



## The Translating Adolescent Brain Science Project: Applying Executive Skills, Positive Youth Development, and Trauma-Informed Care to Workforce-Development

By: Rashaun Bennett, Kim Coulthurst, Sarah Griffen, and  
Thomas Showalter

April 2021

# Table of Contents

- Acknowledgements** ..... 2
- Executive Summary** ..... 3
  - What Did TABS Organizations Do? ..... 3
  - What TABS Organizations Did, and What They Learned ..... 4
  - Recommendations for Creating the Conditions for Change & Translating Adolescent Brain Science ..... 4
- Introduction** ..... 6
  - EPT Approaches ..... 6
  - Putting Adolescent Brain Science to Work ..... 6
  - Overview of the Translating Adolescent Brain Science Project ..... 7
  - Figure 1: Overview of TABS Work, By Organization ..... 9
  - What TABS Organizations Did, and What They Learned ..... 10
- The Role of Intermediaries** ..... 17
- Recommendations for Creating the Conditions for Change** ..... 17

## Acknowledgements

This project came about as a result of conversations with Allison Gerber of the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Sarah Griffen of Griffen Consulting LLC. Throughout the project, Kim Coulthurst of Pathways Consultants and Sarah Griffen provided critical support. We are grateful to the coaching expertise of Patricia Murillo, James Walker of Diogenes Community Solutions, and Dana Emanuel of New Moms. Jennifer Brown Lerner provided additional thought partnership. Photos are courtesy of Keys to Work and Phoenix Indian Center and used with permission.

The Translating Adolescent Brain Science Project was funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. We thank them for their support, but acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the author(s) alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation.



## Executive Summary

The Translating Adolescent Brain Science (TABS) Project, carried out from March 2020-March 2021, sought to understand how workforce development organizations might incorporate aspects of one or more approaches informed by the science of adolescent development. These approaches include executive skill development (ES), positive youth development (PYD), and trauma-informed care (TIC). Collectively we refer to these approaches as EPT (ES-PYD-TIC) approaches. An assumption of the TABS Project is that EPT approaches improve outcomes in youth workforce-development contexts and that the expertise exists to apply these approaches to practice. Thus, this report examines the contexts and resources needed to successfully apply EPT approaches.

The context in which the TABS Project played out – the COVID-19 pandemic, economic upheaval, and police violence – further underlined the importance of placing racial and economic justice at the center of work with young people.

## What Did TABS Organizations Do?

TABS organizations all operate workforce development services for opportunity youth, with a mix of funding from the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and non-WIOA funding.

### Trauma-Informed Care

CAFÉ, [Community Alliance of the Far East Side](#) in Indianapolis, provides an array of services, including job training, counseling, after school programs, heating assistance, affordable housing, and advocacy.

CAFÉ implemented new approaches to Trauma Informed Care with a focus on addressing trauma caused by systemic racism and its impact on racially disparate outcomes. Activities included engaging a culturally appropriate mental health counselor, a life skills class, and setting trauma in the context of structural racism through a community information series.

[Edna Martin Christian Center](#) in Indianapolis is a multi-service organization providing youth workforce development and entrepreneurship, childcare and after school, and other family services.

Edna Martin focused on providing training to young people and to staff in trauma-informed care.

### Positive Youth Development

[Valley of the Sun YMCA](#) in Phoenix offers a range of programming for young people including workforce development, leadership programs, health and fitness, and other activities for the whole family.

The YMCA focused on expanding their leadership program by creating a paid Youth Leadership Internship to provide more input and voice for youth in the organization that also provided skills transferable to work outside the agency.

[Phoenix Indian Center](#) provides workforce development, youth services, cultural enrichment, and other services for American Indians.

PIC provided leadership opportunities for youth through work on the 2020 census and voter registration activities.

## Executive Skills

[Keys to Work](#) in Indianapolis helps homeless and justice-involved young people and adults through employment assistance, workforce certifications, workplace mentoring, and job placement services.

Keys to Work implemented use of the Executive Skills Assessment first with staff, and then with young people, to support them in understanding their strengths and struggles and how to apply them to their work goals. They also worked with youth to provide information on adolescent brain development to support and empower youth.

