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## Small Town, Big Discussions: Perceptions of the Big Topics Youth Leadership Development Program

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### Abstract

In response to the surge of outward migration of individuals from rural communities, the Rural Renewal Initiative at Oklahoma State University conducted a study on a youth leadership program in southwest Oklahoma that seeks to improve and revitalize its rural community. Seven individuals, who were all former participants of the program during high school, comprised the cohort for this study and were interviewed to understand how they perceived the program impacted them and their lives due to their participation. Five themes emerged providing insight and understanding to the value and benefit participants gained from their participation. The five included: a) expansion of critical thinking, b) widening of perspective, c) formulation and expression of opinions, d) relationship building, and e) preparedness for the future. Findings suggest all participants perceived the program to be worthwhile and valuable to their overall personal and long-term development. Recommendations for future research related to this program and similar programs are provided.

### Introduction

It has been said: “. . . the future of any nation rests on the shoulders of youths today as they will eventually become the leaders of tomorrow” (George & Uyanga, 2014, p. 40). Investing in youth is imperative to their development as future positive contributors to their communities and society

(Evans, 2007). Doing so not only improves their skills, experiences, and overall leadership potential (Kress, 2006), it also impacts their connection to a place and its people (Mannion & Adey, 2011).

When youth from a rural community migrate to larger, more urban areas after high school, a severe strain is placed on the community's resiliency and vitality (Hastings et al., 2011). Positive change within communities depends largely on empowering and equipping youth with the skills needed to become civically engaged citizens (Mohamed & Wheeler, 2001). Therefore, investing in youth, their interests, and human capital development is a worthy endeavor to pursue (Bohannon et al., 2020). Such development can assist students in their transition from adolescents to adults (Kelsey & Fuhrman, 2020). To help in this transition, however, sustained and intentional programming efforts are needed where youth can receive necessary mentoring (DuBois & Neville, 1997).

Although mentoring can take many shapes, the most effective occurs in small groups led by a caring adult volunteer (Raposa et al., 2019). Mentoring in more urban or metro areas is often conducted through formal programs such as Big Brothers, Big Sisters. However, in more rural areas, it often comes about through informal volunteers (Aschenbrener & Edwards, 2023). In these settings, volunteers should be encouraged to work in conjunction with formal education systems whenever possible to improve student success in school and beyond and provide support to youths' soci-economic status (Arnold, 2020).

When adults and youth work together, a partnership is formed (Zeldin et al., 2014). This youth-adult partnership (YAP) is a process in which the adult volunteer invests in and develops youth through a systematic program fostered in a productive learning community (Lerner et al., 2011). The effectiveness of such programs is often dependent on the adult volunteer, the students participating in the program, and the type of relationships formed (Rhodes, 2008). As such, these variables should be studied continually to determine best practices for optimal impact (Deutsch & Spencer, 2009). When adults and youth are willing to listen to and learn from each other in a successful YAP, necessary human capital development for both groups is possible (Camino & Zeldin, 2002).

### **An Emphasis on Youth Development**

Researchers and practitioners have recently begun to reemphasize the importance of youth leadership development (Redmond & Dolan, 2016). Unfortunately, all too often, adults view youth as a burden to the community instead of a contributor to it (Camino & Zeldin, 2002). However, the pressure to be more inclusive of all demographics, especially in areas of civic engagement (Camino & Zeldin, 2002), has led to a renewed focus on investing in youth. Due to this trend, along with the sudden shock of the global COVID-19 pandemic, perhaps the need to focus on youth development has never been greater. Arnold (2020) stated:

The need for increased student and family support in schools, the potential for youth development professionals to collaborate more closely with schools and families, the need to address the systemic educational inequalities for youth exacerbated by the [COVID-19]

virus, and the moral imperative to close the opportunity gap, all lead to a need for a new way of supporting youth learning and development. (Education, para. 7)

