

The Role of Positive Youth Development, Educational Policy,  
and Cultural Relevancy in School Settings

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**Abstract**

Changes in federal education legislation have presented scholars, educational activists, and educators with an opportunity to influence educational outcomes that are youth-centered and youth-driven, specifically among students of color in underserved schools. Opportunities for youth to initiate, design, implement, and evaluate district programs and interventions are beneficial not only to youths' intrinsic development, but also to the school communities in which they spend the most time. This article links the growth and promotion of positive youth development (PYD) theories and programming to current federal policy changes that support the inclusion of youth in school reform. The authors also discuss historical PYD programming, the role of cultural relevance in educational settings, and future areas of PYD research at the school level.

*Keywords:* positive youth development, educational policy, cultural relevancy

## **Positive Youth Development**

Positive youth development (PYD) is a holistic approach that focuses on the developmental characteristics—physical, personal, social, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual—that lead to positive outcomes and behaviors among young people (Durlak et al., 2007). Proponents of PYD consider youth as contributors to society (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003a, 2003b), and they believe that in order to promote optimal development, interventions and preventive measures should focus on the behaviors and environmental factors—including protective factors—that help young people thrive as they transition to adulthood. This argument is key to shifting how young people interact within their communities—with peers and supportive adults—as it emphasizes applying an ecological or contextual lens with respect to promoting youths’ development across their lifespan. This argument also differs significantly from the early literature, in which the positive development of youth was interpreted as the absence of ill social behaviors (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006). Early PYD scholars shifted practitioners’ focus from preventing possible negative behaviors youth may experience during adolescence, to youth developing positive characteristics through enhanced, intentional activities and resources. In short, PYD is a positive strengths-based model of adolescent development that recognizes youths’ potential for internal and community change. This approach contrasts with historic and traditional views of youth which have framed youth as problems in need of fixing, resulting in a pathological or deficit orientation (Shek & Merrick, 2015).

Scholars and practitioners of PYD have argued that programs taking an asset-based youth development perspective promote internal and external competencies that result in youths’ ability to self-regulate, interact positively with others, and display self-efficacy. Benson’s (1997) 40 developmental assets established early linkages between child and adolescent psychological theorists (e.g., Freud and Erikson) and later contributors (Lerner, 2006; Lerner & Lerner, 2011; Little, 1993) who identified the “five Cs” of PYD: competence, confidence, character, connection, and caring. However, Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, and Hawkins’ (2002) articulation of 15 key constructs for PYD interventions bridges historical child and adolescent psychological literature to today’s understanding of the role of federal educational legislation in promoting a positive, asset-based, and youth-centered interventions in contemporary school settings.

## **Early PYD Programming**

Early youth programming options traditionally took place out of school, in the community, during idle time. Programs such as Boys & Girls Clubs, YM/WCAs, 4-H clubs, Big Brothers Big Sisters, and Boy and Girl Scout troops are well-known examples of youth programming. Some programs, most notably 4-H, help youth positively develop, connect with adults, develop life-long skills, and contribute to their communities (Lerner & Lerner, 2013). These early and traditional programs provided young people with safe, structured spaces to learn life skills (Vierimaa, Erickson, Cote, & Gilbert, 2012). A report by the National Research Council (2002) on community-based programs that support PYD summarized how such programs impact adolescent development—youths’ primary blocks in human development—and the social assets and supports they offer in promoting youths’ positive well-being. This sense of well-being has also been linked to youths’ perception of control and power over their environment (Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007; Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2006). In addition, these early types of community-based programs help develop strategies that are useful across a lifespan.

## Educational Policy History

The push to improve educational outcomes in schools in the United States can be traced to early social policies for addressing poverty. President Lyndon B. Johnson, a former educator from Texas and an advocate and visionary for the populace, sought to improve the lives of all Americans through his “War on Poverty” legislation. On May 22, 1964, Johnson delivered a 20-minute commencement address to University of Michigan graduates. The “Great Society” speech was important because it addressed then-current domestic affairs, including education. Johnson “urged the people not be content with the nation as it is, but to use their best instincts to solve the nations’ problems,” and he maintained that “the Great Society is a place where every child can find knowledge to enrich his mind and enlarge his talents” (as cited in Warner, 1978, p. 4). The following year, Johnson signed into law the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, with a bipartisan Congress overwhelmingly passing the legislation as an intervention response to poverty. The new law mandated higher educational standards and accountability through federal funding. It also authorized the Department of Education to implement provisions and resources at the federal level. However, ESEA did not include language giving the federal government authority to define student success. Though ESEA policy did provide some guidance to the 50 states (including the District of Columbia), it allowed the states and local school districts to direct how federal dollars would be spent in developing curriculum for their constituents:

