, neighbors, and other adults. This was a cross-sectional study, so cause and effect could not be determined. But the developmental systems literature is clear that it is probably a bidirectional combination of supportive environments enabling the youth to amplify their sparks, and youth with high sparks attracting more peers and adults to support (Overton, 2015).

The SI-Harris study also showed that of the 69% of young people who say they have a spark, only 5% have help to develop that spark from 5 to 6 of six life contexts (family, friends, school, neighborhoods, youth organizations, and religious congregations). Most – 44% – get help only in 0–2 contexts, with another 20% getting help in 3–4 contexts. Redundancy of support across one's ecology is a strong developmental positive (see Benson, 2006), and so the finding that few youth get spark support from the majority of their life contexts is especially disturbing. (If friends are omitted, so support is only about adults helping, then the figures stay about the same: 5% have adult help developing their spark in 4–5 contexts, 26% have it in 2–3 contexts, and most, 38%, have adult help in only 0–1 context.)

This early finding about relationships across contexts is similar to a later study Search Institute conducted of more than 25,000 6th–12th graders in a California city that showed less than three in ten youth have strong developmental relationships with at least four of five important potential connections (parents, siblings, peers, teachers, and youth program staff), and two in ten youth

have *no* such strong developmental relationships (Roehlkepartain et al., 2017). Whether it is only about support for developing sparks, or about a more comprehensive and deep relationship, it seems clear that it is highly unusual for youth to have substantial relational support across the different parts of their lives.

Moreover, these relationships youth have with others occur – or do not occur – within a broader community context that can either inhibit or facilitate them. For example, in a secondary analysis of the Teen Voice 2010 data, Schwartz et al. (2013) found that young people's perception that community adults valued youth in general predicted whether they had a natural mentor or not, and the quality of that mentoring relationship. In turn, having a natural mentoring relationship, and especially having a high-quality natural mentoring relationship, was linked to numerous positive youth development outcomes, including school engagement, mastery goal orientation, prosocial values, and purpose. *Without that broader sense that their community valued youth and their development and contributions, youth were less likely to have natural mentors at all, much less high-quality relationships, and therefore also less likely to have those multiple indicators of well-being.*

Age Differences in Support Experienced for Developing Sparks

One of the most striking demographic differences around adult support for developing sparks involves youths' ages. In the Search Institute-Harris Interactive national study, the proportion of young people who said that *few or no adults supported their pursuit of sparks increased steadily from 10–12-year olds (26%) to 13–15-year olds (40%) to 16–18-year olds (53%)*. These linear drop-offs in adult support were seen in every context (only support from friends showed no difference across age groups) and were especially notable for support from parents and neighbors. For example, 91% of 10–12-year olds get a lot of parental support for their sparks, versus 67% among 13–15-year olds, and just 47% among 16–18-year olds. Similarly, 56% of 10–12-year olds say neighbors give them very little or no support, compared with 66% among 13–15-year olds, and 79% among 16–18-year olds.

Developmentally, it would be expected that, as young people grow and their interests differentiate, their needs for specialized support for their talents and sparks would take them beyond the family and neighborhood where they live. But adult support also is less for older youth than younger youth in all the other contexts as well. Similarly, in the field test of the *Thriving Orientation Survey* (Benson & Scales, 2009), we also found that, for every one of about a dozen specific actions adults could potentially take to support young people’s spark identification and development, smaller percentages of high school students than middle school students said that adults do those things to help them, and middle school youth were more likely to say they have at least three adult role models who have similar interests as theirs. Although these studies were only cross-sectional, and did not follow these adolescents over time, the pattern is quite consistent with a vast amount of research, including a nationally representative study of US adults, showing that younger adolescents are more connected to non-family adults than are older adolescents in high

school (see Scales et al., 2003). These findings around the specific issue of sparks and thriving are quite similar to more recent findings about youths’ broader relationships with adults, with high school students significantly less likely than middle school students to report that they experience developmental relationships where they feel cared for, provided support, challenged to grow, and given opportunities to share power with adults and have their sense of possibilities expanded (Roehlkepartain et al., 2019; Scales et al., 2019).

