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**Designing Quality Programs That Promote Hope, Purpose And Future Readiness Among High Need, High Risk Youth: Recommendations For Shifting Perspective And Practice**

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**Abstract**

This paper uses a social justice perspective to recommend a number of program design strategies for improving high need, high risk youth access to quality education, career and workforce development. Globally, high need, high risk youth refer to the estimated 500 million youth who live on less than \$2 per day, the estimated 600 million youth who are not in school, not employed, and not in training (i.e., NEET or Opportunity Youth). The recommendations are framed using a number of U.N. Sustainable Development Goals with the central aim being to increase access to decent work.

Keywords: at-risk youth, program design, career readiness, social emotional learning skills

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## **Designing Quality Programs that Promote Hope, Purpose and Future Readiness Among High Need, High Risk Youth: Recommendations for Shifting Perspective and Practice**

Drawing from Prillentsky's Emancipatory Communitarianism (1997) and Friere's Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970), a growing number of vocational psychologists and career development professionals are engaging in a postmodern assessment of the value and purpose of career choice and decision-making paradigm (Blustein, McWhirter & Perry, 2005; Byars-Winston, 2014; Chronister, Wettersten & Brown, 2004; Diemer & Rasheed-Ali, 2009; Diemer & Blustein, 2006; Mcwhirter, Rojas-Araúz, Ortega, et al., 2019; Richardson, 1993; Solberg & Ali, 2017; Solberg, Howard, Blustein & Close, 2002). The application of Freire and Prillentsky's ideas encourages vocational psychologists and career development professionals to consider whether and to what extent our program and service design strategies empower and liberate vulnerable populations. The purpose of this article is to offer recommendations and considerations for designing programs and services that enable one such vulnerable population, what we refer to as "high need, high-risk youth," to gain access to decent work. "High need, high risk" youth refer to the intersection of factors known to reduce future quality of life expectations and limit access to learning opportunities and resources needed to thrive. In the United States, high need, high risk youth refers collectively to the estimated 30 million youth who are living in low-income households, 4.6 million disconnected youth (i.e., youth age 16-24 who are not in school, training or employed), 1.3 million youth with disabilities aged 12-17, 420,000 youth living in foster care, 63,000 incarcerated youth, and 36,000 homeless youth. Globally, high need, high risk youth refers to an estimated 500 million youth aged 15-24 who make less than \$2 (USD) per day (Advocates for Youth, n.d.) and the estimated 600 Million

NEET youth around the globe, that is, youth who are “Not in Education, Employed, or in Training (NEET).”

#### Using the U.N. Sustainable Design Goals to Organize Our Design Efforts

The recommendations that follow are organized in response to a subset of the United Nations’ 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG; U.N., 2019). The U.N. established these sustainability goals in response to predictions of an impending global economic collapse (Meadows, Behrens III, Meadows, Naill, Randers & Zahn, 1974; Turner, 2012). This collapse is due in part to “subdued [economic] growth, rising inequalities and accelerating climate change” (Schwab, 2019). Using longitudinal economic data, Turner (2012) has verified the trajectory of this global economic collapse by tracking reductions in global population due to death rates exceeding birth rates, reductions in industrial output per capita, challenges with respect to access and distribution of food, rises in greenhouse effects due to global pollution, decreases in fossil fuels, and lack of access to electricity and literacy rates. One consequence of this economic collapse is a volatile formal and informal labor market that necessitates our collective efforts to implement programs and services that prepare high need, high risk youth with the career navigation and workforce readiness skills that will enable them to develop the adaptability, resiliency and proactivity needed to compete for existing and emerging decent work opportunities and to be prepared to create small business and entrepreneurial opportunities.

For vocational psychology and career development professionals, there are a number of interconnected SDGs that should guide our design efforts. These SDGs include Access to Decent Work (SDG 8), Reducing Poverty (SDG 1) and Hunger (SDG 2), Improving the Economic Competitiveness of Local Communities (SDG 11), Improving Access to Quality Learning and Education (SDG 4), Improving Health and Well-being (SDG 3), Addressing Equity

in Income and Job Opportunities (SDG 5), and Preparing Youth with the Workforce Development Skills Needed to Enter and Contribute to Improving Industry and Our Global Environment (SDG 9). Following recommendations by Lim, Jørgensen, and Wyborn (2018), Figure 1 describes an integrated SDG model.

Figure 1 proposes that access to decent work (UN SG 8) should be the primary outcome of our career and workforce development efforts. To achieve this, our career and workforce development design efforts must be culturally responsive and evidence-based (Howard, Solberg, Kantamneni, et al., 2008; McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter, & McWhirter, 2013) and contribute to increasing secondary and postsecondary educational attainment rates (UN SG 4). More important than the academic degree, our efforts must enable high need, high risk youth to develop the technical and social emotional learning competencies needed to compete for today's evolving world of work (Cappelli & Tavis, 2018; Lim-Lange & Lim-Lange, 2019; Schwab, 2012). Figure 1 also proposes that gaining access to decent work serves as the critical community intervention for addressing range of broader social justice and equity concerns such as reducing poverty and hunger (SDG 1 & 2), improving mental health and well-being (UN SG 3; Center on Society and Health, n.d.) and improving the economic competitiveness of local communities (UN SG 11). When considering program and service design, there is also a need to involve efforts that seek to improve equity in the workplace with respect to gender, race/ethnicity and disability and especially with respect to equitable access to high demand, high wage STEM occupations (UN SG 5).