When appropriate investments in youth leadership programs are made, they provide youth with an opportunity to develop their leadership skills, collaborate with others, and enact change to improve their communities (Redmond & Dolan, 2016). Unfortunately, the literature is scant in regard to mentoring youth who reside in rural areas (Aschenbrener & Edwards, 2023). In general, youth leadership programs should seek to improve youth's abilities and skills related to the following domains: a) social and emotional intelligence (i.e., self-awareness and confidence), b) collaboration (i.e., teamwork, problem solving, decision making, and conflict resolution skills), c) articulation (i.e., oral and written communication skills), and d) insight and knowledge (i.e., critical thinking skills and ethics) (Redmond & Dolan, 2016). Ultimately, these programs should strive to empower youth to have a voice and contribute to the problems plaguing their communities (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Evans, 2007).

### **The Rural Renewal Initiative**

At Oklahoma State University, researchers have developed the Rural Renewal Initiative (RRI) that seeks to offer assistance to rural communities in Oklahoma and beyond by engaging faculty members and university students to conduct research necessary for increasing rural renewal. The RRI conducts place-based research on select counties in Oklahoma, many of which are some of the poorest in the state. One of the research aims of the RRI is to increase the human capital of rural youth through leadership development. Two distinct youth leadership programs existed in one of the focus counties – one is a yearlong program for high school students and the other is a five-week summer program for middle school students – but the impact of each was unknown and limited to anecdotal evidence.

This study directly coincided with RRI work being conducted at Oklahoma State University. Oklahoma State University (2019) identified this initiative as, “The Rural Renewal Initiative engages and expands an interdisciplinary community of researchers and students devoted to improving rural communities” (Vision paragraph). This program seeks to provide undergraduate and graduate students the opportunity to conduct action research under the mentorship of a faculty member related to a specific issue facing a select rural community.

### **Context of Study: An Overview of the Big Topics Youth Leadership Program**

The use of small-group discussions and other active learning techniques has been promoted in schools as a way to inspire students and improve their learning in the classroom (Bennet et al., 2009). One of many active learning techniques designed to increase student interest in what they are learning is by providing them with a large amount of autonomy in small-group discussions (Bennet et al., 2009). Hamann et al. (2012) found small discussion groups provided the optimal platforms for thought expression, according to student questionnaires, and resulted in the highest student happiness and critical thinking abilities scores.

When students work in small groups, they may exchange and assess ideas and sharpen their critical thinking skills (Hamann et al., 2012; Norman, 1992; Wood, 1988). The discussion allows for collaborative learning, which has numerous benefits. Collaboration is a promising style of

human engagement that has emerged as a twenty-first-century trend. There is now a greater need for collaborative thinking and action on important topics (Laal & Ghodsi, 2012). Laal and Ghodsi (2012) based their work around the studies by Johnsons (1989) and Pantiz (1999) to identify four areas of benefits of collaborative learning: a) social, b) psychological, c) academic, and d) assessment.

In this study, one community member of a struggling rural community in southwest Oklahoma identified a need to invest in the human capital of its youth in hopes of better preparing them for life and to become future local leaders in the community. To address this need, he developed a discussion-based program for youth called Big Topics (Bohannon et al., 2020). This yearlong program was designed to be facilitated at the local high school once per week during the academic year targeting students in grades 10 through 12.

The goal of the program seeks to increase students' knowledge of topics not typically taught in a school setting. Some of these topics include religion, government and political issues, socioeconomics, race, and American history. Although hosted at the local high school building each week, the program is not associated with the school and does not affect students' academic standing, as it is strictly voluntary and not a for-credit class. In addition to the community volunteer, a staff sponsor of the local school assists with the program each year.

To participate in the program, students must be standing sophomores, juniors, or seniors in high school. Although many of those who initiate the program as sophomores continue throughout their junior and senior years, that participation is not guaranteed or expected. Each year, both current and interested students must apply for (re)acceptance to participate in the program by writing an essay responding to a specific prompt provided by the program's volunteer leader. A committee of people screen the essays and select the new cohort of 15 to 20 students each year.