The Connection Between Sparks, Thriving, and Positive Outcomes

We have shown that only a minority of American youth have sparks *and* the support to nurture them. This fact matters, because studies have shown that those young people do far better on almost every developmental indicator of well-being studied. For example, in the National Promises Study (Scales et al., 2008), we found that the experience of the five promises was significantly associated with thriving. As Table 4 shows, *in*

Thriving and Sparks, Table 4 Thriving among 12–17-year olds by experience of individual promises (National Promises Study)

	Percentage thriving	Special talent/interest	Adult support
Caring adults			
0 indicators	23	36	35
1–2 indicators	31	44	61
3–4 indicators	53	57	86
Safe places and constructive use of time			
0–1 indicator	10	16	37
2–4 indicators	39	48	75
5–6 indicators	61	65	89
Healthy start and healthy development			
0–2 indicators	37	45	55
3–5 indicators	47	53	79
6–8 indicators	51	56	86
Effective education			
0–2 indicators	31	41	58
3–6 indicators	40	48	75
7–9 indicators	60	64	89
Opportunities to make a difference			
0–1 indicator	36	46	66
2–3 indicators	42	47	76
4–5 indicators	53	59	84

every case, young people who meet an individual Promise by experiencing nearly all or all of the indicators of that Promise report more thriving than other youth, sometimes dramatically so. For example, only 10% are thriving among those who experience none or only one of the indicators of Safe Places and Constructive Use of Time, but the percentage thriving leaps to 39% among those who partially meet that Promise (having 2–4 indicators) and takes another substantial jump to 61% who are thriving among those who meet the Safe Places Promise by experiencing 5–6 of the Safe Places indicators.

Similar results were observed from both of the Teen Voice studies: 15-year olds who reported having at least one spark were consistently more likely to also report doing well on a variety of indicators of personal well-being and community involvement, from having a sense of purpose and valuing improving their academic skills, to placing a high value on being involved in community issues, and specifically, working to correct social inequalities. Table 5 shows the findings from Teen Voice 2010.

In Ben-Eliyahu et al.’s (2014) reanalysis of the 2010 Teen Voice data, *stronger and more pervasive associations between sparks and positive youth development outcomes such as academic success and a sense of purpose were found for*

youth whose sparks were more social or interactive in nature, such as sports, drama and the musical arts, or participating in politics or community service, than for those whose sparks were more solitary in nature, such as computers/electronics or reading. The authors concluded that “Activities that include social interactions present more opportunities for the kinds of cooperative learning and feedback that can lead to optimal states” (p. 85; and see also Scales et al. [2011] similar conclusion).

Moreover, and as would be expected given the positive association between the accumulation of developmental nutrients and desirable outcomes (Benson et al., 2006; Eccles & Gootman, 2002), youth with *multiple* sparks are even more likely to achieve criterion levels of positive developmental outcomes than youth with one spark, as shown in Table 6.

In an unpublished analysis conducted in 2022 of the Syvertsen et al. (2016) study of youth participating in Student Conservation Association programs, we used a modified version of the Thriving Orientation measure shown in Table 1 (positive emotionality was not measured). Among the 494 youth ages 14–19 who had sufficient data on all variables, logistic regressions showed that *those who had high levels of Thriving Orientation (scoring at high levels on six to seven of the seven*

Thriving and Sparks, Table 5 Why sparks matter: the relationship between sparks and outcomes, Teen Voice 2010 study

Positive actions and commitments	If a teen has sparks (%)	If a teen does not have sparks (%)	Gap ^a
<i>Teen reports</i>			
Having a GPA of 3.5/B+ or higher	70	51	19
Has served as leader in the last year	68	52	18
Volunteering at least 1 h/week in a typical week	54	37	17
<i>Sees self as</i>			
Having goals to master what they study at school	69	41	28
Having a sense of purpose	48	17	31
Very often working up to ability at school	45	30	15
Having a positive ethnic identity	36	34	2
<i>Places high value on</i>			
Helping others and working to correct social inequalities	57	36	21
Being involved in community issues	42	32	10

^aThis gap is the point difference between those with and without sparks

Thriving and Sparks, Table 6 The relationship between number of sparks and positive outcomes, Teen Voice 2009 study

	Identifies no sparks (%)	Identifies one spark (%)	Identifies two or more sparks (%)
Is adaptable and flexible	45	60	72
Wants to master new skills	24	44	63
Takes advantage of opportunities to nurture strengths and interests	39	59	73
Values improving academic skills	46	69	79
Wants to contribute to society	32	47	62

indicators) had significantly higher odds (Odds Ratios, ORs) of having high levels of several personal and social positive youth development outcomes, after controlling for gender identity, race, and socioeconomic status (all $p \leq 0.001$):