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INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Using Counseling and Vocational Psychology as a Foundation For How We Collaborate in Design Efforts that Seek Social Justice

Counseling psychology's emphasis on social justice and equity (Toporek, Gerstein, Fouad, Roysircar, & Israel, 2006; Vera & Speight, 2003) and specifically vocational psychology's adoption of emancipatory communitarianism and liberation psychology (Blustein, 2006; Blustein, McWhirter, & Perry, 2005) has spawned a number of important interventions that target high need groups (Ali, Brown, & Loh, 2017; Ali, Yang, Button, et al., 2012; Chronister & McWhirter, 2006; Fitzgerald, Chronister, Forrest, & Brown, 2013; Solberg, Howard, Blustein, & Close, 2002). While it is important that the design of new programs and services is grounded in theory and evidence, in order to ensure that our design is relevant for a given setting and population, it is critical to create action research efforts that enable theory and evidence to be reconsidered within authentic collaborations with policy experts within the public sector and practitioners that include school educators and youth serving organizations.

One strategy for engaging in such collaborations is exemplarian action research which seeks to establish a relational foundation of mutual respect and equal power between scientists, policy experts and practitioners (Coenen, 1998; Solberg, 2003). The first phase of exemplarian action research involves the establishment of a shared perspective. Drawing from multicultural counseling, achieving a shared perspective involves becoming aware of the different world-views and goals of the various team members. As researchers, our world view is often shaped by theoretical constructs that are connected by evidentiary methods. Practitioners are often motivated by wanting to know what works best for their unique population and is responsive to the needs and limitations of the contexts in which the work. Policy makers often focus on

identifying practices that can be scaled effectively and within reasonable costs to the larger population. Building strong collaborations and a shared perspective also involves establishing our credibility. Sue and Zane (1987) describe two forms of credibility. Achieved credibility relates to how well we can establish trust and translate our research in ways that allow policy makers and practitioners to share their own ideas and lived experiences as well as ask questions and challenge the implicit biases or simplistic solutions that may underlie our theory and research. Ascribed credibility occurs when members of the policy and practice community reach out to us because we have established a reputation as being able to understand their needs, values, and represent our science and evidence base in a flexible manner that is perceived as relevant and meaningful for addressing their needs. As Fouad and her colleagues noted, disastrous results can occur when scientists attempt to intervention efforts in settings where practitioners do not perceive us as credible and/or the interventions are not perceived as relevant to their population or setting (Hains & Fouad, 1994).

Exemplarian action research draws from Giddens's structuration theory (1976, 1993) and seeks to focus the action research on the reallocation of resources in such a way as to improve access to quality programs and services. While traditional action research is often focused on seeking to understand the nature of a given problem, exemplarian action research seeks to increase the organization's capacity to address inequities in programs and opportunities. For our work in supporting high need, high risk youth, the aim of exemplarian action research is to mobilize the resources needed to build capacity within schools and youth serving organizations to increase access to quality education as well as career and workforce development opportunities.

Using Individualized Learning Plans as an Organizing Framework

An underlying theme throughout the recommendations is the use of individualized Learning Plans (ILPs). ILPs being used throughout the United States (U.S. DoL, ODEP, n.d.) and internationally (Singapore MOE, n.d.) as a career management strategy for helping youth identify their skills, connect these skills to the world of work, identify a purpose and establish flexible life goals, and identify learning pathways that will enable them to pursue those goals (Solberg, 2019). ILPs have shown promise in facilitating positive youth development in a range of areas including pursuing more rigorous academic courses, decreasing teenage pregnancy rates, increasing secondary education attainment rates, and establishing postsecondary learning goals (Solberg, Wills, Redmond & Skaff, 2014). Some of the critical design elements for quality ILPs include youth identifying career and life goals that align with their talent and interests as well as the design of a scope and sequence of activities that are facilitated by caring and encouraging adults. As a career development effort, ILPs focus on “talent development” rather than career choice and decision-making, fosters goal-setting, critical consciousness, self-regulation, deeper human skills and incorporates access to work-based learning and early access to college (Solberg, 2019). For high need, high risk youth, the ILP process enables the emergence of proactive, resilient and adaptable young adults who are actively pursuing future opportunities with purpose and hope.