Once accepted, student participation in the program is fully voluntary. Students meet weekly over the lunch hour in a classroom in the local high school where they are fed a catered meal provided by the local Rotary Club and participate in a rich discussion over a passage of text or prompt assigned by the volunteer leader. Big Topics is designed to incentivize youth to learn more about civics and local governance and articulate and solidify their stance on such topics – both in written and verbal form. An additional goal of the program is to emphasize the importance of postsecondary education to students, especially those who might not perceive college as a realistic possibility for themselves. To do so, the local Rotary Club supports the program by providing scholarship funds to support students in their pursuit of postsecondary education. To earn scholarship money, students are expected to be active participants in the program through its reward system structure. Specifically, one point is awarded to students each time they offer a rich or intriguing aspect or viewpoint to the discussion during the weekly meetings. The points awarded throughout the program are later translated into dollar values which are awarded to participants as a scholarship at the end of their senior year to be used for pursuing postsecondary education.

In general, it appears Big Topics is a successful program for preparing youth to think critically and become effective leaders in their communities. However, additional research is needed to determine its long-term impact with those who have participated over the course of its existence (Bohannon et al., 2020) as the findings emerging from this research can add to the limited literature base on the topic (Aschenbrener & Edwards, 2023) and possibly serve as a model for other small, rural communities to replicate (Bohannon et al., 2020).

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of the study was to determine the perceived value and benefits of the Big Topics program on youth in the community. Two research questions guided the study: 1) How does Big Topics impact students' leadership development for the future? and 2) What are students' overall perceptions of the program?

### **Methodology**

Qualitative analyses were conducted to determine the perceptions of those directly or indirectly involved in the yearlong program through interviews with former participants. This case study analysis was bound by time, place, and experience (Stake, 1995). Specifically, we were interested in former students who had participated in the Big Topics program at a high school in southwest Oklahoma. As a research team, we identified these participants through snowball sampling (Creswell, 2012) during the summer of 2020. A basic, qualitative protocol (Merriam, 2009) was developed to conduct interviews for collecting necessary data. All participants of the study were purposely selected (Malterud et al., 2016) based on their status as former Big Topics participants. The study was deemed exempt by the Institutional Review Board at Oklahoma State University. In-depth interviews were conducted with seven participants who had participated in Big Topics. Interviews were conducted by three authors of our team who were members of the Rural Scholars cohort, a program of the Rural Renewal Initiative at Oklahoma State University that exists to allow college students the opportunity to conduct research and provide service to a rural community in Oklahoma. Specifically, the Rural Scholars participated in research and service designed around the Big Topics program in a small, rural community in southwest Oklahoma. As Rural Scholars, these team members lived and served in the community for 10 weeks during the summer of 2020. While there, they provided assistance over the summer as an instructor and curriculum developer for a similar program designed for middle school students. As such, they received a first-hand understanding of how the program was designed and administered. Each was highly engaged in the program's planning and delivery at the middle school age, which provided a richer understanding for what the high school students received in the program during the school year. Interviews were the primary method of data collection as they are well suited for the observation of motives, attitudes, and beliefs (Barriball & While, 2015). All interviews followed a semi-structured process with prewritten questions from the researcher but allowed for participants to elaborate further. Responses were recorded using a voice memo app on an iPhone, and according to the consent form signed by each participant. All identifiable information was agreed to be kept private during the data collection process and final write up of research.

Tracy's (2010) criteria were followed for conducting this qualitative case study. For consistency, the interview recordings were transcribed verbatim (Patton, 2002). The data were then analyzed

and interpreted to identify emergent trends and themes (Clark, 2017). Dependability was achieved by using an interview protocol, an audio recorder, and a detailed scope of work associated with conducting the study (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Trochim, 2006). During the interview sessions, field notes were taken for triangulation purposes (Merriam, 1995). Once the data had been fully transcribed, credibility was established through the member check system (Merriam, 1995) by emailing the transcriptions back to the interviewees to ensure accuracy of the results (Dooley, 2007). Emergent themes were identified from the data after analyzing each transcription line by line (Patton, 2002) and were then used to write up qualitative results and discussion for the study (Dooley, 2007).