Working across differences	OR = 9.176
Self-awareness	OR = 8.741
Teamwork	OR = 8.735
Planful competence	OR = 8.512
Communication	OR = 6.813
Expectations for community issues engagement	OR = 5.130
Perspective taking	OR = 3.880

Likewise, an unpublished secondary analysis in 2021 of a half-dozen Search Institute studies showed that even limited weekly participation in *organized youth sports*, always one of young people's top two sparks, is associated with significantly better (at $p \leq 0.001$) academic, psychological, and social-emotional development. The studies collectively involved 129,933 students in grades 4–12 across the United States and included both nationally representative and nonrepresentative but demographically diverse samples. On average, girls, Native American, Hispanic/Latina/o, and Asian American youth, and youth who felt financial strain were less likely to participate in organized youth sports.

In most of these studies, the measure of sports participation was crude: Whether or not youth participated at all in organized youth sports in an average or typical week, and in some cases, how many hours per week. Search Institute is beginning to collect more extensive data than this, on how well-being is promoted when we take into

account both the quality of developmental relationships among coaches and their student-athletes, and how the coaches' coaching philosophy balances person development with player development (Scales, 2022). But even using this crude measure, which lumps together high- and low-quality coaching relationships, young people who participated in sports were from 20% to 90% more likely to also report numerous better youth development outcomes, after accounting for sex, grade, race, and in one study, financial strain. Doubtless, if we had been able to measure quality better, then *high-quality* sports participation would have been linked with even stronger positive youth development outcomes, as the youth sports literature amply demonstrates (Côté & Gilbert, 2009; Falcao et al., 2020; Heath et al., 2018; Table 7).

Compensatory Value of Sparks/Thriving, Developmental Relationships, and Youth Voice

Finally, there is evidence that differences in youth development outcomes by gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status may be mitigated among those who have one or more sparks in their lives, the social support to develop those sparks, and a sense of being able to contribute to the social good, which are all elements of the broad theory of thriving. In the Teen Voice 2009 study, for example, we reported that, in examining positive youth development outcomes by race/ethnicity, mother's education, and gender identity across the whole sample, there were significant differences by demographic groups in 25 of the 36 analyses, most often favoring White and Asian

Thriving and Sparks, Table 7 Significantly better outcomes for youth sports participants, 2021. Unpublished secondary analysis of Search Institute studies

Academic	Psychological	Social-emotional
Belief in malleable intelligence	Positive identity	Sense of belonging in school
Commitment to learning	Positive ethnic identity	Sense of belonging in community
School engagement	Self-efficacy/personal power	Feeling valued by community
Mastery goal orientation	Believe can make a difference	Feeling seen as a resource
Academic self-efficacy	Taking initiative	Social competencies
	Future mindedness	Comfort sharing opinions/expressing voice
	Workplace skills	Being a leader
	Has hopeful purpose	Feeling racially respected
		Political involvement
		Importance of prosocial values
		Importance of civic engagement

American youth, those whose mothers had a college education or more, and females. Among those experiencing high levels of positive relationships, voice, and sparks, however, 22 of the 25 demographic differences in PYD (88%) became smaller or nonsignificant (Scales et al., 2010).

Specifically, eight of nine differences in PYD outcomes by *race/ethnicity* became smaller or were eliminated among those with sparks and other strengths: GPA, attendance, mastery goals, sense of purpose, ethnic identity, prosocial values, civic engagement values, and worries. Differences on racial respect stayed the same, with Black/African American youth feeling less respected than other youth due to their race, regardless of the level of their relationships, voice, and sparks. All nine differences in PYD outcomes by *gender identity* became smaller or were eliminated among strength-rich youth: GPA, leadership, mastery goals, sense of purpose, school engagement, ethnic identity, prosocial values, civic engagement values, and worries. Of seven differences in PYD outcomes by *mother's education* (a proxy for socioeconomic status), six became smaller or were eliminated among those with relationships, voice, and sparks: GPA, leadership, school engagement, ethnic identity, worries, and racial respect.