ESEA offered new grants to districts serving low-income students, federal grants for text and library books, it created special education centers, and created scholarships for low-income college students. Additionally, the law provided federal grants to state educational agencies to improve the quality of elementary and secondary education. (U.S. Department of Education, 2016)

ESEA was the first federal law to allow states to receive financial assistance to address their individual educational needs. More than 30 years would pass before ESEA was reauthorized as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. The new legislation was passed under the Republican leadership of President George W. Bush to “ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education” (NCLB, 2002, sec. 1001). Under NCLB—which represented the first major change to education law since 1965—the goal was to “close the gap between high and low performing children, especially the achievement gaps between minority and non-minority students and between disadvantaged [*sic*] children and their more advantage peers” (NCLB, 2002, sec. 1001). Furthermore, NCLB policy aimed to improve the performance of America’s primary and secondary schools through established math, reading, and writing standards. Under NCLB, state education agencies were charged with helping local school districts meet annual yearly performance (AYP) requirements. To make AYP requirements, local school districts created goals that would ultimately move their students to 100% proficiency in reading and math (NCLB, 2002, sec. 1001). NCLB had been enacted for nine years when it became apparent that not a single school in the country would achieve 100% proficiency—which would effectively put seasoned teachers out of work for ineffective teaching. Furthermore, local school districts were faced with the possible closure of schools as a penalty for not reaching their AYP goals over a three-year period. As teachers, administrators, parents, and students began to understand the ramifications of possibly losing school funding due to a less than 100% proficiency rate, alarms were sounded to lobby the Department of Education to allow states to create and implement accountability standards based on the needs of individual communities.

As a response to NCLB leaving students to languish in failing schools and to schools

nationwide not achieving 100% proficiency, President Barack Obama signed into law the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015. Going into effect during the 2017-2018 academic year, this legislation replaced NCLB, which had dictated how children would be educated and how teachers would be evaluated (Williams, 2015,) thus becoming the newest reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. ESSA “effectively ends heavy federal involvement in public schools and sends much of that authority back to states and local school districts” (Layton, 2015). It is designed to “remove federal government power from oversight and accountability over schools” (Egalite, Fusarelli, & Fusarelli, 2017, p. 757) and to improve the educational outcomes of youth from low-income households using innovative methods that seek to reach youth from across many different cultures. ESSA emphasizes the needs of youth of color and their inclusion in schools, as well as equity at the school level. In addition, ESSA establishes indicators for school reform, such as school quality or success, which is measured through student engagement efforts that advance equity and excellence in schools. Furthermore, it brings attention to the responsibility of school to produce students who are well-rounded.

Presidents Johnson, Bush, and Obama implemented historic education legislation (ESEA, NCLB, and ESSA, respectively) to address the achievement gap between middle class and economically impoverished students. These laws attempted to close the achievement gap and to improve the educational outcomes of students. These changes created an opportunity to use youth leadership and voice to promote working partnerships with adults in order to improve underserved schools in vulnerable communities.

### **Understanding the Interconnectedness of Positive Youth Development, Cultural Relevancy, and Educational Settings**

The social development model is a process through which families, schools, and communities influence youth. In each of these spheres of influence, three specific components must to present in order for positive development to occur. Specifically, youth must be given an opportunity to be involved in meaningful ways, they must develop skills for successful participation and interaction in leadership opportunities, and they must experience a process that is consistent. Ultimately, this process positively reinforces desired behaviors (Brandstädter, 2013).

Positive youth development seeks to connect youth and adults in intentional ways. PYD interventions aim to provide young people with positive expectations, enduring and effective relationships with adults, and diverse activities and settings for individual and collective growth and development. Participants learn intentional self-regulation, which involves self-reflection on existing behavior, the selection of personal goals and activities, and the use of available resources to pursue these goals and activities (Brandstädter, 2013). PYD interventions enable young people to learn and be rewarded for intentional self-regulation activities. Such experiences enable youth to develop and apply intentional self-regulation characteristics more generally to other prosocial goals. As a result of developing intentional self-regulation, young people are better able to develop various positive assets (e.g., competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring). As these characteristics accrue, young people can make increasingly better use of the opportunities available in their wider environment. This enables further accrual of assets, and, ultimately, young people contribute positively to their communities (Zubrzycki, 2013). For underserved youth of color, this process provides an opportunity to alter their trajectory in a setting that is culturally reflective of their experiences.