[Chicanos Por La Causa](#) in Phoenix provides health, housing, education, and workforce services as well as political representation for Mexican Americans.

Chicanos Por La Causa implemented the Executive Skills assessment among staff and used the pilot period to understand how to use the assessment as a team in preparation for later use directly with young people.

## What TABS Organizations Did, and What They Learned

Regardless of the approach they chose, **recognizing and addressing trauma and mental health challenges**, through individual staff training and organizational changes, was paramount for several organizations. To be effective, training and support for staff and young people alike were essential.

EPT approaches offered staff an array of ways to offer **more holistic and individualized services to young people**. The TABS Project also highlighted the **overlap among EPT approaches**, with most organizations applying lessons from more than one approach.

## Recommendations for Creating the Conditions for Change & Translating Adolescent Brain Science

For funders, intermediaries, or service providers considering implementing EPT approaches, we recommend addressing several needs upfront:

- **Allow time for staff to get to know the EPT approaches.** Setting the context – why these frames are important, how they can improve staff morale and youth outcomes, and giving a sense of what changes may be necessary – is critical.
- **Ground all individual and organizational work in racial equity approaches.** Helping young people recognize the role that structural racism plays in their lives, and helping staff bring this awareness to all aspects of their work, will improve implementation and outcomes.
- **Ensure organizational buy-in for change.** Managers and frontline staff must buy-in to applying these approaches, but ultimately leaders must seek ways to allow for longer windows for service provision.
- **Create space and provide expertise to change.** Workforce agency staff are overburdened with duties and may not be familiar with the coaching relationship.

The TABS Project highlighted the demand for work that brings together EPT approaches, to further coalesce language for the field, and ultimately to articulate a vision of adolescent brain science-infused practice that synthesizes these approaches.

**For system leaders and funders, next steps in translating adolescent brain science include:**

- Providing CBOs with the capacity needed to reorient their cultures around EPT approaches.
- Deepening documentation of best practices in the workforce development context, especially for trauma-informed care and executive skills.
- Beginning to identify metrics or ways of measuring the infusion and impact of these practices.
- Enabling system-wide adoption of EPT approaches, with attendant trainings, learning communities.
- Exploring each approach and how it might be incorporated at different ages for youth and young adults, and work to make the tools relevant to those ages.

The TABS Project offered organizations a new lens on youth development, as well as a set of tools to support youth towards employment and education. Applying the lessons of this project, youth and young adult workforce organizations have the opportunity to improve education and employment outcomes by aligning their practice with what we know of adolescent brain development. We invite other communities to join the journey.

\*\*\*\*

# Introduction

## EPT Approaches

### Executive Function Skills (ES)

Executive function skills are "the mental processes that enable us to plan, focus attention, remember instructions, and juggle multiple tasks successfully."

Executive function skills encompass skills related to brain function like inhibitory control, working memory, and cognitive flexibility and enable many skills that are crucial for youth and young adults, including emotional control, metacognition, time management, organization, planning, and prioritizing. For example, a young person can demonstrate developed executive function skills by planning and prioritizing homework assignments based on when they are due and ignoring texts from friends while completing their work. Executive function skills are sometimes referred to as "executive skills".

### Positive Youth Development (PYD)

"[Positive youth development](#) is an intentional, pro-social approach that engages youth within their communities, schools, organizations, peer groups, and families in a manner that is productive and constructive; recognizes, utilizes, and enhances youths' strengths; and promotes positive outcomes for young people by providing opportunities, fostering positive relationships, and furnishing the support needed to build on their leadership strengths."

### Trauma Informed Care (TIC)

Trauma-informed care is a service delivery approach "that is grounded in an understanding of and responsiveness to the impact of trauma, that emphasizes physical, psychological, and emotional safety for both providers and survivors, and that creates opportunities for survivors to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment. Trauma-informed care fully integrates knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices; and seeks to actively resist re-traumatization."

With training, a trauma-informed approach can be implemented in any type of service setting or organization; the approach is distinct from trauma-specific interventions or treatments that are designed specifically to address the consequences of trauma and facilitate healing.