Future Directions in the Conceptualization and Measurement of Thriving Orientation

There are limitations in our conceptualization and measurement of thriving that together help to define future directions for conceptualization and measurement of thriving orientation. Most particularly, more attention needs to be given to how cultural context might affect the definition and operationalization of thriving orientation across racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and other diversities. For example, less affluent students and Black/African American students were much less likely than more affluent and White students to say they had a Thriving Orientation in the secondary analysis of data from Syvertsen et al.'s study of youth in Student Conservation Association programs (2016). But despite the diversity of samples used to build the components of Thriving Orientation that were used in that study and shown in Table 1, it is possible that the overall measure either did not include elements of thriving that are especially relevant for less affluent youth or for Black/African American youth, or that we operationalized the components in ways that did not have as much cultural validity for those youth as they did for more affluent youth and White youth. More work needs to be done digging deeper into how Black/African American youth and families and those from lower-income communities define thriving within their cultural realities, to ensure greater cultural validity of the

measures. As well, more invariance testing and item-response testing are needed to have greater confidence that the Thriving Orientation items are working similarly across different demographic groups of youth.

For example, the work on thriving and sparks discussed in this entry has focused on how a key contribution adults and peers can make is through the relationships and resources that enable young people to identify and pursue their life goals, i.e., provision of social capital (Scales et al., 2020). It seems valid to presume that nearly all youth across diversities want to enjoy possible life paths that are safe, productive, relationally rewarding, and meaningful, including entry to “good” jobs and careers.

But in focus groups with Black/African American and Latina/o youth, researchers found both alignment with and specific unique expressions of those general hopes, with those youth describing the skills needed for “striving in order to thrive” as including perseverance, the ability to engage in struggle, patience, overcoming obstacles, and not being held back by others or oneself (Goodwin-Simon Strategic Research, 2019). The ultimate definition of thriving as defined by those youth included longer-term markers (i.e., beyond 1 year) such as financial stability, home ownership, being able to give back, being in careers they love and find fulfilling, and that allow them to live their vision of a good life. In the shorter-term, they described features of a “good job” as one you enjoy; that has good benefits; where there are friendly coworkers; that enables you to make enough money; where you are respected; and that has opportunities for growth (Goodwin-Simon Strategic Research, 2019). Future conceptualization and measurement of thriving orientation needs to encompass more of these markers in order to expand and deepen its cultural validity.

There is also a need to situate “thriving orientation” within a deeper sociopolitical understanding of the lived experience of racism and other forms of discrimination and attempted marginalization. For example, to what extent do we need to consider activism to dismantle such structural barriers and promote equity to be a necessary

part of thriving orientation, for all youth? One, perhaps especially White people, might think that such activism is especially important for the cultural identity development of those youth most affected by racism and socioeconomic inequality/disparity as well as other forms of discrimination. Doubtless such activism is a potentially critical part of cultural identity development for the discriminated against, within any society that has multiple layers and kinds of discrimination as does the USA. But is it perhaps the youth who enjoy the most socioeconomic, educational, and political privilege – often but not always White youth – for whom we might consider it an especially strong measure of “thriving” for them to be working actively as allies for larger equity of opportunity for all?

In the current polarized US climate, for example, does activism in Black Lives Matter, or in other sociopolitical issues from climate change to gun safety, need to become an essential part of how youth thriving is conceptualized and measured? Dill and Ozer (2019), for example, suggest that young people need “critical social capital” that not only helps them pursue their personal intrinsic interests and sparks but that also marshals political consciousness and positive racial identity to address racism, police violence, and neighborhood violence, among other issues affecting equity of opportunity. This is an especially pertinent question because our notion of thriving has always been not only about the individual young person’s optimal development, but also how that young person, embedded in relational webs that support them and their intrinsic interests, uses their gifts and passions together with others to make the world a better place.