In national research investigating the nature and promise of individualized learning plans, we found that youth who were able to describe clear career and life goals that emerged as a result of receiving access to career development lessons were found to report higher levels of Social Emotional Learning skills (SEL; e.g., academic self-efficacy, career search self-efficacy, academic motivation, and goal setting) which in turn were associated with better academic grades, stress and health management, and fewer career decision-making difficulties (Solberg,



Wills, Redmond & Skaff, 2014). Longitudinal research in Germany also found that developing these skills in adolescence predicts future employment and job satisfaction in adulthood (Pinguart, Juang & Silbereisen, 2003). These results are consistent with experimental research revealing career and life goals as an important psychological mechanism that produces self-directed and proactive behavior (Bandura, 1997; Salmelo-Arlo, 2010).

#### Program Content Design Recommendations

Below are a number of recommendations collaborative design teams to consider when developing career and workforce development programs and services.. These recommendations were distilled from a range of experiences in working with schools (Solberg et al., 1998; evaluation of ILPs with IEL), state and federal policy makers (State leaders network; Work Matters Report; Solberg, Wills & Larson, 2013), and international collaborations (Boston University, 2019a, 2019b; Solberg, 2016; Solberg, Hutchison, Kashiri et al., 2017). With respect to Prillentsky's (1997) emancipatory communitarianism (Blustein et al., 2005) and more specifically his SPECS model (strengths, prevention, empowerment, and community conditions; Prillentsky, 2005), the recommendations focus on program redesign strategies from a positive youth development perspective that seeks to build the collective capacity among educators, youth serving organizations, employers, families, and higher education systems to proactively implement quality programs and services that enable youth to develop the skills needed to become self-directed, resilient and self-determined learners. From the perspective of Friere's Liberation Psychology, the recommendations incorporate critical consciousness by helping high need, high risk youth explore their own talent within the context of living within conditions of inequity and unequal access to resources and support as well as by helping ourselves and the

policy makers and practitioners we are working with to become critically conscious of our own implicit biases.

1. Identify Transferable and Resiliency Skills

Using a Positive Youth Development framework (PYD; Solberg & Ali, 2017; Silbereisen & Lerner, 2007), we propose that educational attainment and workforce development programs begin by helping youth become aware of their emerging talent that can be framed as transferable workforce readiness skills. The major implication for program design is the hypothesis that by facilitating youth awareness for how their emerging talent transfers into the world of work will increase their sense of hope and purpose. Within the context of individualized learning plans, identification of transferable skills is considered part of helping youth develop their own self-exploration skills (Solberg, 2019).

Two transferable skill domains that are especially relevant for gaining access to decent work within the current 4th Industrial Revolution (Schwab, 2012) include becoming aware of one's emerging technical skills and deeper human skills (i.e., advanced social emotional learning skills; Cappelli & Tavis, 2018). Gaining access to decent work will increasingly involve the acquisition and continued development of advanced technical skills that are used within an occupational area. "Deeper human" skills refer to a range of advanced social emotional learning skills such as empathy and compassion, complex communication, adaptability and resilience, entrepreneurial thinking, personal branding, social capital and marketing (Lim-Lange & Lim-Lange, 2019). For high need, high risk youth, efforts to identify and develop critical social emotional learning skills also support mental health by establishing psychological and emotional stability (Payton, Warlaw, Graczyk, et al., 2000; Greenberg, Domitrovich, Weissberg & Durlak, 2017).

In their examination of labor market trends, Burning Glass (2015) identifies six baseline skill clusters that describe the transferable technical and deeper human skills that will enable youth to access a wide range of decent work opportunities. These baseline skills clusters include: Presentation and Persuasion, Customer Service, Project Management, Research and Strategy, Positive Disposition, Supervision and Detail Oriented (Table 1). Industry recognized lists of transferable skills like these offered by Burning Glass can be added to group activities such as the “Who Am I” lesson found in Making My Future Work (Perry, President, Harmon, et al., 2014). “Who Am I” is a group activity that engages peers to reflect on each other’s personal brand qualities. In facilitating these activities, youth should also be encouraged to consider transferable skills they may have developed from experiences outside of traditional education settings. In the United States, informal learning opportunities may offer access to a range of work-based learning opportunities that focus on a range of technical and deeper human skills through after-school programs or out of school programs such as Scouting, 4-H, Future Farmers of America.

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Many high need, high risk youth have experienced trauma, violence, and poverty. It is especially important therefore to explore transferable skills related to SEL (CASEL, n.d.) and deeper human skills that align with resiliency, adaptability and empathy. For example, Zaff, Aasland, McDermott et al, (2016) explored the personal narratives of 27 youth who left school

prior to graduation. They found that most youth left school to pursue short-term goals that were relevant to their personal circumstances such as caring for ill family members, to escape abuse or violence, or to address pressing financial needs of their family. Using a positive youth development lens, Zaff et al., concluded that the personal narratives of many of the out of school youth demonstrated a range of SEL skills including the ability to make responsible decisions, career management with respect to being able to set short and long-term goals, create and implement strategies for goal pursuit, and understanding how their thoughts, feelings, and experiences relate to their development.

