External Assets as Predictors of Positive Emotions Among At-Risk Youth in Malaysia

Nor Ba’yah Abdul Kadir, Samsudin A. Rahim, Zaidah Mustapha, Mimi Hanida Abdul Mutalib, Chang Peng Kee and Rusyda Helma Mohamed
Centre for Youth Empowerment, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

The present study is among the first to examine external assets as predictors of positive emotions among at-risk youth. The study aims to examine the associations of external assets with positive emotions, determine external assets as a predictor of positive emotions in phase 1, and see if these predictors were consistently established in phase 2. At first contact, 403 participants from low-income apartments in the suburbs of Kuala Lumpur, aged 13–25 years were asked to complete the 25 Developmental Assets, Malaysian version. The participants were also invited to participate in social activities organized by the PERMATA community. The same participants were approached four months later to examine the stability of measures. Multiple regression analysis revealed support is the most significant predictor of positive emotions at phase 1 whilst positive peer influence, family boundaries and caring neighborhood are the significant predictors at phase 2. Results suggested that the presence of other external assets can enhance the positive development of at-risk youth, however, the support must be present to some extent in the first place.

Keywords At-risk Youth; Developmental Assets; External assets; Malaysia; Positive Emotions

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Introduction

The healthy development of youth is tied to the community in which they live. Several developmental assets were identified from a wide range of sources in the community (e.g. families, neighbours, peers, schools, and religious community) for acquiring strength of character and skills. Developmental assets postulate that every young person has the potential for success and healthy development and that all youth possess the capacity for youth development (Lerner, Alberts, Jelicic & Smith, 2006); however, a good fit is required between the youth and their developmental assets (Urban, Lewin-Bizan &
Lerner, 2009). Developmental assets consist of external assets and internal assets. It has been suggested that external assets have to be developed in relation to the capacity for change in human development (Lerner et al., 2005) and for a better future (Adams, Nam, Shanks, Hicks & Robinson, 2010) whilst internal assets focus on psychological qualities that lead to positive choices and foster a sense of confidence, passion, and purpose. Despite this importance, in Malaysia, there have only been a few studies done to assess the quality of developmental assets to promote the development and behavior of at-risk youth. Therefore, our main concern is those youths who are exposed to an unhealthy lifestyle or a disadvantaged neighbourhood environment.

The risk was seen as being primarily located within the individual or family, rather than the society or culture (Schonert-Reichl, 2000). At-risk youth can be identified in terms of disadvantaged environment, educational failure, dropping out of school, and delinquent behavior. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (Organization for Economic Co-operation & Development, 1995) suggested that most unsuccessful individuals in academic achievement and in making the transition to work and adult life are significantly unable to make a full contribution to their own society. In this study, we defined at-risk youth as young people who have been exposed to an unhealthy lifestyle and a disadvantaged neighbourhood environment.