*Definitions are from [Child Trends](#); see their [webpage](#) for other science-informed definitions and links among concepts.*

## Putting Adolescent Brain Science to Work

Over the past decade, the youth development field has increased its understanding of and focus on a range of practices that support youth and young adults more holistically. These practices include three approaches informed by the science of adolescent brain development: executive skills development (ES), positive youth development (PYD), and

trauma-informed care (TIC). Collectively we will refer to these approaches as EPT (ES-PYD-TIC) approaches.

The Translating Adolescent Brain Science (TABS) project sought to understand how workforce development organizations might incorporate aspects of one or more of these approaches in their work with opportunity youth (youth between ages of 16-24 who are out-of-school and out-of-work), and to understand how to support staff and help organizations improve their services. While many organizations recognize the importance of each of these approaches to successful workforce and life outcomes for young adults, many struggle to operationalize them.

Two of the three approaches incorporated in TABS – positive youth development and trauma-informed care – enjoy widespread awareness in the field. However, strained budgets, a focus on immediate crises facing youth, staff turnover and the compliance-oriented approach mandated by many public systems and funding sources have impeded their infusion into practice. Executive skills development is emerging both in understanding and practice.

[The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#) describes individual trauma as resulting from "an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being."

Taken together, these approaches to understanding adolescent development represent a nuanced view that sees human development in the context of social and political systems. Trauma can negatively affect a person's productivity, program retention, and overall well-being. Living a healthy and productive lifestyle and thriving in today's workplace necessitates addressing trauma and having attention to the mental health of the individual. The COVID-19 pandemic brought about conditions for better integration of these approaches as policymakers, system leaders, and practitioners increasingly recognize that well-being is the foundation for successful long-term educational and employment outcomes.

## Overview of the Translating Adolescent Brain Science Project

To explore how workforce-development organizations might apply one or more of these approaches in their work with young people, the [National Youth Employment Coalition \(NYEC\)](#), a membership association of youth-serving organizations, created the TABS Project. This small and time-limited pilot introduced service providers to EPT approaches and created space for organizations to try out practices that might support better engagement and outcomes for youth and young adults. An assumption of the TABS Project is that EPT approaches improve outcomes in youth workforce-development contexts and that the expertise exists to apply these approaches to practice. **Thus, this report examines the contexts and resources needed to successfully apply EPT approaches.**

NYEC engaged intermediary organizations first. As local conveners, they could amplify lessons learned, ensure service providers felt supported, and offer sustainability and continuity. NYEC selected [EmployIndy](#) in Indianapolis and [Opportunities for Youth](#) in Phoenix. Each intermediary in turn selected three service providers from their network to participate. Providers were selected because they were organizations that 1) focus on opportunity youth, 2) are at an early or emergent level of implementing approaches informed by the science of adolescent development, and 3) have organizational capacity to implement tangible changes to service delivery with limited support.

**The primary goals of the TABS Project were:**

- For each of the six youth-serving organizations embed at least one tool or process informed by the science of adolescent brain development; and
- To use this experience to inform the broader workforce development field about how to apply these approaches.

**During TABS, each service provider:**

- Participated in three webinars that introduced adolescent brain development, executive skills, trauma informed care, and positive youth development practices.
- Undertook a staff-level organizational assessment to identify where practices and outcomes might be strengthened by adolescent brain development-informed strategies and practices.
- Joined a virtual convening to share results of the organizational assessment, learn about change processes (such as rapid-cycle testing), and identify specific tools or processes to implement.
- Implemented one or more tools or processes over a period of several months.
- Received limited coaching customized to their organization and the EPT approach that they chose.
- Participated in peer calls to share progress, problem-solve, and gain support.
- Engaged in peer learning and presented lessons learned during NYEC's Annual Forum in December 2020.

## Figure 1: Overview of TABS Work, By Organization

### Trauma-Informed Care

CAFÉ, [Community Alliance of the Far East Side](#) in Indianapolis, provides an array of services, including job training, counseling, after school programs, heating assistance, affordable housing, and advocacy.

CAFÉ implemented new approaches to Trauma Informed Care with a focus on addressing trauma caused by systemic racism and its impact on racially disparate outcomes. Activities included engaging a culturally appropriate mental health counselor, a life skills class, and setting trauma in the context of structural racism through a community information series.

[Edna Martin Christian Center](#) in Indianapolis is a multi-service organization providing youth workforce development and entrepreneurship, childcare and after school, and other family services.