### **Statement of Limitations and Subjectivity**

Subjectivity is an overview of the research team's perspectives on the subjects they are researching and are created by researchers based on their personal backgrounds, cultural worldviews, and professional experiences (Given, 2008). Although this study's findings provide a view of the perceived benefits of participating in this youth development program, the study is limited only to data of past participants of the program. It is acknowledged the experiences and interpretations by this study's cohort may not reflect all past participants who have participated in the program. Neither do the findings represent the benefits of participating in a discussion-based program for all youth. Therefore, the transferability of the findings should be considered by readers.

As a research team, we also recognize there may be potential biases in this study. The lead researcher was a graduate student who analyzed the data and assisted with facilitating a similarly structured summer program for younger youth (i.e., middle school age) in the same community led by the same adult volunteer of the program featured in this study. He also had a background in Extension education working with a variety of youth populations in various settings. Moreover, he worked extensively with a well-known agricultural organization serving on a state committee, which provided governmental advocacy and lobbying, and represented the organization in a national discussion-based competition. Other researchers on the team were either Rural Scholars or are highly engaged in the Rural Renewal Initiative at Oklahoma State University. Each is admittedly interested in helping identify programs that seek to improve their community's resilience. Therefore, we offer our reflexivity to the reader as a research team and acknowledge our potential biases in describing the data and findings of the study.

### **Findings and Discussion**

**Introduction to Participants:** The participants represented a diverse background of former students who were all involved in the program during high school. They ranged in age from 18 to 28 years old. Of the seven interviewed, five (71.4%) self-reported as female and two (28.6%) as male. These former students reported either currently being enrolled at a college or university ( $f = 4$ , 57.1%) or having completed at least a four-year degree ( $f = 3$ , 42.9%) at the time of the study. Of those reporting having completed a four-year degree, two (66%) stated they had gone on to obtain graduate degrees (i.e., Master's degrees), and one mentioned plans to go back to school and work toward a second graduate degree. All former students admitted to participating in the program during both their junior and senior years of high school.

**Emergent Themes:** Five themes emerged from the study to provide a perspective of participants' views on what they experienced and learned throughout their time participating in the program. The themes identified included: a) expansion of critical thinking, b) widening their perspective: openness and analysis, c) ability to formulate and express their opinions, d) relationship building, and e) preparedness for the future. To ensure confidentiality, no names or identifying information is provided related to the findings of the study.

**Expansion of Critical Thinking:** The first theme identified was expansion of critical thinking. The program's volunteer leader challenged each participant to take the topic of each week's discussion and conduct their own research on it outside of the program. Many students involved in the program admitted the extensive research on their own positively contributed to their preparation for discussing the topic each week and helped to expand their own study and critical thinking skills. One participant stated, "The most major thing that I got out of Big Topics was just critical thinking." When asked why she joined the program, another participant commented: "My MiMi told me that she would like me to get involved in it because she said that not only do they give you a scholarship if you do good in it, but you can also form critical thinking skills." Another participant explained that she struggled to think deeply and compose her thoughts prior to her participation in the program; however, over time, her critical thinking improved, and she became more confident in her ability to think through and formulate an opinion on various topics.

The expansion of critical thinking helped participants understand the importance of being lifelong learners and was a useful skill when pursuing goals later on after high school. For instance, one participant said, "My personal statement when I applied for graduate school was about lifelong learning, and I think a lot of that stemmed from the program and understanding that you're always learning, and it is a continuous process."

