

APPENDIX A
RESEARCH SUMMARY

The HEROES® Program by IMPACT SOCIETY



AWAKENING THE HERO WITHIN.

*“Modeling isn’t one way of
influencing people; it’s the only way”*
– Albert Einstein

INTRODUCTION

There is nothing new about the observation that challenges, and potential risks will always be present in the lives of youth and the communities they live in. What is new has been a growing interest in positive psychology that embraces a strengths-based approach to enhancing the positive developmental pathways of youth (Alford & White, 2015). In brief, positive psychology reflects a paradigm shift from an emphasis on mitigating problems, vulnerabilities and deficits to one with a focus on “what is right” as the starting point for fostering personal/academic success, resilience, character strengths, life skills and enhanced well-being (Cherkowski & Walker, 2018; Slemp, Chin, Krern, Siokou, Loton, Oades, Vella-Drodrick & Waters, 2017).

In light of the increased interest in positive psychology and the adoption of its principles, there has been a growing need to develop youth-focused programming that is holistic and strengths-focused. In response to this need, IMPACT SOCIETY presents the “HEROES” program as a viable competency and character-building program based upon an understanding of the major components that contribute to the positive development and well-being of youth in our schools and surrounding communities.

THE INTENT OF THE HEROES PROGRAM

All youth start their journey of learning and personal development with a sense of curiosity and passion to explore the unknown. But as the journey unfolds, youth often experience challenges and life-changing influences that start to shape their perception of who they are and the world around them. To evolve a positive mindset and capacity to thrive, IMPACT SOCIETY embraces the belief that youth need supportive relationships that believe in their potential and provide the opportunity to meaningfully explore and develop their capacity to thrive as well as experience positive well-being. In order to build the foundation for success in the HEROES program, youth are supported to:

- Form positive attachments to people—peers and adults.
- Feel personally empowered and optimistic about what their future might be.
- Understand that they are an important part of something greater than themselves.
- Know that they are of value and will be treated fairly.
- Feel safe, respected and valued while participating in the program.
- Clearly understand innate value and what is expected of them.
- Know they will be supported and resourced for success.
- Learn how to own their journey of change and care for themselves.

THE GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF THE HEROES PROGRAM

The HEROES program draws upon the belief that everyone is created with gifts & abilities (internal strengths) that are unique to them. As youth participating in the HEROES program start to understand their value, choose to root themselves in core values and experience the support of caring, mentoring individuals—confidence grows, and decision-making skills increase. The results are the actions of a hero—a person who believes in themselves, chooses the right path and lives with purpose.

This paradigm shift to a focus on strengths does not attempt to ignore the problems and challenges of social-emotional development and the unique learning processes that youth might experience. Rather, the HEROES program focuses on exploring and actualizing the personal strengths of youth while at the same time, identifying potential limitations that may need to be explored and supported as part of enhancing the probability for success. The strengths-based approach of the HEROES program supports youth to embrace a vision how things might be by aligning their current strengths with their passions and innate desire to be successful. This emphasis on strengths is founded on the following beliefs (Rapp & Goscha, 2006; McCashen, 2005):

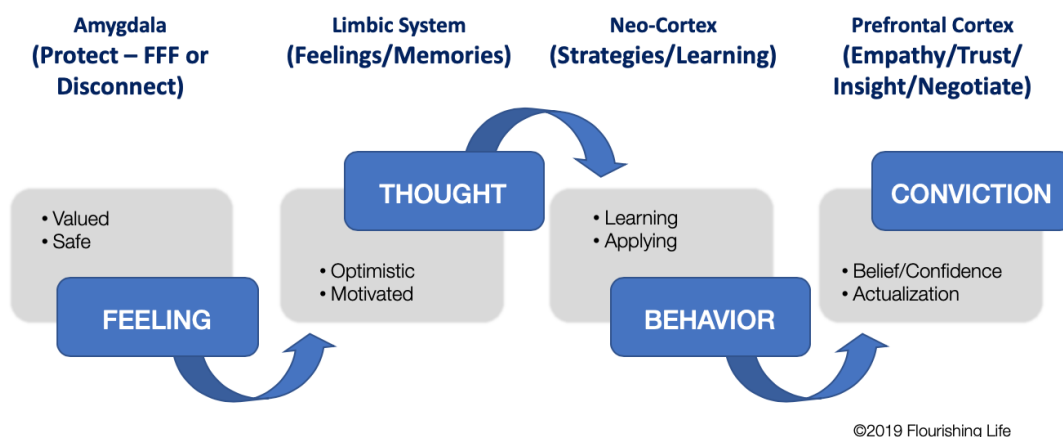
- All youth have unique strengths and the ability to thrive.
- It is the strengths of a youth that will determine their success and define who they are— not their limitations or the mistakes they might make.
- All youth want to be successful, are curious about the world they live in, want to contribute in positive ways and need to be an active participant in something bigger than themselves.
- A youth's capacity to thrive and experience well-being can be realized when supported with the right relationships, conditions and resources.
- Focusing primarily on "what's wrong" limits a youth's ability to identify their innate strengths and explore their potential in meaningful ways.
- Thriving and experiencing well-being is a dynamic and progressive process that evolves over time and is unique to each youth.
- Positive change occurs when youth feel valued and safe in the context of unconditional and authentic relationships.
- How a youth perceives themselves and the world around them is the critical starting point for transformative change.
- All youth are just trying to do the best they can based upon what they have learned and experienced to-date.