Edna Martin focused on providing training to young people and to staff in trauma-informed care.

### Positive Youth Development

[Valley of the Sun YMCA](#) in Phoenix offers a range of programming for young people including workforce development, leadership programs, health and fitness, and other activities for the whole family.

The YMCA focused on expanding their leadership program by creating a paid Youth Leadership Internship to provide more input and voice for youth in the organization that also provided skills transferable to work outside the agency.

[Phoenix Indian Center](#) provides workforce development, youth services, cultural enrichment, and other services for American Indians.

PIC provided leadership opportunities for youth through work on the 2020 census and voter registration activities.

### Executive Skills

[Keys to Work](#) in Indianapolis helps homeless and justice-involved young people and adults through employment assistance, workforce certifications, workplace mentoring, and job placement services.

Keys to Work implemented use of the Executive Skills Assessment first with staff, and then with young people, to support them in understanding their strengths and struggles and how to apply them to their work goals. They also worked with youth to provide information on adolescent brain development to support and empower youth.

[Chicanos Por La Causa](#) in Phoenix provides health, housing, education, and workforce services as well as political representation for Mexican Americans.

Chicanos Por La Causa implemented the Executive Skills assessment among staff and used the pilot period to understand how to use the assessment as a team in preparation for later use directly with young people.

## Implementing Reforms in a Time of Change

TABS was planned prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Work had just begun in early March 2020, when the pandemic shut down much of the United States. NYEC and organizations decided to move forward, with a lengthened timeline. All group meetings and individual coaching from NYEC became virtual, including a convening planned as a keystone event for the project. At the organizational level, staff worked to adapt their approaches. While many resumed in-person services by summer 2020, the [triple crisis](#) of the pandemic, economic collapse and the [racial reckoning sparked by the police killing of George Floyd](#) each contributed to make the daily lives of young people and staff members much harder. Every one of the participating organizations works in marginalized communities. Each took advantage of this opportunity to implement new practices to support young people, even while coping with their own pandemic experiences.

## Adolescent Brain Development Is Changing Approaches to Working with Youth and Young Adults

Adolescents' changing brains mean that adolescents act and respond differently from adults, with their actions guided more by the part of the brain, the amygdala, that reacts and has emotion than by the rational frontal cortex. Practitioners are increasingly recognizing the importance of offering opportunities for youth in taking healthy risks, making mistakes, and learning from them as an integral part of their growth. It is also a critical time for identity development, and comprehensive approaches to working with youth incorporate supports for that exploration.

Evolving research showing that trauma and poverty can have significant impact on adolescent brain development, when combined with a racial equity lens, is also shifting approaches to working with youth and young adults. By layering awareness of systemic oppression and trauma-informed approaches, youth can be equipped to become agents of systemic change in their communities. Recognizing this, many youth workforce programs are moving towards a more comprehensive approach to working with youth and young adults that builds upon their strengths and offers concrete strategies to manage stress and engage in leadership opportunities that address systemic barriers.

## What TABS Organizations Did, and What They Learned

With support from coaches, staff members from participating organizations identified ways to apply the lessons of ES, PYD, and TIC to their work with youth and young adults. No single approach is meant to stand alone, and organizations generally incorporated pieces of two or more approaches. Several key themes and lessons emerged from individual organizations over the six-month period that are relevant as the field at large implements EPT throughout systems.

### Acknowledging the Context

The context in which the TABS pilot played out – the pandemic, economic upheaval, and police violence – illuminated the challenges of economic instability and racism young people have long faced, and the importance of placing all work with youth and young adults in those contexts. The participating organizations using the tools and guidance provided by the TABS project framed their work differently and acknowledged the importance of using those tools

to support youth because of their deepened understanding of how trauma caused by racism, poverty, and more recently the pandemic, impacts young people.

Structural racism creates conditions that limit educational and employment pathways for young people, and the pandemic exacerbated those limitations, causing [a huge surge in the number of opportunity youth](#). As Sharleigh Poindexter of CAFÉ said, “[Youth] deal with everything from the disparities within our community, which we see as far as food desert, under employed or not employed at all, lack of health benefits, all the disparities that come with people who are marginalized, due to their race, age, background and sex. So our clients come in and a lot of times, they have various levels of trauma.” CAFÉ recognized that a youth’s path to successfully transition to the workforce is impeded by external systemic factors and that providers must be aware of and prepared to respond to.