French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu offered a sociological account of the uses of culture

and language (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; 1992), and his theory and methodology may contribute to cultural relevancy in school settings because they offer a better understanding of the symbolic power of language and culture within a “habitus.” Within a habitus, individuals respond to their consciousness by transforming a future reality based on the path already taken. As such, the habitus denotes intelligent dispositions (Crossley, 2013) that equip human nature with continuity. The response of the habitus is symbolic of goals already achieved. Bourdieu (1977) stated, “The habitus produces practices which tend to reproduce the regularities immanent in the objective conditions of the production of their generative principle, while adjusting to the demands of inscribed as objective potentialities in the situation, as defined by the cognitive and motivating structure making up the habitus” (p. 78).

Bourdieu’s scholarship on social inequality in education and its impact on urban students’ access to social and cultural capital resources highlights how schools contribute to the reproduction of educational injustice in high poverty, urban school districts. For example, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicates that 51% of White fourth graders performed at or above the proficient level in mathematics compared to 19% Black and 26% Latino fourth graders (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017).

Every school represents a “habitus” with its distinct way of life. This habitus perpetuates dominant cultural beliefs and attitudes at the expense of “other” cultures. For example, the teachers at 80% of public schools are predominately White and female (Aldana & Byrd, 2015). Bourdieu argued that people learn to consume culture based on their socioeconomic status (Jenkins, 1992); thus, according to this theory, White teachers teach based on their economic position. With two different cultural realities—one for teachers and one for students—in urban school settings, it is important to identify ways for youth to experience enhanced habitus of learning.

The theoretical basis for positive youth development borrows from developmental systems theory. According to Lerner (2013), the defining features of developmental systems theory include a rejection of the distinction between nature–nurture; a recognition of the interrelated integration of all levels of an ecology (e.g., the bidirectional nature of influence between individual, family, school, and community); a consideration of the individual in relation to his or her context; and an acceptance that development occurs over time because of humans’ plasticity (i.e., the capacity to grow, change, and adapt). The recognition of plasticity promotes an optimistic and proactive search for characteristics of individuals and their ecologies that, together, can promote positive human development across the lifespan (Lerner, 2013). Furthermore, it can be argued that this perspective allows youth development to be seen through a culturally appropriate lens, resulting in an enhanced habitus of learning.

Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) coined the term *culturally relevant pedagogy* and argued that cultural relevancy upholds students’ cultural identity while developing a critical perspective that challenges bias in schools (Irvine, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Culturally relevant pedagogy attempts to find a cultural “fit” that creates students who can achieve scholastically, cultivates students who display cultural competence, and nurtures students who can both understand and review the dominant social order (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014). Since the introduction of culturally relevant pedagogy, many teaching programs have espoused this theory as effective when applied to work with diverse students (Swindler & Hill, 2006; Watson, Sealey-Ruiz, & Jackson, 2014).

One of the biggest drawbacks of connecting culturally relevant understanding to the

classroom is that educators are not entirely equipped to work with diverse communities, especially predominately Black and Latino youth in urban settings. Diverse student educational needs are not necessarily aligned with middle-class educational values. Aldana and Byrd (2015) synthesized the phenomenon of socialization of individuals in the context of ethnic and racial background. They found that students spend an inordinate amount of time in school, and these same students are formally and informally instructed around dominant cultural values. Moreover, students are rewarded and punished based on how they internalize these cultural values. For a Black student who is expected to socialize one way in school and another in the community and at home, he or she may have difficulty engaging with a dominant school culture, thereby impacting his or her educational outcomes.

More recent educational reforms seek to link youths' traditional educational settings with their communities. Such reforms have led to the development of out-of-school funding that seeks to bridge school time, out-of-school time, and communities. For instance, the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Program, funded through the U.S. Department of Education, partners schools with community-based programs in order to create after-school programming called learning centers. These programs contain elements of PYD; they seek to change youth development outcomes through the combination of educational and social enrichment activities and to provide culturally relevant and responsive programming. A few well-established programs, such as BEST in Los Angeles, START in Sacramento, After School and Beyond in Boston, and ACT for Youth across New York State, provide connections for youth in their neighborhoods and opportunities to develop leadership (National Recreation and Park Association, 2010).