THE BRAIN-SCIENCE OF POSITIVE CHANGE IN THE HEROES PROGRAM

The HEROES program reflects the belief that youth do not change their perspectives or behaviour just because they have been told to act a certain way or educated to know something. Rather, research clearly indicates that transformative and positive capacity-building in youth occurs when the four dimensions of strengths-based learning are experienced (Immordino-Yang, 2016).

Figure 1

The Brain Science of Change/Learning



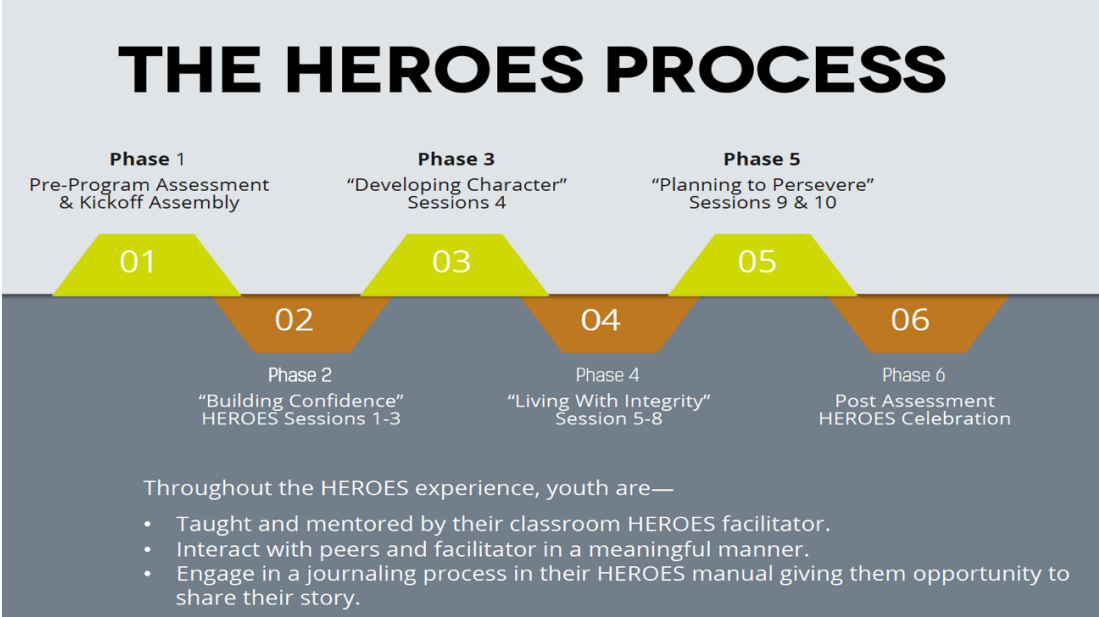
The Four Essential Dimensions of Learning are (Figure 1):

- 1) **Biological** (Feeling) - Youth need to feel safe and valued before they will take the risk of learning something or engaging in positive change. All learning and social development is connected to a relationship that demonstrates authentic empathy, integrity, and affirmation of one's worth. "Youth may forget what we say, but they never forget how you make them feel." – Unknown.
- 2) **Psychological** (Thought) - Youth need to be inspired to believe that they have the potential for success and can learn new skills and competencies. This inspired belief often comes from the student's perception of the instructor's demonstrated competence, experience and personal optimism of what can be.
- 3) **Behavioural** (Experience) - Youth need to be offered ongoing learning and stretching opportunities that create a self-awareness of innate strengths and evolving sense of learned competence and optimism. The goal is to nurture a youth's understanding of what it means to be successful by learning new skills and applying them in purposeful ways with the right effort.
- 4) **Convictional** (Empowered) – Change in a youth's mindset based upon self-generating success and re-orientation of one's perspective and values.

