



Learning Systematically from Experience through a Research-to-Practice Pipeline in Chicago

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A quantitative evaluation of a school-based group counseling and mentoring program for young men of color showed positive results, but did not explain why the program worked; qualitative research revealed mechanisms leading to the program's success.

The Becoming A Man (BAM) program is a school-based group counseling and mentoring program run by Youth Guidance (YG), a community organization that serves children in Chicago schools who are at risk. BAM guides young men to learn, internalize, and practice social cognitive skills, make responsible

decisions for their future, and become positive members of their school and community. This article weaves together the perspectives of three different stakeholders involved in research on BAM to offer a narrative about how the research partnership evolved and how the research findings are being integrated into practice.

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WHY IS RESEARCH IMPORTANT TO BAM?

WENDY FINE: Youth Guidance embraces evaluation, since it helps us gain deeper insight into our programs and improve them. We evaluate our processes and outcomes internally, and also partner with external evaluators who use highly rigorous approaches.

The BAM Logic Model and Theory of Change¹ guides the evaluation. This framework reflects our assumptions about how BAM works, expectations about its impact, and values that ground it. It defines a group of *inputs* such as high-quality, well-trained counselors; *participant characteristics*, such as students at risk for trauma; and *activities*, such as group work. The model includes both *immediate outcomes* such as improved social competencies; *intermediate outcomes* such as reduced involvement in the criminal justice system; *long-term impacts* such as successful post-secondary education or employment. The BAM curriculum teaches six core values: integrity, self-determination, positive anger expression, accountability, respect for womanhood, and visionary goal-setting. As evaluation reveals what works and how, we incorporate this learning into practice in many ways.

MARSHAUN BACON: BAM evaluation has taught us the importance of implementation fidelity to the BAM model. As BAM grows in scale, we need to ensure that it's done in the same way that generated the positive outcomes seen during evaluation. YG created the BAM Training Academy to provide training and ongoing coaching for the BAM counselors, along with curriculum development and refinement. The curriculum training and coaching also provide a good opportunity to

translate our ongoing research and evaluation findings into clinical best practices.

JIFFY LANSING: YG's approach to evaluation aligns with Chapin Hall's mission to help partners conduct rigorous, relevant, and actionable applied social policy research. My role as a qualitative researcher is to help institutions and programs adjust their practices to increase the positive impact on the young people they serve.

WHAT THE QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH SHOWED

WENDY FINE: YG had some preliminary *internal* evidence of BAM's positive academic and social-emotional outcomes for young men of color who were at risk of becoming victims of gun violence. We saw a growing need in Chicago (and beyond) to address gun violence in the communities that we serve, so it was important that we determine how effective the program really was.

BAM first became involved in *external* research partnerships in 2009, when the University of Chicago Crime Lab (now Urban Labs), through a design competition, selected YG as a promising program to reduce youth gun violence in Chicago. The Urban Labs conducted randomized control trials (RCTs) in 2009-2010 and 2013-2015 to determine the impact of BAM on outcomes such as crime involvement and academic engagement.² The quantitative methods used were well suited to this purpose and showed promising results: up to 50 percent decrease in violent crime arrests and up to 30 percent decrease in arrests for other crime, along with a significant increase in academic engagement,

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1 See <http://vue.annenberginstitute.org/issues/48>.

2 See Heller et al. 2017.

based on an index of school attendance, persistence, and grades.

For the City of Chicago, as elsewhere in the nation, reducing crime involvement and closing the achievement gap with young men of color has become a top priority. The promising results of these BAM studies did not go unrecognized by policymakers and other stakeholders. The cost-effectiveness analysis showed that BAM also makes good economic sense, with a 30:1 return on the dollar. Finally, some results also pointed to reduced automaticity, or helping participants to slow down their decision-making, as one potential mechanism through which crime might be reduced. BAM relies partly on cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) approaches that help participants “think about their thinking.” Together, the findings from these studies have important policy implications, and have led to demand for scaling BAM and increased funding of BAM.

WHY QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?

JIFFY LANSING: The quantitative research methods of BAM’s RCTs did what they were designed to do – statistically demonstrate the program’s impact on specific outcomes. But quantitative methods are not well suited to understanding the underlying mechanisms through which BAM works. Qualitative research, on the other hand, brings to light the voices of young people, contextualizes quantitative research, and opens the “black box” of mechanisms untouchable by many other forms of research. Shedding light on processes can suggest ways to improve program design, staff recruitment and training, internal oversight, and the important task of communicating how a program is working.