In this context, we have noted in a larger study of social capital (Scales et al., 2020) that most studies of social capital that helps youth thrive do not specifically look for assets in contexts of apparent disadvantage. However, Ferguson (2006) notes that “numerous studies” (p. 9) find social capital in such “marginal areas or ghettos,” as reflected by intra- and extrafamilial social support networks and “elaborate systems of inter-familial bartering,” although these are often inadequate to overcome the deleterious effects of

poverty, in part because social capital in lower-income communities tends to be “loose and fragmented.” Rabinowitz et al. (2020) is another example of the minority of studies acknowledging that youth living in neighborhoods of high poverty, crime, and disorganization may in fact also experience social capital in those settings. Using “pluralistic neighborhood theory,” they suggest that “disadvantaged and disordered communities may also possess assets and strengths that support youths’ positive development” (p. 495). Such assets may include residents feeling a responsibility to protect youth and young adults from the high level of perceived risk on the streets, and common financial hardships promoting a reaching out among families facing financial hardship, to help each other.

Similarly, the presence of individual and social developmental assets, including strong developmental relationships with family, peers, and other adults, has been documented internationally among youth who are victims of natural disasters or even living in refugee camps due to wars and armed conflict (Scales et al., 2015). In the same way, a study of gang and nongang urban youth and young adults found that of various kinds of individual and social capital studied (e.g., racial/ethnic identity, role models, positive family and peer relations, etc.), gang members had more of them than nongang members did in 25% of the cases (Taylor et al., 2003). Finally, Goodwin-Simon Strategic Research group (2019), in focus groups with Black/African American and Latina/o youth across the country, found that youth may have skills that could be useful in a career, such as “finesse” or “hustle,” but they do not necessarily recognize them as career-worthy skills. Thriving orientation conceptualization and measurement needs to more fully take into account these and similar aspects of community and youth assets in settings of high risk and disadvantage as key contributors to young people’s possibilities for thriving in those contexts.

As we consider the positive gains related to having access to social capital, we must also consider the extent to which adults in the lives of youth are culturally competent. Culturally competent adults are astute in multiple cultures and are

capable of supporting the development of cultural identity for youth of color. Healthy identity development is particularly important for youth of color. It has been identified that stronger ethnic identities can reduce the impact of negative stereotypes by expanding the understanding of self in ways that help young people resist the harmful views held by others (Dukes et al., 1997).

Cultural competency is particularly important in the social capital context when the adults are not of the same community, culture, race, or background. In order for youth of color to thrive, the cultural competency of the adults in their lives must be taken into consideration and supports provided for adults and youth who do not share the same community, culture, race, or background to grow in their cultural competency (Rivera and Arauz 2019). This consideration of cultural identity development is crucial when discussing thriving in a multicultural context. Cultural identity development is an integral aspect of helping youth of color meet their shared human needs for relative autonomy, belongingness, and competence, because it is centrally considerate of the unique ways those “ABC” needs may get satisfied in differing cultural contexts, a cultural consideration and grounding that is necessary to support a thriving orientation for all youth.

Relatedly, studies of how adults support young people’s pursuit of their sparks and larger thriving have rarely defined “support” in such a concrete way that it could be considered social capital that provides what Dill and Ozer (2019) called “social leverage,” which helps people get ahead and access information and connections that advance their social mobility. We did include youths’ reports of financial and transportation support, not just encouragement, in our Teen Voice 2010 study (Scales et al., 2010). But as Ben-Eliyahu et al. (2014) found, even though youth with high levels of sparks received much more of all three forms of support, only 26% of the sample met the criteria for having high sparks levels. And the Syvertsen et al. (2016) study of youth in a conservation service program found that less affluent youth and Black/African American youth were much less likely to have an overall Thriving Orientation, as measured in that study.

Most of the support that youth receive for developing their deep personal interests comes from family and friends, people most typically like them in race, ethnicity, educational background, socioeconomic level, social status, and larger social power. For youth from historically marginalized communities, these are typically then people who are less likely to be providing the kinds of social capital that can help them experience greater equity. For example, in a comprehensive review of the social capital literature (Scales et al., 2020), we concluded that most social capital studies “still do not explicitly note that bonding capital [resources provided by people in similar life circumstances], by itself, cannot serve to bring greater equity of opportunity to those who experience not only current racism, sexism, and discrimination, but, as in the case particularly of African American and Native American YYAs [youth and young adults], centuries of systemic exclusion and social injustice. The limits of “bonding” social capital are even more clear for young people whose social locations are within the intersection of multiple historically marginalized and bias-experiencing groups (e.g., simultaneously being poor, female, and a youth or young adult of color; gender non-conforming, and a youth or young adult of color; etc.)” (p. 23). Measures of support for sparks and thriving, then, need to more concretely and deeply examine how much “bridging” and “linking” social capital young people accrue, especially young people from historically marginalized communities and groups, from those unlike them in status and power (Grootaert et al., 2004).