Working with homeless youth, Williams, Lindsey, Kurtz and Jarvis (2001) describe a range of resiliency domains that emerged from their multiple case study design featuring five runaway and homeless youth. These domains included determination, meaning and purpose in life, self-care and readiness to accept help. Determination refers to self-efficacy, tenacity, persistence to overcome previous trauma and resulting life challenges. Meaning and purpose centers on the emergence of hope and gratitude, a desire to give back to others, and establishment of a spiritual connection. Self-care refers to being able to identify and meet one's needs and development of problem-solving skills. Readiness to accept help involves becoming ready to accept help as well as care to ensure that youth have access to caring and encouraging adults.

Zaff and his colleagues also investigated the support systems that enable high need, high risk youth to thrive. They recommend that when designing programs and services for high need, high risk youth, it is important to ensure access to a "web" of caring and encouraging adults (Pufall, Flanagan, Zaff, et al., 2017). This web of support helps high need, high risk youth establish their social capital by providing (a) emotional support from someone offering

unconditional positive regard, (b) instrumental support that helps them access and/or manage education, financial, and other life challenges, (c) informational support that connects them to valuable resources, (d) companionship support such as someone to participate in social activities, and (e) validation support that helps them reframe their personal challenges as normal responses to trauma and other life circumstances. Aviles and Grigaluanas (2018) describe an effort to provide a web of support for homeless youth. In order to facilitate the ability of the adults to provide caring and encouraging support, they used a participatory action research strategy to facilitate the adult's critical consciousness about the experience of homeless youth while also helping youth develop the advocacy skills needed access social services. Babcock's (2014) trauma informed strategy for homelessness focuses on helping individuals improve their "stability" as part of an integrated strategy that also incorporates making strides to improve education and workforce development opportunities.

In sum, the aim of focusing the design of education and workforce development efforts to begin with identifying transferable skills is to enable each youth to explore the assets and qualities they have acquired and that have direct relevance to the world of work. As a trauma informed strategy, it is important to ensure youth receive access to a range of support from caring and encouraging adults who are able to consider the range of resiliency skills they have developed.

## 2. Help Youth Become Aware of the Relevance of Their Transferable Skills to the World of Work

After helping youth become aware of their transferable skills, we recommend designing activities that enable youth to identify how these skills expand the range of occupations for which they may qualify. The aim is to help youth recognize that their employability expands as

they acquire a broader range of advanced technical and deeper human skills as well as help youth realize the relevance of increasing their educational attainment. For vocational psychologists and career professionals working in higher income countries such as the United States, connecting skills to formal labor market occupations is facilitated through online systems such as O\*NET (n.d.). However, 60% of the world's population is employed within informal labor sectors that do not incur taxable income or provide social welfare benefits such as protection or health and retirement benefits (ILO, 2018). With the rapid changes in access to formal labor opportunities, many have expressed concerns that the word "career" is no longer applicable because there are few "ladders" that enable one to be promoted within one occupational area (Savickas, Nota, Rossier, et al., 2009). And, from the positionality of high need, high risk youth, the majority may not resonate to the concept of "career" which could be considered a privilege (Blustein, 2006) for those living in communities with clear access to secondary and tertiary education and have access to a robust formal labor market. Designing programs in areas with a constricted range of formal labor market opportunities such as rural communities and many low income countries, it is important to examine our own critical consciousness regarding the relevance of terms such as "career" for the populations who will be receiving our programs and services. In working with high need, high risk youth in South Africa, for example, Marsay chooses to use the term "sustainable livelihood" rather than "career." Furthermore, she believes that the concept of "guidance" which implies an external authoritarian approach should be replaced with "enabling and empowering" which implies strengthening of inner resources of the person within the community. She advocates a "Hope Based Future Oriented Approach" to assisting young people make decisions about their future (Marsay, 2016; 2018; 2020).

And, there is a tremendous opportunity to translate our work globally into communities with high concentrations of informal occupations. The Women's Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing agency classifies a range of informal occupations with high concentrations of women as including domestic workers, home-based workers, street vendors, waste pickers, garment workers, agriculture and farming, and transport workers (WIEGO, n.d.). What is missing is a translation strategy whereby youth serving organizations and educators can help youth identify the transferable and employability skills associated with high demand informal labor occupations (see Palmer, 2017). What is also missing is clear messaging about the value and dignity of informal labor market opportunities. By focusing attention on developing entrepreneurial skills and small business management skills as well as developing the financial literacy, it is possible to engage in informal labor market opportunities in ways that produce livable and sustainable wages.