WENDY FINE: When we understand the underlying mechanisms that result in outcomes like reduced automaticity³ and improved school engagement, we practitioners can focus our improvement activities. Current research by the Consortium on Chicago School Research on the developmental needs of youth (Nagaoka et al. 2015) supports our framework that relationships among participants, their BAM counselor, and each other can unlock the development of key success factors, such as identity development, and social/emotional competencies, such as self-awareness, emotional regulation, and responsible decision-making. The relationships are bolstered by a strong youth engagement approach, mixed with group work and men’s work/rites of passage.

It is only through using rigorous qualitative methods that we have been able to ask questions to examine how the BAM model was playing out in practice and being experienced by our participants and counselors:

- How do participants see themselves being affected by BAM?
- How do participants see BAM facilitating the development of agency, integrated identity, and skills to manage their emotions? How do they use the BAM core values in their lives?
- How do the participants see the role of the BAM counselor in development of these skills?
- What is the role of the BAM group in developing these skills?
- How are BAM counselors seen as different from other adults in their lives?

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³ *Automaticity* is a pattern of automatic responses or habits that does not engage thinking at a deeper level.

JIFFY LANSING: I initially discussed with YG the idea of designing a qualitative study that would help illuminate the relationship between program components and developmental processes of BAM. In 2015 the qualitative study was born.

WENDY FINE: We always knew that most BAM participants experienced the program very deeply, but outside of how our BAM counselors described it, we didn't have a way to explain the students' perspective or see if it aligned with our theories. We desired a deeper understanding of BAM as we moved to scale and replicated the model in other cities so we could focus our program fidelity and quality improvement efforts on the most important areas.

MARSHAUN BACON: The BAM Training Academy (BTA) saw the qualitative study as not only an opportunity to clarify our understanding of how BAM works but also as a way to focus the training and ongoing coaching in key programmatic aspects to be identified by the study. Several of the BTA's senior staff met with both Wendy and Jiffy to come up with the research questions and approach to engaging youth that would later become the interview protocol. Interviewing participants and BAM counselors helped us be sure that we got the chance to ask the important questions around how each side actually sees BAM helping them. It also helped the counselors to have more buy-in to the qualitative study results.

JIFFY LANSING: BAM counselors were key to us accessing students for the study. The research team ended up conducting semi-structured interviews with a purposefully selected sample of twenty-nine BAM participants and ten BAM Counselors. The sample represented youth and counselors from groups that varied on a number of salient dimensions, including counselor

longevity with BAM and counselor formal credentials, BAM integration in the school and overall BAM implementation, and youth attendance and youth length of time with BAM (one or two years), so we could leverage the variation in our analyses. The BAM participants and counselors we interviewed expressed a desire to participate in the study and have their voices heard.

WHAT DID THE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH FIND?

Key Program Components Supporting Youth Development

JIFFY LANSING: Comparative qualitative analyses of these interviews found *four key BAM program components* that support youth developmental processes.

- **The safe and special space of the BAM room** within the school building. As one youth explained,

Whatever we say in the group, stays in the group. . . . Sometimes I don't trust people [outside of the BAM group]. I don't want people making fun of me for something I say.

Other youth talked about being able to go to the BAM room outside of BAM group periods to get away from potentially dangerous situations elsewhere in the school.
- **BAM's curriculum of core values**, along with activities and group missions that help youth grapple with defining and applying these core values. Youth describe the core values as anchors for decision-making, values they could draw upon when faced with decisions. One youth explained the core value of *accountability*:

Any decision you make, you should stand behind it. You always want to make sure you make a good decision. That way you're not scared to stand behind it because it was the best decision.

Youth described many activities that resonated with them and helped them learn and practice the curriculum's core values.

- **Consistent group check-ins** as a way for young people and the BAM counselor to practice articulating their own experiences and feelings, as well as witness and support others. Check-ins were youth's favorite part of the BAM group process. Participants also reported that check-ins became more deep and meaningful over time as youth in the group opened up more and more. One youth said,

I like how we can just sit down and just talk to each other, and it's calming. . . . You're in there, everybody's relaxed . . . and it's nice to just be sitting there talking about whatever.

- **Strong relationships with the BAM counselor and others in the group**, which were built on trust over time and led to a sense of belonging, connection, and mutual responsibility. One youth recounted a story about his mother planning to move to Florida because she couldn't find work, and how he reached out to his counselor for help finding a job so his family could stay in Chicago.

