

**Introduction**

YouthBuild USA is a nationwide Department of Labor initiative that helps the underemployed and undereducation youth throughout America, by headlining General Education Development (GED) classes while giving them job training skills for future development. These students are traditionally poverty-stricken, culturally different, and non-lexical within societal norms. The interstate YouthBuild program has 276 available in 40 states. All of them are structured differently. Naturally, the surrounding environment where these youngsters live is imperative to the framework of the program's activities.

**Statement of Problem**

The location of the program in the city of Newburgh, NY is not a conducive learning environment. The venue where the GED classes are held is an easy-on-the-eyes newly constructed apartment building. What surrounds the building is very uncomfortable. In the back of the building is an empty lot belonging to three desolate three-story abandoned row homes with no doors and windows; making it an ideal place for squatters to roam. On to outer perimeter of the building, there is constant around-the-clock drug activity, along with a fitful of rest-in-peace candles propped on the sidewalk. During a class lecture, a woman had been raped just outside the class's window causing multiple police detectives to scour the building. The lecture wasn't disrupted, but tensions were hardened, especially among the female students. One day after class, the building janitor, a good-looking young black gentleman with moral courage was shot and killed for not allowing multiple thugs into the building.

**Purpose of Study**

The cultural foundation surrounding these students makes their day-by-day actions and interactions somewhat unbearable and problematic. The holistic events surrounding their lives give them the strength to survive, but, on the other hand, there are moments when these students struggle to adjust to society's interpretation of intestinal fortitude. This study is to identify whether the rewards given to the Newburgh YouthBuild (NBYB) students contribute to the lack of engagement and motivation in the classroom.

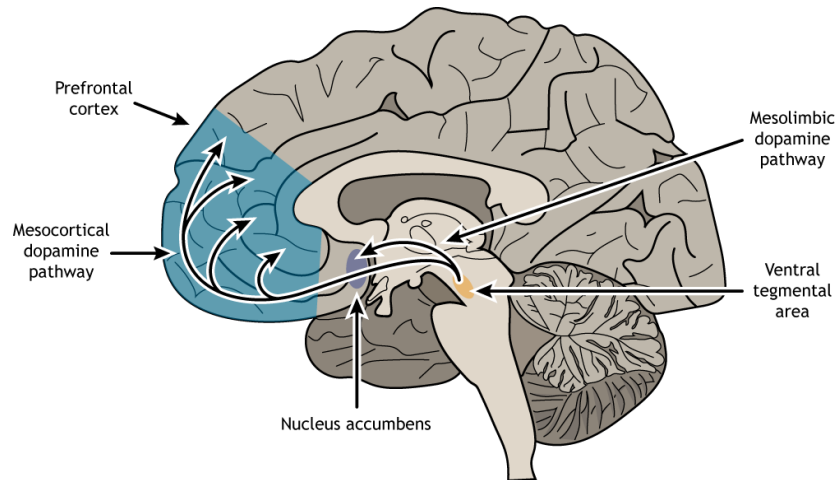
**Theoretical Framework**

The YouthBuild program Nationally is “uniquely designed to address the status of unemployed and uneducated young men and women who are disconnected from work and education”, Nehls (2021). The NBYB as a single case has a recruitment strategy that offers rewarding incentives including a stipend, two meals a day, construction and nursing job training, gifts, and a GED study program. These incitations help to build interpersonal relationships between the students and the NBYB program’s directorship.

The welcoming strategy is considered a reward because most of these students have no money, therefore, the stipend and two meals per day help in moments of hunger. A similar reward was the exciting moment when the legendary rapper Partison Fontaine better known as Parti, came on-site gifting each student a pair of sneakers and posting the occasion on a YouTube video. Even though the construction and nursing training didn’t amount to enough hands-on experience to get work in the local construction union or local medical facility, the reward of identifying with these carriers stimulated the students.

The most rewarding aspect of the NBYB program is providing the students with the opportunity to get their GED; giving them the probability of sustaining gainful employment. However, being in the classroom, the students aren’t intrinsically motivated to learn. Jenson (2005) suggests that motivation, “consists of the willingness to be active combined with ‘differences in the brain, which commonly results in differences in behavior’ (meaningful participation)”, (pg. 102 & 103). In Jenson's book, ‘Teaching with the brain in mind, he lists these common reasons for demotivation: “Lack of positive relationships, Learned helplessness, Awareness of disrespect towards one’s culture or ethnicity, Perception of threats, Brain anomalies, Drug use, and Perception that class assignment or tasks are irrelevant”, (2005 pg. 103).

The path within the brain that induces pleasure from rewards is pictured below. This is a complicated task involving “prediction, detection, goal orientation, planning, pleasure, expectations, and memory”, Jenson, (2005)



Rewards allow the brain to produce endorphins which generate a natural high, Jenson, (2005) declared, “It probably doesn’t matter to the brain ‘the reward system doles out good feelings on a daily basis whether the reward is concrete – like money or objects of value – or more cognitive – like privilege, status, recognition, attention, security, or fame, (pg. 104).