**Widening of Perspective: Openness and Analysis:** The second theme that emerged dealt with a widening of perspective: openness and analysis. For many of the participants it was challenging to consider topics beyond their own personal views, attitudes and values. Most participants stated that the program required them to analyze the world around them and be more open minded to others' thoughts and opinions. One participant stated, "I think Big Topics helped me in hearing people out and not criticizing them for their views but just try to understand them a little bit more." Another participant found that during the program as he gained more perspective on the world and people around him that he became better at analyzing people and situations. He mentioned, "Just the ability to analyze conversation, to analyze discussion, analyze perspectives, those are all things I got through Big Topics."

Some recalled how they learned to listen to others and give their opinions to the group, but also received feedback from the program's adult volunteer leader about their thoughts. One participant recalled how, prior to participating in the program, she failed to accept the opinions of others. She stated:

I don't believe that I probably accepted others' opinions, and I would keep thoughts to myself, so it was either really 'hot' or really 'cold' in that area. So learning to respect others'

opinions but then also keep my [own] opinion while standing on the ground that I got that opinion from, I think that [the program volunteer] just does listen to what everyone says and then really explains why he believes this and where that knowledge basis has come from.

One participant even provided an example of how widening her perspective during her time in the program carried into her college career and gave her the ability to open her mind to broader ideas and coincide with other students who had differing opinions. She stated:

I have to be very studious and very dedicated to my studies, and I think that some of the topics are so broad and difficult to grasp on to. [But] because we had such difficult material that we would read in Big Topics, it would really open my mind up to ‘oh there is a lot more out there than I initially thought,’ and so there’s just a lot of opinions and theories and so much that goes into it. It was good to experience those differing opinions, and it helped me to not necessarily combat them but to be able to be in an environment in the classroom where I can coincide with them and be in the same environment yet we may still have our differences.

Another participant summed it up best when she admitted, “I think that the most uncomfortable conversations in Big Topics really pushed me to grow the most.”

***Formulation and Expression of Opinions:*** A third theme was participants’ ability to formulate and express their own opinions. One participant in particular recalled the program helping him to open up and be able to converse more easily with others. He said:

I think being able to talk to people and have conversations like this. I was, when I first started Big Topics, I like didn’t speak. I just kind of sat in there just because it was kind of nerve wracking. And I’ve been in like public speaking, but it was different to like sit down and have a conversation. And I think since then I’ve been able to open up a lot more and talk to people about just everything.

Another participant expanded on how during the program the volunteer leader would allow her to write her thoughts about the weekly topics. “He allowed us to get extra credit and extra points by writing about topics, which is what was kind of my savior. So, it helped with kinda my essay skills, and he also made me read everything I wrote out loud,” she said. Such expectations helped participants improve their verbal and written communication skills. When asked to expound on the ways in which the program helped her grow, one participant stated that she learned when disagreements arise, “it doesn’t have to be a big argument, but it can be [an] intellectual debate that each person feels in their understanding and why the other person feels the way that they do.”

### ***Relationship Building***

Many participants talked about the relationships they built with each other during the program and the continued support and friendship they developed with their volunteer leader. Shayla stated:

I don’t sit there and talk with him [volunteer leader] as often as I would like to, but every couple of years we will get together. And just the support he has for me and the excitement and just that’s been the most important thing I have gained from it is him having my back



in everything I do and helping me choose my career path from what I am interested in, and he's been a really big supporter. So just having that behind me is what I see now as one of the biggest things.

Another participant spoke about how the participants' desire to be in the program was enhanced from support of their teachers' nomination to the program or due to their siblings having gone through the program before them. She reflected:

Usually, you get involved because teachers nominate you. My dad is the high school principal and so he really pushed me to be in every single thing that the school offered. So that was my initial push and interest, but my older brother was in it and my older cousin as well, so just some older family members before me had participated in it and saw lots of good things from it.

Yet, another participant talked about his connection of having had friends participate in the program and how he had a family connection with the program's volunteer leader. "For me, I had some older friends that had been in it and talked about how it's really cool. And my dad also is pretty good friends with [the volunteer leader], so he kind of told him that it was something that I should participate in," said Michael.