Within high income countries with large formal labor market sectors, youth will likely have access to career information and communication technology (ICT) such as online career information systems (Bimrose, Kettunen, & Goddard, 2015; Kettunen & Sampson, 2019; O\*NET, n.d.). These ICT solutions provide detailed information about the range of occupations that align to transferable skills. For example, O\*NET's "Skills Search" feature enables youth to identify 35 employment skills. After "clicking" the various skills they deem relevant to their own experiences, the system generates a list of occupations that align to those skills. For countries or areas with high concentrations of informal occupations or where ICT is not available, it is possible to facilitate awareness of the relevance of transferable skills by engaging youth in conversations with adult role models from various occupations through activities such

as job fairs, information interviews and job shadowing. And, efforts need to be made to provide ICT access using SMART phones.

In sum, more effort is needed to help youth become aware of how their emerging talent and skills apply to the world of work. For countries with strong formal labor markets, the use of ICT can help youth learn how their efforts to increase their educational attainment and gather workforce readiness skills will expand the range of occupational opportunities. For youth living in lower income countries, it is important to explore how their emerging talent and skills can be applied within the local formal and informal labor market.

### 3. Use SEL Skills to Establish Future Ready Learning Objectives

In many schools and youth serving organizations, career development programs and services is assumed to be provided by someone in the role of a “career/school counselor.” Unfortunately, many high need, high risk youth are participating in communities that do not have adequate access to career services. In the United States, a report from the Education Trust (2019) in collaboration with Reach Higher and the American School Counseling Association reports that youth have less access to school counselors if they are from underrepresented racial/ethnic backgrounds or live in lower income households. The European Network on Youth Employment (Zanaki, Gkogka, Jankuniene & Teliopoulou, 2010) argued that the design of educational attainment and workforce development efforts in schools should become a whole-school effort whereby all youth participate in curriculum that is administered by all educators. This sentiment has been embraced by U.S. states that are mandating or strongly encouraging schools to use ILPs (Solberg, 2019) as well as being advocated by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop), the European Commission, the European Training Foundation (ETF), the International Labor Organisation (ILO), the Organisation for



Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (CEDEFOP, 2019).

One challenge to implementing programs and services that involve all staff within schools or youth serving organizations is gaining “buy-in.” To address this issue, the Social Emotional Learning International Research Network (SEL IRN) was established with research teams from 15 countries (Boston University, 2019a, 2019b). Recognized as an international research network by the World Educational Research Association, this effort aims to help educators become aware of the value of SEL and workforce readiness and thereby increase their interest in delivering career development programs and services. One of the exciting implications of this work is the opportunity to compare educator beliefs about the nature of SEL from a cross-cultural context. This comparison has enabled the researchers to become more critically conscious of the assumptions, language and privileges associated with each country. And, it is interesting to note that there was consensus among educators across the 15 countries regarding a number of SEL skills including resiliency, adaptability and proactivity.

Within the South African context, the SEL efforts aligns well with Marsay’s reframing of “career” as sustainable livelihood and the goal of program design as to enable youth to find “purpose, hope and future readiness” (Marsay, 2014; 2016; 2018; 2020). Currently, South Africa is focused on the implementation of a National Skills Development Plan 2030 (2019). The plan aims to mobilize and align education, workforce readiness, and work-based learning opportunities with high demand occupations. The plan proposes a multi-tiered approach and will begin with learning from employers about what skills they are needing. While the plan emphasizes education and technical skills, it is expected that in time the implementation language will include social emotional learning skills.

The SEL IRN used an SEL framework that was developed in the United States in order to gather educator perceptions about the nature of SEL and its connection to career readiness (CASEL, n.d.). The CASEL framework organizes SEL skills within five categories - self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship management, and responsible decision-making. Using a modified grounded theory strategy to assess SEL responses from 68 South African educators serving youth with disabilities, Marsay (2019) identified 64 SEL skill themes. Given the fact that South African youth experience tremendously high rates of violence (Leoschut, 2009), it is not surprising that educators identified a number of trauma-informed SEL skills. Examples include: (a) Compassion which was defined as “caring and understanding the suffering of others;” (b) Restorative Justice which involves the ability to “repair the harm to the relationships between offenders and victims, and offenders and the community;” (c) Conflict Resolution which involves the ability to “facilitate the peaceful ending of conflicts;” and (d) Forgiveness which involves “a conscious, deliberate decision to release feelings of resentment or vengeance toward a person or group who has harmed you, regardless of whether they actually deserve your forgiveness.”

With respect to future readiness, South African educators reported a number of SEL skills including: (a) Personal Development which involves “a way for people to assess their skills and qualities, consider their aims in life and set goals in order to realize and maximize their potential;” (b) Personal Values which involves “decision-making guidelines that help us connect to our true selves;” (c) Potential which involves “abilities that may be developed and lead to future success or usefulness;” (d) Work Ethic which involves the “principle that hard work is intrinsically virtuous or worthy of reward;” and (e) Future Orientation which was defined as “the extent to which an individual thinks about the future, anticipate future consequences, and plans

ahead before acting.” The theme that emerged most frequently in the qualitative analysis of the data, was the need for improved interpersonal relations. This theme emerged for the educators themselves, as well as the students in the classroom, as well as for future use in the world of work.