During the pandemic, [the youth unemployment rate](#) reached a high of 27.4% in April 2020 and nearly two in three young people expressed that they were [feeling down, depressed, or hopeless](#).

Recognizing the importance of placing trauma in context for both staff and residents, CAFÉ organized a six-part series during Black History Month in February 2021 called “Welcome to the Cookout.” The virtual events included discussions of microaggressions, health and mental health disparities, law enforcement, and some forward-looking sessions on building black wealth and other topics. The events were well received and offered the opportunity to shift the conversation and, for young people and residents, to place their individual daily struggles in a broader systemic context. CAFÉ also began a conversation with community police officers: Through what Sharleigh described as “true authentic talk,” young people began to realize they could reclaim their power by describing police interactions to the officers. Both of these efforts offered young people a critical re-framing of their communities, which in turn helped deepen their understanding of challenges from the personal to the systemic.

## Addressing Trauma and Mental Health (For Staff and Participants)

Regardless of the approach they chose, recognizing and addressing trauma and mental health challenges, through individual staff training and organizational changes, was paramount for several organizations. To be effective, training and support for staff and young people alike were essential.

The challenges faced by staff from youth-serving organizations mirrored young people’s challenges related to trauma, with staff turnover and burn out from the intensity of supporting young people and the trauma of their lives. As Charla Hayes at Edna Martin Christian Center said, “We realized we needed coaches to go through a training so that they could be more comfortable with having conversations about trauma with the young people.” It helped, she noted, that through honest dialogue with staff about their own struggles and

in being transparent, youth could see that they are not alone in working through the trauma of racism and poverty.

At Edna Martin Christian Center, this reality affected their organization directly: The murder of one of their youth-engagement specialists coincided with a training on trauma informed care. The incident allowed Edna Martin to conduct a session focused on trauma and its impact on staff, and how to support each other through the tragedy.

At the Valley of the Sun YMCA in Phoenix, staff and young people participated together in a trauma informed care training that offered context around trauma and ways to support youth and staff in understanding trauma in their own lives. Highlighting the way that systems cause and perpetuate trauma helped staff shift to an asset-based lens when interacting with young people.

At Chicanos Por La Causa, staff delved deeply into their own executive skills profiles and then consciously used their profiles to better understand how to work with and support each other. As one staff noted, “It helped me recognize that time management was a struggle for me. I had tried to get everything done in one day, and because of the executive skills work I am now pacing my work and setting daily goals.” Now that the staff are comfortable with how to use executive skills profiles and understanding, they are readying to work with youth, and intend to approach working on executive skills profiles by sharing their own profiles to help level-set the universality of strengths and struggles as people.

## Individualizing Staff Approaches to Young People

Whether using EPT approaches, staff recognized the importance of approaching their work with each young person as an individual. TABS-informed tools and skills offered staff a wider array of ways to work with youth, within an individualized approach. Each modality explored through TABS offered organizations insight into the direct benefits in preparing young people for work.

While each approach within TABS has distinct features, organizations found strong intersection across the three modalities. For example, executive skills work, while not explicitly under a positive youth development frame, also offered youth a positive way forward. As James Conway at Keys to Work noted, “[Executive skills] was a missing piece that I didn't know was missing. And it ties into everything else that we do in trauma informed care, positive youth development, and just the whole point of what we're doing in our program, which is to help [young people] learn how to set goals and attain them and to understand that they can control the direction of their life. Not 100%. But they can at least control how they react to what is happening.”



## Positive Youth Development Offers Skill Building Opportunities that Translate to Work

**Confidence and Engagement:** The Valley of the Sun YMCA and the Phoenix Indian Center’s focus on positive youth development strategies helped them understand the power of youth leadership opportunities. These helped young people build real world skills, find their voices, and discover their power. The YMCA offered youth small, compensated opportunities to contribute to their program after staff watched the first young person gain confidence through engagement. They began with working with one person to design a mousepad logo, and as they saw his confidence grow from the project, they offered him more discrete compensated projects, such as designing a PowerPoint presentation. The YMCA also conducted a blended approach by engaging the youth to develop and deliver the YMCA’s trauma informed care training. By the end of the TABS pilot, 10 youth had been engaged to support some aspect of the program, by building their skill set through small, discrete projects that helped them experience success. As Chris Medina noted, working with the youth one-on-one and offering these opportunities showed young people they could contribute to the program while building their skills. Several have transitioned to jobs outside the YMCA since, including one working as a Medical Assistant, and another who is working for a local nonprofit.