The HEROES program embraces a transformation change by design approach where youth are purposefully affirmed and encouraged to be continuous, proactive and autonomous learners who take smart risks in ways that creates ongoing success. When a youth feels safe, valued, optimistic and confident in their own unique capacity to learn, they are empowered with a conviction that true learning involves trying new ideas and strategies to experience “what might be”. It’s a process of learning and coping that builds upon what is already successful, adding what is needed to increase the probability of success and learning to apply growth-oriented strategies to new challenges and opportunities as a way of enhancing one’s competency.

These critical phases of learning reflecting the brain-science of positive change have been incorporated into each of the 10 sessions (Figure 2) that make up the HEROES Program. The goal is for each participating youth to sequentially experience the four dimensions of learning through the content and relational-based delivery in ways that will enhance the emotional connection, experiential learning required for positive and sustainable change and the inevitable capacity to thrive. It is a process that transforms youth from the inside out (facilitating confidence building, supported by positive relational influences, prepared with essential skills/competence and empowered aptitude based in exploring strengths and experiential learning opportunities leading to the capacity of flourishing and well-being) as opposed to the traditional learning approach of an outside in model (managing change and learning based solely through delivery of prescribed behavioral interventions and content).

Figure 2



THE IMPACT OF THE HEROES PROGRAM

Although the HEROES program is strongly supported by anecdotal evidence, it has also been validated in several research studies that strongly supported its effectiveness in enhancing the critical protective resiliency factors required for positive youth development. Through the use of the statistically validated Youth Resiliency: Assessing Developmental Strengths Questionnaire – YR:ADS (Donnon & Hammond, 2007), the pre and post comparative results evidenced a significant increase in the following protective factors (The HEROES Program: Initial Evaluation and Preliminary Findings (2008). Study performed by Resilience Initiatives, Calgary, Alberta):

INTERNAL STRENGTHS	EXTERNAL STRENGTHS
Self-Esteem and Optimism	Positive Connection/Communication to Family
Social/Emotional Intelligence	Positive Connection/Participation in Community
Self-Management/Regulation	Positive Connection/Influencing with Peers
Sense of Purpose and Meaning	Positive Connection/Communication with School
Personal Integrity/Values	Achievement Motivation
Social Justice/Advocacy	Competence to Create Success
Problem Solving	Confidence to Complete Assigned Tasks
Interpersonal/Collaborative Skills	
Receptiveness to Cultural Diversity	

The study also revealed that the HEROES program was very effective in engaging the more complex youth that schools and community programs struggle with. It also demonstrated that youth who struggle with stepping outside their comfort zone developed greater confidence in seeing challenges as opportunities to learn and reflected qualities of a growth mindset orientation.

In a continued effort to reflect best practice, the HEROES program has adopted a pre/post survey (as well as a three-month follow up) that are designed to measure the ten-essential life/skills competencies and character traits research indicates as critical for academic and life success (Cherkowski & Walker, 2018).

Essential Competencies and Character Traits
Personal Power/Confidence
Personal Awareness/Management
Emotional/Social Intelligence
Leadership/Courage
Knowledgeable/Good Judgment
Resilience/Growth Mindset
Motivated/Self-Directed Learner
Moral Directedness/Integrity
Interpersonal/Collaborative Skills
Effective Problem Solver/Accountable

THE FUTURE ASPIRATIONS FOR THE HEROES PROGRAM

The current HEROES program embraces a paradigm shift towards an integration of strengths-based practice and a positive psychology perspective in its content and programming delivery. Initial assessment results support the desired intent of preparing youth to thrive and effectively cope with the future developmental challenges they will inevitably experience. It also addresses the challenge of identifying and effectively engaging those vulnerable youth who, if not helped, often present as at-risk and destructive in their coping behaviours as they grow older. It provides the opportunity for all youth to explore, understand and grow their innate potential and character strengths to navigate and negotiate future challenges in positive ways. As future studies are performed, the HEROES program will continue to evolve as a best practice for enhancing positive youth development and reflect the desired goal of preparing youth to flourish in partnership with educational systems and community-based intervention/prevention programs. In many ways, the vision and mandate of the HEROES program is to transform community through a new generation of youth leaders that are value-driven and prepared to thrive in an unpredictable and potentially chaotic world.

Some desired next steps include the following:

1. The HEROES program to become a recommended educational curriculum resource for Canadian middle schools, targeting 11-14-year-old students.
2. IMPACT SOCIETY to be seen as an organization that is:
 - A leader in program development and research that uniquely contributes to youth mental and emotional health practice that other organizations will look to as best practice.
 - Focused on providing practical insights to educators that strengthens their capacity to support students for academic excellence and life success as well as the ability to navigate challenging issues (bullying, self-harm, addiction, social media issues, etc.).
 - recognized as an effective engagement and intervention/prevention model that continually provides key understanding of youth challenges, potential and opportunities.

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