### **Discussion and Implications for Research and Practice**

Understanding the role of school as context is connected to the extension of PYD in the school reform debate. Applying Bourdieu's understanding of language and culture to habitus or environment enables current social science researchers to better understand how students develop in educational settings. In addition, it allows culturally relevant pedagogy to drive academia to explore how culture, space, and youth development frameworks can help educators and administrators develop and institutionalize programming that meets the expectations of current educational law. Ladson-Billings (2011) suggested that the definition of culturally relevant pedagogy must evolve to meet the needs of the next generation of students. This concession has a significant place in the design of school-based initiatives to increase educational achievements and is important as educational policies are implemented. This perspective is also essential to incorporating the emphasis of federal educational laws on social emotional learning. As such, schools are viable places for the promotion of school engagement among youth of color who are disengaged or have demonstrated proven-risk (Campie et al., 2013). PYD may be a tool for better connecting youth to school, ultimately increasing grades and decreasing negative social and educational outcomes such as delinquent behavior, including use of illegal substances.

PYD's approach seeks to prepare young people to meet the challenges of adolescence through a series of structured, progressive activities and experiences that help them obtain social, emotional, ethical, physical, and cognitive competencies. This asset-based approach views youth as resources and builds on their strengths and capabilities for development within their own community, and it emphasizes the acquisition of adequate attitudes, behaviors, and skills (Bazemore & Terry, 1997). This approach concentrates less on the prevention of delinquent behaviors, although the empirical research has suggested this is an important result of PYD programs (Blumenfeld, Kempler, & Krajcik, 2013).

The replacement of NCLB with ESSA was a quiet and understated contribution to PYD. Lerner (2006) argued that youth development is contextual and fluid, occurring over an extended period of time. Furthermore, youths' development occurs in various locations, including their schools. The identification of schools as contextual places for promoting positive youth outcomes with the inclusion of PYD offers greater potential to reform educational experiences for youth through youth leadership opportunities. With the implementation of ESSA, PYD programming can expand from community-based and out-of-school programming to in-school programming that calls for intentional learning activities promoting youth voice, especially for youth of color. ESSA regulates meaningful inclusion of key stakeholders in school reform at the district and building levels. Indeed, practitioners' interpretation of inclusion is moving toward a call for youth voice in school reform (Lac & Baxley, 2018; Mitra & Gross, 2009).

There are several key implications for researchers and practitioners with respect to PYD, cultural relevancy, and educational policy. The sixth "C"—contribution—should be explored in chronically low-performing school settings, among students of color who are underserved, during the school day, with school reform as the goal. Research that aims to understand the role of PYD principles in school settings, how PYD impacts school reform, and the likelihood that PYD characteristics increase the educational outcomes of youth would all contribute to the PYD literature. Furthermore, future research should explore the role of educators in promoting PYD and engaging students in school reform efforts. Snyder, Shane, Hal, Kevin, and David (2003) suggested that when youth formulate thoughts about change and their futures, their sense of hopefulness increases, altering their present orientation toward setting future goals. With this in mind, the PYD literature would benefit from an analysis of how youth organize themselves to conduct youth participatory action research projects that examine district controlled data (e.g., attendance, grades, graduation rates, and Youth Risk Behavior Survey outcomes) in order to advocate for school-based reforms.

In addition to educational outcomes, future research should address the role of recent outcomes suggesting a hierarchy within the five Cs. Lopez, Yoder, Brisson, Lechuga-Peña, and Jenson (2014) argued that the character characteristic should be intentionally developed early in PYD programming. Attributes of character are inclusive of social emotional attributes, which promote the development and well-being of well-rounded students. More research is needed to link traditional youth educational outcomes to PYD activities and frameworks used during the school day. For example, how does Potts' (2003) and Prilleltensky's (2003, 2008) identification of connections between social justice, social action, and empowerment connect to a sense of well-being (i.e., power and control)? What is the relationship between youths' leadership in school improvement activities and their expression of character? What is the relationship between character and students' credits, grades, attendance, graduation, and college attendance outcomes?

School reform efforts, like those outlined in ESSA, must include nontraditional ways of seeing and working with youth of color (El Moussaoui, 2017). These efforts must focus on youth as the actors of their own reform. Using Lerner and Lerner's (2013) 4-H study as a model for understanding the role of the five Cs in youth outcomes, a future study could measure how youths' active participation in an educational change process—a process whereby youth develop educational solutions that are culturally relevant to them—reflects ESSA's emphasis on equity and opportunities for youth of color. Furthermore, research analyzing how PYD reflects ESSA's inclusion of social and emotional outcomes for youth in school settings would also advance scholarly debate. Future research would help to expand PYD as a reflective and responsible way



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to develop youth who are socially aware, empowered, and engaged. In doing so, youth improve educational reforms and shift in-school environments from an administrative, deficit model to a strengths-based, youth-driven reform model that is culturally relevant and responsive.

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