The biggest thing was being in this program, because it does help me. It helps me here and it helps me in the outside world. So the first person I called was my counselor. I told him, "Hey, can you help me out? I'm kind of struggling right now. I'm trying to get a job."

One youth remarked that he would not have been friends with the people he is friends with now if he didn't come to know them through BAM.

Developmental Mechanisms Fostering a Sense of Belonging

The core components provided the structure necessary for these developmental processes to emerge, which moved young people toward a strong sense of belonging that shapes how they think about who they are, how they experience the world, how they present themselves to others, and who they will become. As one participant who told us, "It's like I'm doing it for everybody, not just for me." We identified *three main developmental mechanisms* by which this sense of belonging with BAM was fostered.

- **Social norms (habits and behaviors).** Young people strove to live up to the behavioral habits and social norms of BAM's safe space to maintain their own reputation within the group and to maintain that space for the whole group.
- **Agency (decision-making and cognition).** Core values and activities of BAM served as anchor points for immediate and longer-term decision-making. Coupled with the safe space and relationships with their counselor and BAM peers, this sense of agency provided participants with confidence in their ability to control their own future and develop a longer-term future-orientation.
- **Empathy (emotion and language).** Check-ins provided a structure for BAM youth to share their thoughts and emotions with each other. The personal storytelling and listening to other's personal stories developed skills in identifying underlying emotions and developing empathy.

WHAT TO DO WITH THE RESEARCH FINDINGS?

WENDY FINE: While the results of Chapin Hall’s qualitative study indicate that our previous BAM theory of change is largely supported, they also hold a wealth of information that is helping YG focus on refining the theory of change and logic model. The results also allow us to identify key practices around which we can strengthen our fidelity of implementation to ensure positive youth development outcomes, which, in turn, will lead to better life and academic outcomes.

- **Authentic relationships with BAM counselors** play a critical role in participants’ development of their sense of self. BAM is implementing coaching systems, supports, and training for BAM counselors to ensure they are creating authentic relationships through youth engagement, modeling of desired behaviors, critical listening, and appropriate challenging and confronting.
- **Creating a safe space** is essential for the participants to be vulnerable, explore their emotions, be challenged, and develop trust. We are currently partnering with each school to ensure that the school will support the creation of a safe, confidential space for the BAM work to occur.
- **A new framework to measure progress in social-emotional development** emerged from the findings on the key BAM mechanisms that create positive change. BAM is piloting the use of the PEAR Institute’s Holistic Student Assessment⁴ in an effort to better determine immediate outcomes of BAM. We may also develop other scales that more directly measure these key mechanisms now that they are more clearly defined.

MARSHAUN BACON: The qualitative study confirmed much of what we already thought about BAM, but it also illuminated the components and mechanisms and put them into a developmental framework. BAM is not a “one size fits all” program that builds a single developmental process or skill. Rather, it supports the complexities of youth development and accommodates the differences between individual youth.

One of the key takeaways for us is that the success of the intervention depends on how the BAM counselor employs the four core program components identified in the study. The BAM counselor must develop the skills to be able to create the safe space, connect the curriculum activities and missions to the core values, ensure that the check-ins are deep and meaningful, and create and maintain consistent authentic relationships with students. Techniques used to support the development of these skills include effective use of self (using their own stories while respecting boundaries), cognitive behavioral therapy, and men’s work/rites of passage.

FINAL THOUGHTS

JIFFY LANSING: Qualitative research, by systematically exploring participants’ and counselors’ experiences of BAM, brought important learnings about program components and the developmental mechanisms being influenced by BAM.

MARSHAUN BACON: These learnings helped to modify our theory of change and were both relevant and actionable to the implementation of BAM. We have more language to discuss how BAM works, and are now more focused than ever on providing

4 See <https://www.thepearinstitute.org/holistic-student-assessment>.

supports that develop BAM counselors to be effective in these aspects of the program.

WENDY FINE: Having results from both the quantitative and the qualitative studies is allowing BAM to define a course of high-quality implementation that supports program replication and scaling to more young men for whom it's not too late to have life changing positive impact.

The full qualitative study can be found at: <https://www.chapinhall.org/news/articles/qualitative-study-becoming-man-bam-program>

For further resources, see <http://vue.annenberginstitute.org/issues/48>.

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