**Management and Communication Skills:** Phoenix Indian Center (PIC) engaged youth in outreach for the 2020 census and voter registration, helping them to build management and communication skills while contributing to important civic initiatives that benefit their communities. As Bridget Blixt reflected, “It was eye opening for PIC, to see youth use their voice, to share what PIC is and what the culture is – it will help both the youth and PIC grow. It reinforced for us that youth need to have a voice in the services the center provides.”

Applying PYD may lead to unexpected outcomes. Opportunities for Youth, the Phoenix intermediary engaged in TABS, sponsored a virtual youth convening attended by over 40 young people. Staff assumed young people would be interested in content centered on education and workforce opportunities. However, young people designed the convening and decided to focus on mental health and suicide prevention, the most immediate need in their communities. The event offered tangible opportunities for the youth leading the event to build planning and other skills and experience themselves as leaders.



## Trauma-Informed Care Approaches Can Help Young People Process Their Experiences and Transition to Work

**The 3 R's of Trauma Informed Care:** As Sharleigh Poindexter of CAFÉ noted, trauma underlies young people's lives, and if organizations don't support youth in addressing that trauma, the young person can't achieve employment and training work. And by placing trauma in context, staff are able to shift youth understanding of the roots of trauma from the personal to the system.

CAFÉ utilized the "[\*Realize, Recognize, and Respond\*](#)" framework to change their approach in different ways. Discovering that CAFÉ employment navigators did not have the skills or time to focus on the trauma of their youth participants, CAFÉ leadership sought to lighten their load. They contracted with a mental health professional with a background in trauma informed care. Since the professional is from the community, they were able to create culturally responsive peer groups for the young people to gain support and recognize common challenges.

**Addressing Needs Holistically:** Two TABS organizations set out to identify the strengths of program participants, while addressing the trauma that shadows their experiences and those of their families and communities. CAFÉ established a four-week class called "Take Care Life Coaching" to support a small cohort of youth moving through and beyond their trauma. The class helped young people map out their purpose, and learn how to build stronger self-care habits. One young man, for example, learned in class that incorporating affirmations that can be used and applied in everyday life could be transformative. Because of the violence in his community, he displayed a lack of confidence and significant anxiety. What seemed at first a silly exercise to him - beginning each day by repeating "I am a leader" ten times a day in a mirror - became empowering: "This is really starting to work and make a difference in my life. Every morning I get up and focus on my affirmation. At the beginning I thought, it's not going to work. But now I stand in the mirror and can see I am built to be a leader, and I'm going to get things done and come into class." As Sharleigh observed, creating space for the young man to find his confidence has kept him in the program more effectively than if CAFÉ's approach had focused solely on getting him a job.

## Executive Skills Enhances Reflection and Awareness, which Translates to Readiness

**Authentic Assessments:** At two TABS organizations, staff dug in deeply to learn how understanding executive skills could support young people in setting goals, moving to employment, and working with others. James Conway at Keys to Work worked with two small cohorts of young people to help them assess their executive skills using the assessment tool of twelve questions. He first tried using a video to explain brain development and executive skills, but observed the youth had a hard time relating to it, and in his second try he used himself as the example to explain executive skills, which really got the youth's attention.

James understood that it's best to connect with young adults "where they are" which might include coming from a point of familiarity in their lives, in this case James' own story. Recognizing that youth needed a safe way to discuss the results, James then worked individually with the youth to explore their strengths and struggles, again using himself as an example to underscore that everyone has a different profile and areas upon which to build, and areas in which to grow. He said, "[I went over] all the good knowledge and understanding of how the brain develops and how it functions. I could kind of see in most of them, a light go off a little bit... there was no one I didn't feel like really didn't get it or didn't see that this was something that they should understand about themselves. And, more importantly, I told them that especially for the ones that had children, that this is the time where their brain is on hyperdrive, and everything that they do and say, and what the people around them do and say, affects their development, and it's going to affect them for the rest of their life. And I use myself and a lot of times, I would tell them, about certain events in my life that I realized later on affected me, but I didn't understand it until I was older. " He continued, "I tell them ... we're not alone in this...it strikes me that they seem to be surprised by it."