Based on responses from 40 educators, the United States SEL IRN effort yielded 123 SEL themes (Park, Newman & Solberg, 2019). In collaboration with CASEL and a number of school counselors, the U.S. themes are being used to generate Future Ready learning objectives that can be used to guide the development of whole school program design efforts. Using CASEL’s five SEL domains, sample learning objectives include: (a) Ability to describe emerging talent, competencies, and values (Self Awareness); (b) Engages in perspective taking by being aware of the diversity of roles, skills and knowledge needed to complete group tasks or simulated work activities (Social Awareness); (c) Demonstrates proactive and self-motivated behavior by identifying ways to develop their talent and competencies (Self Management); (d) Ability to demonstrate effective communication skills needed to give and receive feedback from peers (Relationship Management); and (e) Ability to identify 2-3 career and life goals (Responsible Decision-Making).

While access to decent work is argued to have a positive impact on mental health and well-being, exploring the SEL skills needed to pursue one’s goals can also help youth reflect on their mental health, health and/or ability challenges (SDG 3). The World Health Organization’s International Classification of Functioning (ICF; WHO, n.d. ) offers an excellent positive youth development model. The ICF model argues that all individuals - those with and without disabilities, mental health or health difficulties - function at an optimal level when they receive the supports and accommodations needed to fully participate and function within their

community (e.g., school, work, social opportunities). Educator Julie DiPilato (2019) and School Counselor Erin Eastman (2019) from the Barnstable School District in Massachusetts shared a story about the transformation of one disengaged youth after they learned about the SEL skills needed to become a firefighter. The story began at the end of 7th grade when the firefighters visited the school as a work-based learning activity. The individual had not participated academically throughout the year but on this day they were animated and asked lots of questions. And, they were noticeably upset finding out that “maintaining composure” was one of the most important SEL skills to become a firefighter. It turns out that the student was struggling with anger management. DiPilato reports that for the remainder of that school year the student not only engaged in academic activities, they also began working actively on learning how to manage anger. Eastman describes how the local fire department continued to mentor the student throughout high school and after graduating was able to pass the emergency medical technician certification and was a volunteer at the fire station and in line for a full-time position. By learning about the transferable skills needed to pursue decent work opportunities, youth will discover for themselves why it is important to manage their personal challenges. While engaging in these activities can motivate youth to address their mental health or physical challenges, the ICF model reminds us that when designing programs for high need, high risk youth, it is critical to incorporate access to additional supports and services that can provide the accommodations or skill development opportunities to manage them.

In sum, adopting SEL as a framework for engaging educators in providing opportunities for high need, high risk youth to develop deeper human skills can result in their becoming more engaged learners as well as develops the skills needed to access decent work opportunities. In the United States, CASEL (Schlinger, 2019) has also come to the conclusion that middle and

secondary education teachers are more likely to engage in SEL practices if they understand how SEL supports career. From the perspectives of emancipatory communitarianism (Blustein, McWhirter & Perry, 2005; Prillentsky, 1997) and liberation psychology (Friere, 1970), establishing a cross-cultural examination of SEL and career readiness has made us critically conscious of how the word “career” is less relevant to the majority of high need, high risk youth who may not have access to formal labor market opportunities due to economic conditions found in their communities or lack of access to the education and training needed to take advantage of existing opportunities. To achieve this, it is important to reconsider practices and language in ways that are more inclusive and responsive to the lived experiences of high need, high risk youth. Some examples include replacing the word “career” with “access to decent work,” “sustainable livelihood,” and framing the objectives of our efforts as enabling youth to discover “hope and purpose” in order to become “future ready.”

#### 4. Incorporate Trauma Informed Program Design Strategies

As noted in the introduction, there are over 500 million youth living in extreme poverty. Compounding this challenge are reports that as many as 1.4 Billion of the total global population of 2 Billion youth are exposed to violence (Hillis, Mercy, Amobi & Kress; 2016) as well as serious gender inequities in youth unemployment rates (see Figure 2; ILO, 2019). While youth unemployment is relatively low and generally equal between females and males in the United States, in most regions of the world, unemployment rates for female youth is a serious challenge. For youth with disabilities, the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy (US ODEP; n.d.) tracked monthly youth employment rates through 2014. Their data indicates that 16% of youth with disabilities aged 16-19 and 31% of those 20-24 were employed compared to nondisability youth employment rates of 30% and 65%, respectively. The World

Health Organization (2018) estimates that globally 15% of the estimated 1 Billion people have some form of disability, and the most recent estimate is among working age youth and adults

with disabilities, only 30% are employed throughout the Americas - North, South and Central (International Disability Rights Monitor, 2004).