For example, “linking” social capital refers to individuals’ relationships and connections with others across levels of hierarchy and power. Indicators of social leverage may include things such as informational support, collective action and cooperation, and empowerment and political action. Informational support is a common indicator of social leverage and is essential for helping youth and young adults acquire the postsecondary and employment opportunities that are commonly included aspects of how thriving is defined. Youth-serving organizations may also contribute to youth and young adults’ social leverage. Dill &

Ozer (2019) showed that adults in youth-serving organizations may do so by providing access to academic and educational resources, access to employment opportunities, and by enhancing youths’ self-esteem and future orientation.

Social leverage may also be achieved through collective action and empowerment. A social group may acquire many valuable resources through collective action (e.g., group rights, group resources). Collective action is often assessed by the level of community and/or social group participation (e.g., membership in organizations, volunteering). Individuals and social groups who are able to promote collective action may also have high levels of empowerment. Individuals and/or social groups may feel empowered when they feel that they are able to have an element of control over the processes and institutions that directly affect their well-being. Indicators of this dimension may include control in making decisions that affect one’s everyday activities, power to make or contribute to important decisions that change the course of one’s life, and the impact one has in helping to make the neighborhood or community a better place to live (Grootaert et al., 2004). Stanton-Salazar (2011) also suggests that staff at youth-serving organizations and institutions may serve as “empowerment agents – “adults willing to go counter to the established and hierarchical social structures.” (p. 1089). These youth-serving staff empower youth and young adults of color by providing resources and support that enable youth to effectively navigate and exert control over their environment (e.g., school, community; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Thus, to be more culturally valid and meaningful, future developments in the conceptualization and measurement of thriving need to consider how much to describe and assess youth access not only to adults who support young people’s sparks but also to those who act as such “empowerment agents” to help them navigate and contribute to the overturning of systems of oppression, racism, and discrimination.

Conclusion

This entry has described the intellectual journey that took Search Institute researchers and colleagues, over more than two decades, from looking at thriving as a collection of point-in-time status indicators, to thriving as a dynamic person–context process unfolding over time, with one’s sparks at the red-hot center, fueling one’s metaphorical life fire, to the further conceptualization of thriving as particularly including bridging and linking social capital to expand access to life opportunities for youth who have been systemically minoritized and marginalized. It has been noted that sparks are “akin to the human spirit” (Benson, 2008, p. 17), the breath of life put into action. This analogy explicitly connects thriving and youth spiritual development in a rhetorical way. This intellectual journey around sparks and thriving over the next two decades will focus on an even more conceptually rigorous and empirically oriented exploration of the common and unique elements of thriving-sparks, spiritual development, and developmental relationships and developmental assets, within an even stronger emphasis than in our previous research on the larger context of community and culture (see Scales et al., 2022, this volume).

Even as we wish to end this entry on the high note of thriving as being not only adequate development but also optimal development, and not only individual development but also development of settings and contexts – families, schools, youth organizations, religious organizations, and communities – we also must inescapably grapple with the unyielding reality, exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, that all our youth do not have equal opportunities even to survive, much less thrive. Black/African American youth, and Native American youth, and some Latina/o groups, have less chance than White youth in particular, and some groups of Asian youth, of simply staying alive long enough to attain dreams of a “good life” in adulthood. Everything we have written in this entry about thriving is predicated on a foundation of at least adequate opportunity to start with.

But even that minimally adequate opportunity is unequal: the opportunity to live, to not be the victim of hate crimes and mass gun violence, to avoid the less violent but no less far-reaching disenfranchisement from educational, economic, and political opportunity that is the persistent residue of centuries of racism, poverty, and discrimination. No entry on young people thriving can responsibly end without acknowledging the vital need for collective action to put in place a structural equity of opportunity that has never been a reality for all in the United States. We will continue doing the work we can with our modest research and practice contributions to try to make the lives of all young people better. But until we as a collective people commit wholeheartedly to finally erecting a social, educational, economic, and political structure that is rooted in equity, those efforts to promote thriving for all youth will succeed only in promoting thriving for some. All our youth deserve better.

Cross-References

► [Developmental Assets and Developmental Relationships](#)

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