**Translating a Youth's Strengths:** As James drove a young man to a geometry class who was doubtful he could succeed, he reminded the young man of his executive skills profile – pointing out the strengths that would help him succeed in the class. By the next day, the young man had changed his view and was ready to take on the class. James has seen other successes too; most young people are employed or working towards finishing school, several have gone through the

steps they needed to get housing, and some are getting drivers' licenses. He hopes to partner with a neighboring transitional jobs program that works with many of the same young people to bring executive skills approaches to reinforce the approach now implemented at Keys to Work.

At Chicanos Por La Causa (CPLC), using the executive-skills profile among a team of youth workers has helped them understand how to translate their own profiles into how they operate at work and as a team. One staff member said, "I realized that I struggle with time management, so I lean on another staff who is really good at it, and that helps me." The time spent understanding how to utilize their executive skills assessment has prepared them for their next stage of working with youth in their program to both be transparent with youth about their own strengths and struggles, as well as to help youth figure out how to use their understanding of their profile to be successful at school and work. As Reeta Devi said, "It has made the unconscious, conscious, and that is making a big difference for us."

## Applying EPT Approaches Means a Different, Broader, and Lengthier Approach to Working with Young People

Rather than moving through prescribed program offerings and sequences that end in job placement, EPT approaches ask staff to customize their offerings to meet young people where they are. Organizations almost universally recognized the importance of taking the time – often months – to build trust, work through trauma and related mental health issues, and establish relationships that enabled youth to engage and make progress towards their goals. Young people served by these organizations often live in survival mode, and as such need far more than preparation for a job to be able to keep a job. As Sharleigh Poindexter noted, “Youth don’t just need job readiness skills. If we can’t address the mental health and self-care piece, they can’t be successful moving forward in career, job or vocational training. If they don’t have a solid foundation, barriers come into play and cause them to fail.”

Underneath much of the work in the pilots was a focus on meeting young people where they are and developing authentic, deep and trusting relationships between staff and youth, a foundational value and practice of positive youth development. James Conway at Keys to Work, when utilizing the executive skills assessment, would regularly talk about his own assessment and strengths and struggles as a way to help youth see that everyone has a balance of strengths and challenges. He also felt comfortable reflecting on his own life story as a way to level-set that moving through jobs and life is not a linear path and has ups and downs.

At CAFÉ, staff took young people out to eat, where often for the first time in their lives young people were waited upon, rather than being the wait staff. Conversation over a meal was focused on building a relationship and beginning to establish more trust, being empathetic, sharing stories, and helping youth to realize that they actually matter. The organization recognized that this approach, paired with mini-cohorts where young adults could recognize and reflect shared realities, helped keep them engaged in the program, which could support work towards employment.



Staff at Edna Martin Christian Center noted similarly that taking the time to create the trust and work through trauma was critical. Staff there worked with one youth, who had experienced homelessness, for nine months before they were able to focus on employment. As Charla noted, if staff had approached this youth with a job first, they may have had a more difficult time engaging them.

## The Role of Intermediaries

Each of the workforce development intermediaries reported engaging in TABS because they recognized the potential to learn how these methods might benefit their broader network of youth-focused workforce organizations. Their participation in group learning sessions, as well as in individual dialogue with organizations, helped to build their understanding of how EPT practices could contribute to better outcomes for youth and young adults. Moving forward, each intermediary plans to hold webinars and briefings within their networks, as well as to continue exploring how organizations can incorporate some of the learnings from TABS. For example, Opportunities for Youth is creating training documents for its network based on TABS content, conducting trainings with its partners, and incorporating ES into their goals in their next grant opportunity.