***Preparedness for the Future:*** The fifth theme that emerged from the study was preparedness for the future. Participants believed the wide variety of topics discussed in the program helped them in all areas of life. For example, one week's topic might include a discussion about religion, and the next week might include a lesson on ancient literature. Participants noted how the content they learned and discussed proved valuable to them beyond the program and into their college careers. One participant, in particular, noted how she was able to use something in one of her college courses that she had learned about in Big Topics. She stated:

When I went to college my freshman year, we had a quiz in my speech class, and because of what we discussed in Big Topics, I was actually able to get bonus points on a test because she asked the most random question, but because [the volunteer leader] had us read this book, I knew the answer.

Another participant talked about how there were scholarship opportunities throughout the program to help participants generate funds to help them financially if they chose to pursue a postsecondary degree. He said, "The program set me up in more ways for college and higher education than anything else I've ever experienced."

Yet another participant found the financial assistance from her scholarship for participation in the program very helpful to pursuing her goals after high school. She mentioned:

My family is not exactly capable of paying for my college so I was trying to do everything I could to apply for scholarships and this program helped me out a ton. It's hard to just 'Oh yeah, Mom, I'm not going to have enough [money].' And they have to worry about that because I don't want them to. So it has helped me a lot financially for my first year.

## Summary

The aim of this research study was to understand the perceived value or benefits of former participants of Big Topics, a discussion-based youth program. Based on the qualitative analysis of interviews with former participants, the results of the study indicate that participants found value that lasted long after their participation in the program. The Big Topics program held participants' accountable for improving their critical thinking and oral and written communications skills. Participants were asked to write about and then stand and deliver on difficult topics throughout the duration of the program. The additional reading and preparation caused students to develop skills that have served them well in life. As such, the acquisition of this human capital aligns with the skills identified as being important components of an effective youth leadership development program (Redmond & Dolan, 2016). In addition, the program caused participants to consider new ideas. In some cases, the ideas discussed in the program affirmed their original thoughts on the topic, and in other cases, participants' thoughts were challenged from their original paradigms. Such cognitive dissonance is possible in safe places where relationships, rapport, and trust have been established (Rhodes, 2008).

Being able to offer a program such as this requires an invested adult volunteer who has the time and expertise to mentor to youth. In this case, a retired individual willingly offered the program as a way to provide a service to his hometown. His relationship with the local school leaders and community, in this case the Rotary Club, was imperative to the development and success of the program. This model might not be feasible in other communities. However, it is recommended that other school districts across Oklahoma and beyond brainstorm ways to use the existing human capital present in their own communities to invest in the youth who will become the next generation of leaders (George & Uyanga, 2014) and then measure its impact along the way (Deutsch & Spencer, 2009).

Big Topics was volunteer-based, both for the mentor who led it and the students who participated. It is important to note that students did not receive a course credit for attending or participating in these weekly sessions. Their original motivation might have been more extrinsic in nature (i.e., the scholarship money promised at the end of the school year). However, it is apparent through the interviews that the motivation for participants to continue the program became more intrinsic as the year progressed. This was based on strong mentoring relationships between the students and the adult volunteer, who was willing to listen to and partner with youth to provide them a voice and empower them to action (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Redmond & Dolan, 2016). This is encouraging for others wondering if youth will persist in such an intense, sustained, and prolonged outreach effort.

Future research should measure the success of the program longitudinally over time. In addition, when possible, mixed-methods studies should ensue. Specifically, researchers should observe these sessions and make observations on the learning occurring through Big Topics. Finally, other schools across Oklahoma and beyond likely have similar outreach mentoring efforts established for their youth. Research should ensue to determine what types of programs exist as well as their perceived level of success and impact as many rural places look to unlock the potential for the future (Evans, 2007; George & Uyanga, 2014; Kress, 2006).

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