Park, H. & Melamed, D., (2016) reported in their study, “to predict that when a series of repeated rewards occurs through time, under-reward at one particular time cannot be fully compensated for by the same amount of over-reward at another time. Likewise, an over-reward at one particular time can be canceled out by a smaller under-reward at another time. Through this process, the instability of a reward system has an overall negative effect”.

This brings to bear, an important demotivational behavior not mentioned in the above behaviors from Jenson’s book, the ‘cell phone’. NBYB student’s smart/mobile phone usage during class lectures contributes to a major perplexity – ‘the brain’s pleasure pathway for cell phone addiction’, from attempting to hide their phone in their laps, having their phone placed between the pages of a book while pretending to be reading, having their phone in a bag but wearing headphones to connect to their phone via Bluetooth. Some classroom mothers can justify having their phones for emergencies, allowing other students to attempt to rationalize why they need their phones.

It becomes clear that contention between the teacher and students proves the “Evidence about the negative effects of mobile devices on learning is overwhelming. Large-scale international assessments have shown that anything beyond limited use of technology in the classroom harms academic performance”, (“Dumb to Allow”, 2023). The author of this study agrees solely with the above quotation for the single case setting at NBYB.

Kuang-Tsan & Hong, (2017), reasoned “Smart mobile phone addicts are more sensitive to interpersonal relationships, they cannot communicate directly with others, they complain about their problems, and they suffer from insomnia, social disorders, negative self-concept, low-esteem, anxiety, depression, timidity, etc”, (pgs. 109-118). These characteristics are reminiscent of what was stated in the above.

### **Research Questions**

Should cell phone usage be prohibited in the Adult Education classroom just as using drugs or alcohol, since they all can be considered an addiction, and it doesn't matter to the brain?

Does achieving a GED have a greater status of importance than preparing for a GED, when it comes to receiving rewards or gifts?

Is paying attention to a rap star greater than paying attention to a teacher, when it comes to NBYB's GED studies?

### **Significance of the study**

This study lends importance to the community at large, giving the undereducated and underemployed something to look forward to and have on their resume for years to come. The project provides knowledge of how the brain perceives awards. Understanding how young adults handle negative environmental/cultural situations will help all stakeholders understand the help needed in our underserved neighborhoods. Orange County Community College, (OCCC) is less than half a mile away from where the GED classes are held. The College's campus is a better learning environment for the NBYB students. The college atmosphere will change the student's perspective on learning, especially, since the college is located in the heart of the community it serves, and the instructor for the NBYB program gets paid by the college. It should be the heartbeat that gives a pulse to the NBYB program.

## **Research Design**

This qualitative design uses an Ethnography method with data collected from a peer review database and fieldwork participant observations of an NBYB GED class in Newburgh NY. Establishing rapport with NBYB's staff while working as a quasi-liaison between OCCC and NBYB gave me an inside-the-system observation that helped me collect and analyze the data from the classroom experience.

## **Definition of Terms Section**

### **Limitations**

More studies need to be done on the brain's Pleasure Pathway and cell phone addiction, and not having the ability to face-to-face interviews with every stakeholder involved with the NBYB program including government officials, NBYB staff members, students, and entertainers, i.e. rapper Parti.

### **Delimitations**

Controlling what the NBYB program does with its funds, students, and where the GED classes are held. The field research would have been different if the classes were held at the OCCC campus in Newburgh; the study would have focused more on student learning, instead of the NBYB program itself.

### **Assumptions**

Every student in the NBYB programs can pass the GED test regardless of any action or interaction within the context of living in Newburgh.

## **Chapter Summary**

It is important to understand how rewarding students can affect their behavior in the classroom. Being from the same cultural environment as the participants and understanding the day-in and day-out adversities that come with living in that environment. This study allows me as a self-subscribed informant to communicate on a level of mutuality with my students. For this reason, the seriousness and importance of talking and conversing with these students is paramount, because these students are living through horrific times in Newburgh. Newburgh has been ranked the city with the highest homicide rate per capita in America. The city is near three of

the biggest federal prison systems in America, and there are numerous rehabilitation centers in Newburgh and surrounding areas. Ex-criminals tend to want to relocate to Newburgh. into the fieldwork helped me understand the mental state of the students when they encounter negative or positive reactions to their circumstances.

As a self-proclaimed informant, there is no need to owe the participant of the study any remuneration. I was in the right place at the right time to get the teaching assignment with NBYB. Offering knowledge may sound a little uncouth to some, but the participants have been rewarded enough. The rewards they received from the NBYB program knowledge seem to hinder their learning. This lack of participation and being distracted by mobile devices shows demotivation within the student's Psyche.

Articulating how the brain works with rewarding stimuli was detailed by Eric Jensen. His explanation told why cell usage causes distraction issues in the classroom, and the students' behavior in wanting to use their mobile devices during the lecture proved that Kuang-Tsan & Hong's research into cell phone addiction has some validity.

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