## Recommendations for Creating the Conditions for Change

The TABS Project was in part an effort to assess what supports are needed to apply EPT approaches in the context of community-based organizations. We observed several upfront needs, each of which was exacerbated by the pandemic, which future efforts should address more comprehensively:

- **Allow time for staff to get to know EPT approaches.** While awareness of PYD and TIC is rising among youth workforce organizations, many staff members have not received training on the underlying approaches themselves or professional development on implications for their work. ES, as a newer frame, is even less known. Setting the context – why these frames are important, how they can improve staff morale and youth outcomes, and giving a sense of what changes may be necessary – is critical.
- **Ground all individual and organizational work in racial equity approaches.** Opportunity youth are disproportionately people of color: helping young people recognize the role that structural racism plays in their lives, and helping staff bring this awareness to all aspects of their work, will ultimately improve the effectiveness of any of these approaches.
- **Ensure organizational buy-in for change.** In the long term, brain science-informed approaches will result in better outcomes for young people. But service providers are often held accountable to short-term measures of credential attainment and job placement. Managers and frontline staff must buy-in to applying these approaches because they are foundational for youth to lead healthy and productive lives. Ultimately, leaders must seek ways to allow for longer service windows for young people.
- **Create space and provide expertise to change.** Some staff struggled to take advantage of the coaching offered through the project. In normal times, workforce agency staff are overburdened with duties and COVID-19 only exacerbated this. While

community-based organizations received small subgrants for their participation in the project, the work of the project was generally on top of staff members' other duties. Few staff had received coaching before, so some needed assistance understanding the coaching relationship and how to best work with their coaches.

#### Recommendations for Translating Adolescent Brain Science

Most youth-serving organizations operate on shoestring budgets even in good times. Setting the learning process of this project in context, each organization agreed to engage in the work of TABS despite the challenges and additional work created by the triple crisis.

Each organization found value in working to incorporate one or more of the three brain-centered modalities, and even in the short time frame of the project, reported progress for some of the young people who participated. And each organization experienced some measure of challenges that were not related to the pandemic, but are everyday realities: staff turnover, community violence, and other events. As the workforce field continues to explore the implications of adolescent brain science, supporting staff and organizations will be critical if new practices are to gain a foothold.



More broadly, TABS lifted up the increasing importance for the workforce development field and policymakers to recognize the importance of supporting the mental health and wellness of staff and young people alike in program design, funding, and organizational operations. For young people, and opportunity youth in particular, the road to education, employment and eventually a career is set in the context of longstanding structural racism that impacts communities and people. Policy and program alike need to incorporate supports and processes that are strength-based and provide the support young people need to set and reach their immediate and long-term goals. All the unique supports should be created and endorsed by the communities being served, such as peer-support models and partnerships.

Perhaps most importantly for workforce development organizations, recognizing that work with and in support of opportunity youth and young adults requires: a frame that recognizes the strength of youth and young adults while also recognizing the institutional and systemic constraints for them; more time to address the foundational needs of youth (such as mental health, housing, transportation, and child care) prior to or in tandem with educational and career needs; services and support above and beyond traditional workforce programming; and patience for outcomes. Significantly increased funding is critical if organizations and young adults are to reach employment and career goals.

In the TABS Project, time and resource constraints necessitated a focus on implementing one tool in each organization, which resulted in less possibility for comprehensive changes in organizational cultures. Similarly, the focus on a relatively small number of provider organizations within each intermediary's network limited the ability for systems change.

Nonetheless, the TABS Project highlighted the demand for work that brings together these approaches, to further coalesce language for the field, and ultimately to articulate a vision of adolescent brain science-infused practice that synthesizes these approaches.

**For system leaders and funders, further work in translating adolescent brain science to practice should include:**

- Providing CBOs with the capacity needed to reorient their cultures around EPT approaches.
- Deepening documentation of best practices in the workforce development context, especially for trauma-informed care and executive skills.
- Beginning to identify metrics or ways of measuring the infusion and impact of these practices.
- Enabling system-wide adoption of EPT approaches, with attendant trainings, learning communities.
- Exploring each approach and how it might be incorporated at different ages for youth and young adults, and work to make the tools relevant to those ages.

The TABS Project offered organizations a new lens on youth development, as well as a set of tools to support youth towards employment and education. Applying the lessons of this project, youth and young adult workforce organizations have the opportunity to improve education and employment outcomes by aligning their practice with what we know of adolescent brain development. We invite other communities to join the journey.