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For high need, high risk youth, it is critical, therefore, that program design strategies incorporate trauma-informed practices. While originally developed to support homeless adults, Empath offers an excellent trauma-informed model that incorporates educational attainment and workforce development as two of their five program design areas that also include family stability, health and well-being, and financial literacy (Babcock, 2015). Drawing from advances in brain science, Babcock argues that trauma-informed efforts need to consider how overactivity within the limbic system due to prolonged exposure to poverty, stress and trauma impacts development of the prefrontal cortex which is needed for establishing a future time perspective, setting goals and problem-solving. While Zaff and his colleagues advocate for a web of support to work with high need, high risk youth (Zaff et al., 2016), given the potential for emotional and mental health challenges, it is also important that programs provide access to counseling support, especially to help youth become ready consider future possibilities.

An example of a trauma-informed approach to support educational attainment and workforce development is Right Turn. Right Turn is a program sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education (IEL, n.d.) that uses ILPs (i.e., individualized career development plan)

as a key strategy for helping court-involved youth make successful education and workforce transitions. Their trauma-informed program works with community-based organizations who provide youth with caring and encouraging adult mentors, places the youth in educational settings that will enable them to either complete or receive an equivalent high school degree, provides workforce development opportunities, places them in jobs, and encourages participation in postsecondary education. Program staff describe the important role of relationship building before moving to setting goals and considering future options. Once the relationship with the lead staff is established, youth are assigned a mentor and program efforts seek to match youth to an educational pathway that will enable them to either graduate from high school or equivalent, enter workforce training, and find employment. Youth report that one of the most meaningful elements of the program is discovering their transferable skills and learning how these skills align to the world of work. They report that this discovery and the support of their mentor enable them to consider a wider range of occupational opportunities and to seek the postsecondary training and education options needed to pursue them. Evaluation results indicated that 65% of the 816 of the court-involved youth who participated in job placement services, 77% of the youth aged 17 and below (n = 278) successfully remained in school for 12 months or more, 59% participated in exploring postsecondary opportunities, 69% of participants 18 or older (n = 145) completed a postsecondary degree or received an industry recognized certificate, and 73% of those 18 or older received unsubsidized employment (Career Development Systems Design and Evaluation, 2018).

In sum, when working with high need, high risk youth populations, it is important to incorporate trauma-informed practices that include access to professionals and youth workers

who can establish a strong working alliance that can enable youth to begin experiencing hope for their future.

#### 5. Address Inequity in STEM Occupations

Despite years of efforts to increase access to STEM careers there remain significant inequities with respect to gender, race/ethnicity and disability. In the context of the United States and by extension many high income countries, longitudinal studies indicate that addressing the lack of equitable racial/ethnic representation in STEM fields will only shift by designing learning opportunities that encourage youth and their families to consider STEM occupations provides access to encouraging adults and work-based learning opportunities that enable them to imagine themselves as a STEM professional (Archer et al., 2012; Archer, Dewitt & Wong, 2014).

Program design should focus on increasing self-efficacy related to their perceived ability to perform the required occupational skills (Whiston, Rossier & Barron 2017), As many high need, high risk youth may not perceive themselves as being “brainy” enough to pursue a STEM career, it is essential to help youth identify their existing transferable skills that can be applied within STEM occupations (Archer, Dewitt & Willis, 2014).

Howard and her colleagues (Howard, Solberg & Trunfio, 2020) have established a collaboration with Sociedad Latina which offers after-school and summer STEM enrichment to middle school youth as well as offers support through high school in an effort to increase postsecondary participation rates among Latinx youth. The collaboration involves developing a strategy to translate STEM research in higher education for use in middle and high school settings as well as using individualized learning plans to help youth and their families explore the ways in which the technical and deeper human skills they are learning within these activities enable them to consider an expanded range of STEM and nonSTEM career opportunities. A



primary outcome of the efforts is to help youth and their families design a four-year academic plan for high school that describes (a) in and out of school learning opportunities they intend to pursue, (b) work-based learning and early college learning opportunities, and (c) career pathways they can pursue and that will lead to industry-recognized credentials they can obtain before graduating from high school and entering postsecondary education.

In sum, in addition to providing higher wages, designing programs that actively encourage high need, high risk youth to consider pursuing STEM occupations addresses a critical and long-lasting area of inequity in the workplace.

#### Final Thoughts

Addressing the education, career and workforce development challenges for high need, high risk youth is a global concern. While these challenges can feel daunting, by creating authentic collaborations with policy makers, educators and youth serving organizations, we have an opportunity to design programs and services that can enable youth to find hope and purpose. The recommendations offered share a perspective that our goal in providing these programs is to empower youth with the skills needed to become proactive in seeking out the educational, career and workforce development opportunities that align best with their evolving future goals.