In 2010, the population of Malaysian youth aged 15–25 years old was estimated to be around 5.2 million (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2010). Based on the World Youth Report (2005) in respect of the estimation of world at-risk youth, it is expected that 25% of the 5.2 million Malaysian youth would be classified as at-risk youth. More importantly, the Malaysian Youth Report (2007), for instance, revealed that the most prevalent for at-risk behavior among adolescent girls is substance abuse and sex-related behavior (Hamzah, 2007), thus, reflecting the need for effective prevention programs. Previously, a report on youth problems in 1997 showed that around 20–50% of adolescents were involved in antisocial behavior (Salleh, 1997), such as running away, teen pregnancy (Lee, Chen, Lee & Kaur, 2006; Omar et al., 2010), substance abuse and alcohol (Hammond et al., 2008; Lim et al., 2006, 2010; Mohamed, Marican, Elias & Don, 2008; Navaratnam & Foong, 1989), committing crimes (Mey, 2010; Wong, 2011), prostitution (Zakaria, 1987), and educational failure (Ong, Chandran, Lim, Chen & Poh, 2010). Most importantly, around 23% of youth reported that they received less support from parents and that no communication with them also contributed to at-risk behavior (op. cit.). Malaysia also reported that around 400,000 adolescents aged 18 years and below were regular users of tobacco, 80% of primary school students have been bullied, 9.4% were prostitutes, 40% of 40,409 youth aged 13–25 years were confirmed to be infected with HIV, and 13% of adolescents aged 5–15 years experienced mental health problems (Positive Youth Development, 2005). Peer pressure was also reported as a strong predictor of problems among adolescents (Baharudin, Juhari, Abu Samah, Md Noor & Abu Talib, 2005). Using an in-depth interview, other studies reported that around 60% (n = 6) of Malaysian girls had experienced drugs. In terms of their first sexual experiences without using protection, which can lead to health risks such as unwanted
pregnancies, STD infections, or HIV/AIDS, the mean age was 17.2 years (Fadzil & Ng, 2005). These girls can be considered as under age according to the Malaysian Child Protection Act 2001. Most studies that were carried out at schools, juvenile centres, or rehabilitation centres emphasized risk factors in relation to mental health problems (Mahammod, Yusooff, Abdul Kadir & Ahmad, 2005); however, studies on at-risk youth in the community to foster their positive development were scant. Therefore, identifying these problems at the ground level using the developmental approach is particularly relevant for community psychologists and community social workers who emphasize prevention and early intervention models. In addition, developmental assets help community social workers to develop systematic primary intervention services to effectively meet the basic needs of at-risk youth. This means that a specific evidence-based intervention method that works best with at-risk youth can be identified.

Developmental asset-based research in Malaysia is considerably new and few researchers are giving their attention to positive youth development. The emergent research of positive youth development in Malaysia is directed at the need to create, amend or improve youth policy and prevention programs. Youth development studies in Malaysia are significantly based on the government’s priority interests, in which the requirement is for research to be commercial and its relation to economic development emphasized. More effort and ideas are required to create preventive programs that help at-risk youth with positive development. At-risk youth should be studied as the product of a bidirectional relationship in the contexts of persons-in-environments (Mueller et al., 2011) not as “problems to be managed” (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). A more complex risk factor can be assessed in real-world situations using this developmental approach.

Developmental assets look at the positive experiences and relationships with others as the most essential components in building the well-being of at-risk youth. This can be done only by providing after-school programs, participation in the community, or community contribution to help their youth develop and strengthen their talent and potential. At-risk youth is a group of adolescents in the community who have been exposed to the same risk factors including environmental and social factors. Some at-risk youth have developed coping skills which help them to become successful individuals and overcome their adversities, whereas some may be unsuccessful. Therefore, helping at-risk youth by providing prevention programs at the community level is significantly important to reduce antisocial behavior and develop healthy, caring, and responsible youth. There is also evidence that prevention programs using developmental assets are substantially effective for homeless and at-risk youth (Heinze, Jozefowicz & Toro, 2010) and reduce the number of at-risk youth (Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995; Urban et al., 2009).

External assets focus on positive experiences that at-risk youth receive from people in the community and institutions. Four broad factors of external assets include support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time (Benson, 2003). In a healthy neighbourhood environment, external assets are made available to at-risk youth frequently and consistently. Parents, community leaders, community members, volunteers, non-governmental organizations, and government agencies as well as community workers all play formal roles in providing positive experiences and opportunities
External assets are also made available through informal discussion, social activities, and daily interactions with caring. In this present study, the National University of Malaysia as a provider has been committed to ensure at-risk youth are provided with formal and informal external assets. These positive experiences, which cultivate positive emotions, in turn, would increase protective factors or resilience in at-risk youth. Therefore, based on this theoretical framework, we suggest that developing external assets are crucial for at-risk youth to counter negative behavior.

This study was conducted to enhance our understanding of the external assets by examining the associations of external assets with positive emotions and determining the predictors of external assets in phase 1 on positive emotions. Finally, we would like to see if these external assets were consistently stable in phase 2. We tested participants who were willing to participate in our community programs. Most of our participants had close friendships with their peers. This is significantly important in relation to expanding their social networks among their peers in the community, and, thus, it can be described as a process of self-expansion (Aron & Aron, 1986). According to the broaden-and-build theory, positive emotions can be built based on a significant social resource as an opportunity for at-risk youth to gain useful social resources to increase their social well-being. Therefore, we predicted that positive emotions might be particularly associated with external assets by participating in our social activities in the community.

**Method**

**Participants**

One-third (403 of 1149) of at-risk youth from low-income apartments in the suburbs of Kuala Lumpur were chosen to participate in this study. Participants below 13 years old and above 25 years old were excluded from this study. The mean age was 16.2 (SD = 2.60). Phase 1 was conducted in February 2010. In phase 2, the same groups of participants were approached in June 2010. The mean age was 17.9 (SD = 3.23). The study suggested several reasons for attrition: (i) some of the participants and their parents had moved out of this area; (ii) some of the participants aged 21–24 years had left for a good job, which prevented them from participating in our study; (iii) participants below 13 years old and above 25 years old were removed from this study; (iv) lack of interest in the study; and (v) shyness at participating in social activities organized by the PERMATA community. Based on the reasons above, only 171 participants participated in phase 2.

In phase 1, the sample consisted of Malays (93%), Indians (6%), and Chinese (1%). More than half were male (60%) and 40% were female. In terms of education, almost all participants were at school (96%) with 1% reporting dropping out. Using a cut-off 3/4 (dichotomous variables coded as 3=0; 4=1), 46.7% of the participants had more than four siblings. In phase 2, the sample comprised Malays (93%) and Indians (7%). No Chinese participated at this stage. In terms of gender, 51% were male and 49% were female.

**Measures and procedures**

This cross-sectional survey study comprises two phases. In phase 1 (sampling selection), a total of 11 public housing developments under the City Hall of Kuala Lumpur were
identified as our samples. Invitation letters were sent out to the heads of the communities, only three responded—2 to 3 weeks later. The Principle Investigator (PI) and research team organised several meetings with the residents’ committees before conducting the actual study. These meetings were important in order to explain the study, the benefits of the study, and its implications for adolescents and their community. Community collaboration on this research project was also sought. The door-to-door technique was applied to introduce the study, explain the objectives and implications of the study, answer queries, and dispel any apprehensions of the target respondents. After obtaining verbal consent, the research assistants administered the questionnaires to each person aged 13–25 years.

All the participants who agreed to participate in this present study were asked to fill out the 25 Developmental Assets Questionnaire—Malaysian version. The participants took 45–60 min to complete the questionnaire. The 25 Developmental Assets is a 93-item assessing 13 internal assets and 12 external assets. An additional 20 items were formed to measure demographics. All items were adopted from the Search Institute’s Framework of Development Assets (Scales & Leffert, 2004; Scales, Sesma & Bolstrom, 2004).

The 12 external assets measure family support (five items), other adults’ support (five items), family communication (five items), caring neighbourhood (five items), caring school (six items), caring workplace (six items), caring neighbourhood climate (five items), family boundaries (five items), hope and expectation (five items), positive peer influence (six items), religious community (four items), and safety (three items). All items were scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). In our study, the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was 0.87 for all dimensions of external assets apart from safety (0.88). Only 10 external assets were analysed. Caring workplace and safety were excluded in this analysis. Examples of external assets included “Family support: My parents always give me an opinion to help me solve the problem”, “Other adults’ support: My neighbours have never been good to me”, “Family boundaries: My parents punish me if I make a mistake”, “Positive peer influence: If I deal with my problem in a negative way, my friend will stop me”, and “Caring neighbourhood climate: I feel bad at school/in my community”.