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Table 1: Burning Glass (2015) Basic Skill Requirements

Skills Cluster	Skills	Opportunities
Presentation & Persuasion	Creativity, Relationship Building, Presentation Skills	Design, Media & Writing, Sales & Marketing
Customer Service	Customer Service, Bilingual Skills	Sales & Customer Service, Personal Care
Project Management, Research & Strategy	Research, Project Management, Strategic Planning, Management Negotiation, Analytic Skills	Management, Research
Positive Disposition	Teamwork, Self-starter, Positive Disposition	Sales & Customer Service, Personal Care
Supervision	Supervision, Leadership	Management
Detail Oriented	Time Management, Detail Oriented & Multitasking	Clerical & Administrative, Finance



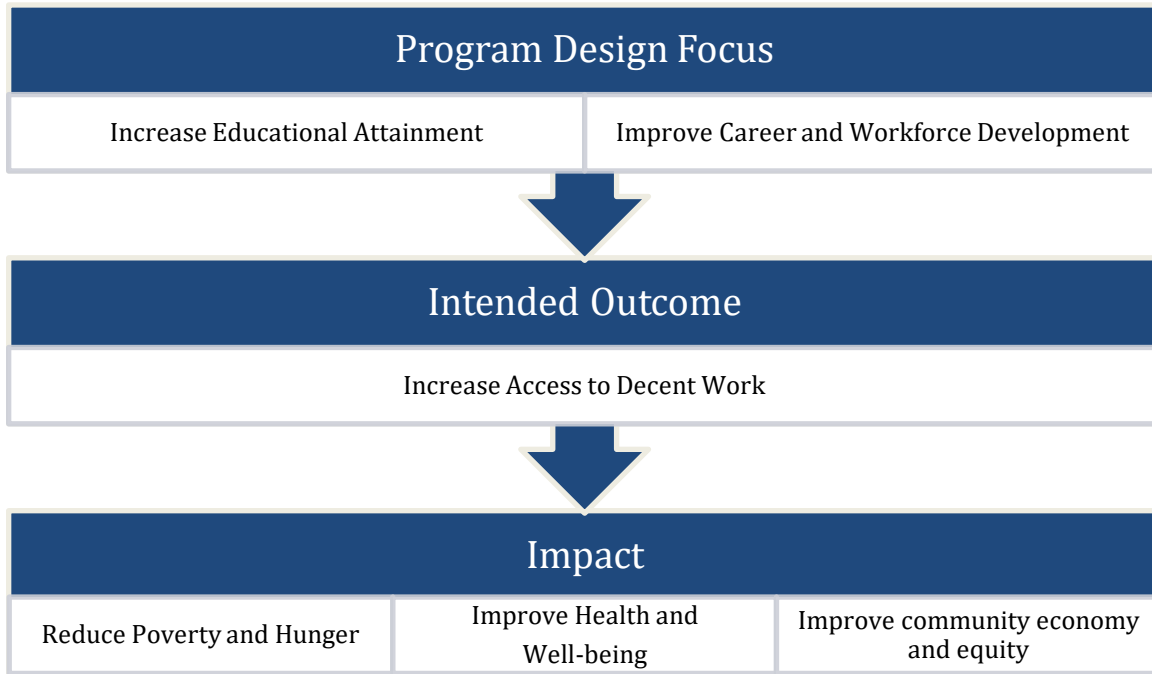


Figure 1. Program Design Using Sustainable Development Goals

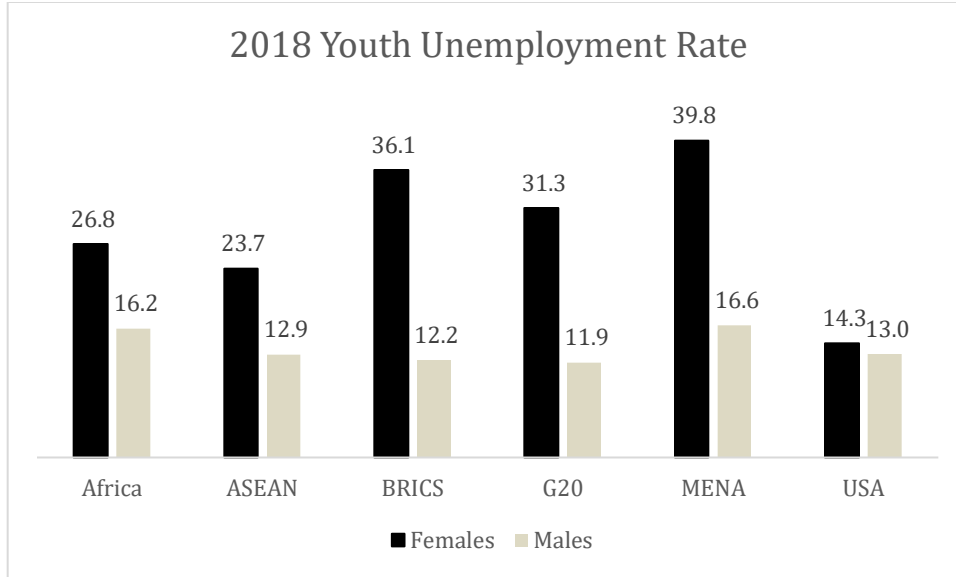


Figure 2. 2018 Youth Unemployment Rate.

Note: BRICS refers to Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa; G20 refers to the European Union and 19 individual countries; MENA refers to Middle East and North Africa. In the United States