The internal assets measure 12 dimensions: achievement motivation, school engagement, caring, integrity, planning and decision making, interpersonal competence, resistance skills, self-esteem, sense of purpose, curiosity, morality, and positive emotions. In this study, we decided to examine the relationships between external assets and positive emotions. The positive emotions were treated as an outcome whilst other external assets were treated as independent variables or predictors. Positive emotions can be defined in terms of affect positive and affect negative, depressed mood, and life satisfaction; this current research described positive emotions as sadness, thinking of running away from home, sleeping disturbance, interest or pleasure activities, and social functioning. Items on sadness, thinking of running away from home, and sleeping disturbance were reversed items. Although it can be seen that the items are designed in such a way, feeling sad or loss of interest or pleasure are the fundamental negative emotions.
Therefore, we reversed the code so that these items reflected positive emotions. Examples of internal assets include “Achievement motivation: I feel confident that I can compete with others at school”, “School engagement: I feel safe at school”, “Caring: I will help disabled people”, “Integrity: I speak the truth even if punished”, “Planning: I realize that my future depends on me”, “Interpersonal competence: I like helping friends who are in difficulties”, “Resistance: I don’t have a problem if others dislike me”, “Self-esteem: I feel that I’m not an excellent person”, “Sense of purpose: I feel uncomfortable in making friends with others”, and “Curiosity: I like to explore new things.” This article focuses only on the external assets in relation to positive emotions because external assets among adolescents are seen as a significant context for their capacity for change in human development that adds its influence to family, community, and social network. Thus, we believe that external assets play a vital role in shaping the engagement of at-risk youth in their community.

Findings

Descriptive statistics are reported in Tables 1 and 2. To test all the possible differences between males and females, a gender group comparison was made in phase 1. The t-test showed that there were no significant differences in any external assets measured between the groups. In all cases, the reliability coefficients were acceptable. Tables 1 and 2 display Pearson correlation analyses examining the associations between study variables; all variables were significantly correlated from low to modest, indicating that these variables were free from bias and were independent.

In order to avoid potential problems with overlapping between variables, multicollinearity tests were carried out. Since all the tolerance indices were $>1-\mathbf{r}^2$, none of the study variables were removed. Then, further analysis was conducted to examine the predictor model of positive emotions at first contact (phase 1). Using the stepwise method, a significant model emerged (Table 3). The model produced two predictors, which contributed 30% of the variance (adjusted $r^2 = 0.30, F_{(2,402)} = 93.14, P < 0.001$) to positive emotions. It was found that family support ($\beta = 0.15, P < 0.05$) and other adults’ support ($\beta = 0.12, P < 0.05$) significantly predicted positive emotions. This indicated that family support and other adults’ support were correlated with positive emotions to a certain degree. To be specific, at-risk youth who score highly in family support and other adults’ support were found to have high positive emotions. Family support was found to be a stronger predictor than other adults’ support. The significant variables are shown in Table 3. None of the other predictors, however, were significantly associated with positive emotions.

A similar approach was applied for phase 2 to examine the stability of predictors that emerged in phase 1 and to see whether more external assets emerged. Again, the multicollinearity tests suggested that all the tolerance indices were $>1-\mathbf{r}^2$; therefore, none of the study variables were removed. In phase 2, the model produced three predictors which contributed 50% of the variance (adjusted $r^2 = 0.50, F_{(3,170)} = 56.85, P < 0.001$) to positive emotions. It was found that positive peer influence ($\beta = 0.34, P < 0.01$), family
Table 1 Intercorrelations between external assets—phase 1 (before participating in social activities)

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<tr>
<td>2. Other adults’ support</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Family communication</td>
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<td>0.56**</td>
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<td>0.52**</td>
<td>0.31**</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Caring school/workplace</td>
<td>0.41**</td>
<td>0.43**</td>
<td>0.21**</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Caring neighbourhood climate</td>
<td>0.54**</td>
<td>0.54**</td>
<td>0.30**</td>
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<td>7. Family boundaries</td>
<td>0.75**</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Hope and expectation</td>
<td>0.64**</td>
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<td>0.43**</td>
<td>0.30**</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Positive peer influence</td>
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<td>0.47**</td>
<td>0.44**</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Religious community</td>
<td>0.58**</td>
<td>0.51**</td>
<td>0.48**</td>
<td>0.29**</td>
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<td>Mean</td>
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<td>14.78</td>
<td>17.95</td>
<td>9.85</td>
<td>9.71</td>
<td>19.56</td>
<td>14.93</td>
<td>17.00</td>
<td>21.63</td>
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<td>2.34</td>
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<td>4.17</td>
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**correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
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<td>4. Caring neighbourhood</td>
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<td>8. Hope and expectation</td>
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<td>0.62**</td>
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<td>9. Positive peer influence</td>
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<td>2.70</td>
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**correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
boundaries \( (\beta = 0.30, \ P < 0.01) \) and caring neighbourhood climate \( (\beta = 0.18, \ P < 0.01) \) emerged as significantly predicting positive emotions in phase 2. This indicated that positive peer influence, family boundaries, and caring neighbourhood were significantly correlated with positive emotions to a certain degree. To be specific, at-risk youth who scored highly in positive peer influence, family boundaries, and caring neighbourhood were found to have high positive emotions. Positive peer influence was found to be a stronger predictor, followed by family boundaries and caring neighbourhood. The significant variables are shown in Table 4. Surprisingly predictors in phase 1 were not significant in this analysis and no other predictors were significantly associated with positive emotions.

Discussion

This study aimed to: (i) examine the associations between external assets and positive emotions; (ii) determine the predictors of positive emotions among external assets in phase 1; and (iii) see if external assets were consistently stable 4 months later. With respect to research objective 1, intercorrelation analysis revealed that all variables were significantly associated with each other from modest to high, suggesting that all variables were independent and free from bias. When this correlation was examined, all variables were consistently correlated with each other. The means of all variables increased. With respect to research objective 2, multiple regression suggested that two indicators (family support and other adults’ support) significantly predicted positive emotions. When external assets were investigated 4 months later, three predictors (positive peer influence, family boundaries, and caring neighbourhood climate) of positive emotions emerged.
However, family support and other adults’ support were not significantly associated with positive emotions at this stage.

Family support was found to be a stronger predictor of positive emotions than other adults’ support. As predicted, the significant contribution of support was highest in the family. This indicates that the parents’ role in supporting their teenage children socially and financially as well as giving advice during crises increases positive emotions. Parents have a major responsibility for their children’s care. At-risk youth, for instance, require at least one adult to assist them with love, care, and attention so that this at-risk youth can develop their external assets. This kind of relationship is the foundation of emotional bond formation between at-risk youth and their caregivers, which suggests that there is a supportive and harmonious relationship. For at-risk youth, strong support from parents indicates a positive experience in the relationship whilst the presence of other trustworthy adults can contribute to their resilience (Vondra et al., 1999a,b). This supportive relationship protects at-risk youth from antisocial behavior and prevents them from affiliating with deviant peers, as has been suggested in the literature (Edwards, Mumford & Serra-Roldan, 2007). The developmental assets model confirmed that support is the most significant external asset that helps at-risk youth develop as healthy, caring, and responsible people. We also conclude that support underlies all of the other assets. The presence of other external assets can enhance the positive development of at-risk youth; however, the support must be present to some extent in the first place.

In contrast to our study, previous studies have shown that adolescents aged 16–18 years reported that peer support exceeded parental support whilst older age groups received compatible support from both peers and parents (Bokhorst, Sumter & Westenberg, 2010). However, this is particularly true for those young children aged 9–15 years who spend more time outside the home, away from home, or alone (Larson & Richards, 1991), and have greater exposure to negative behavior influences in a disadvantaged environment. In relation to other adults’ support, this finding suggests that at-risk youth are searching for a sense of autonomy and independence from those who can be considered trustworthy. Experiencing supportive relationships will also serve as a protective factor, particularly when at-risk youth do not have a good relationship with their parents. This can be considered as another way of forming emotional bonds.

A unique contribution of this study was the finding that three external assets emerged 4 months later whilst the previous one was dropped out. Positive peer influence, family boundaries, and caring neighbourhood climate appear to be significant predictors of positive emotions. There are a variety of possible explanations for this finding. First, positive peer influence has a greater impact on moral development and social adaptation, and, therefore, the outcome may also depend on whom one befriends (Knecht, Snijders, Baerveldt, Steglich & Raub, 2010). Peers may be a protective factor when they show positive attitudes. A good friend or peer will perhaps bring happiness, and, therefore, positive emotions are produced. Although no comparison between gender was made based on previous studies (see Sumter, Bokhorst, Steinberg & Westenberg, 2009), we suggest that over time adolescents may gain more autonomy than their peers and be able to stand on their own, which would also bring about positive emotions. This can be understood in
terms of psychosocial maturity whereby adolescents become more sensitive to the needs of others, have increased self-awareness, are more responsible, and do not follow their peers without thinking. At this point, we believe that the adolescents in this study have also developed their own character strengths.

Second, the association between family boundaries and positive emotions is interesting, and can be important for parenting purposes. The family rules and persistent monitoring of their teenage children’s whereabouts may be of importance for family boundaries. Parental warmth and monitoring, as well as family rules, are seen as one way of preventing antisocial behavior. We suggest that family boundaries help at-risk youth change in a more positive direction. In respect of our findings involving parenting, the results indicate that the family boundaries score is a good predictor of positive emotions. This study is in line with other findings that family is a significant factor of happiness (Gray, Chamratrithirong, Pattaravanich & Prasartkul, in press). However, it is unclear whether there is any gender difference in family boundaries, particularly monitoring of at-risk youth, in this present data. Monitoring, perhaps, is equally important to both father and mother but warmth is more effective in mothering than fathering (Lewin-Bizan, Bowers & Lerner, 2010). Similarly, family rules are probably more effective in fathering than mothering.

Third, in respect of the links between caring neighbourhood climate and positive emotions, we found that caring neighbourhood climate emerged as a significant predictor of positive emotions. This finding is consistent with previous research that indicates that caring neighbours and an encouraging environment increases healthy, caring, and positive behavior (Scales, Benson, Leffert & Blyth, 2000a,b), which, in turn, produces positive emotions. A caring neighbourhood climate seems to have a positive influence on the feeling of belonging to the community, which has been defined by some as social well-being (Keyes, 1998). This would encourage at-risk youth to actively engage in community activities.

This study has several limitations. Our findings are restricted to at-risk youth in the community context. Therefore, our results may not be generalized to include other adolescents of other populations. This study did not examine the interaction between external assets and internal assets to test mediation or moderation of the variables.

Conclusion

This study supports the suggestion that, for external assets, at least one asset should be developed among at-risk youth. However, our findings discovered that at least two external assets are required to produce positive emotions. Support is the most significant external asset. Support is a basic emotional need for at-risk youth to develop their talent and potential. By providing support, both from the family or other adults, this increases their positive emotions. Positive peer influence, family boundaries, and caring neighbourhood climate, which emerged as predictors of positive emotions 4 months later, also played a vital role in producing healthy, caring, and responsible youth. Therefore, improving external assets can be useful in promoting positive emotions at the community
and individual levels. The results of this study can be used by other researchers who are interested in studying external assets on general samples. Our understanding of protective factors in terms of developmental assets will be enhanced by exploring at-risk youth talent and potential using various prevention methods. The 25 Developmental Assets as an assessment tool to tap the talent and potential of at-risk youth can be used to design and refine more effective social activities in the community.

Certain external assets emerged in this study as especially important: positive peer influence, family boundaries, and caring neighbourhood climate. At-risk youth with these particular external assets were more likely to thrive and to become youth leaders in their communities, value diversity, and help others (Scales et al., 2000a,b). It is suggested that using this theoretical framework and the Malaysian version of developmental assets allows social workers to evaluate the developmental assets of at-risk youth in the community. An important implication of the findings for social work and community practice is that social workers, supervisors, caregivers, and community members should give more attention to these three important external assets of at-risk youth. We also recommend that policymakers and analysts should consider the roles of developmental assets in relation to enhancing the well-being of at-risk youth because we should think collectively that youth with these assets can developed well and have a better future. In relation to public policy, we suggest that the Malaysian government should capitalize on the spirit of volunteerism in helping our at-risk youth to explore and develop their talent and potential. Borrowing the popular words of the former President of the United States of America, John F. Kennedy, “we ask not what the country could do for us but what we could do for our country”. This can be done through the engagement of at-risk adults by providing afterschool programs or extra activities in the community, such as parents willing to volunteer in homework club activities or mentoring programs.

References


