



Research article

The role of positive youth development practices in building resilience and enhancing wellbeing for at-risk youth[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Services that utilise positive youth development practices (PYD) are thought to improve the quality of the service experience leading to better outcomes for at-risk youth. This article reports on a study of 605 adolescents (aged 12–17 years) who were concurrent clients of two or more service systems (child welfare, juvenile justice, additional education, mental health). It was hypothesised that services adopting PYD approaches would be related to increases in youth resilience and better wellbeing outcomes. It was also hypothesised that risks, resilience, service experiences and wellbeing outcomes would differ by age, gender and ethnicity. Youth completed a self-report questionnaire administered individually. Path analysis was used to determine the relationship between risk, service use, resilience and a wellbeing outcome measure. MANOVA was then used to determine patterns of risk, service use, resilience and wellbeing among participants based on their demographic characteristics. Services using PYD approaches were significantly related to higher levels of youth resilience. Similarly, increased resilience was related to increased indicators of wellbeing, suggesting the mediating role of resilience between risk factors and wellbeing outcomes. When professionals adopt PYD practices and work with the positive resources around youth (their own resilience processes) interventions can make a significant contribution to wellbeing outcomes for at-risk youth.

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Introduction

There is growing interest in defining the characteristics of psychosocial services that are most effective in improving outcomes for young people who are exposed to high levels of enduring individual, family and contextual risk such as abuse, neglect, educational disengagement and neighborhood distress (Berzin, 2010). Young people who face the most risk are often clients of multiple service systems (Haapasalo, 2000; Hazen, Hough, Landsverk, & Wood, 2004; Kroll et al., 2002); their exposure to these risks brings them into contact with the child welfare, juvenile justice, specialist educational and mental health systems. In principle, this repeated contact means that there are numerous opportunities for services to have a positive effect. It is not clear, however, that these multiple opportunities to intervene do result in improved outcomes for

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children facing high levels of risk. Indeed, there is some evidence that the involvement of more services is associated with increased rather than reduced risks (Ungar, Liebenberg, Dudding, Armstrong, & Van de Vijver, 2003; Garland, Aarons, Brown, Wood, & Hough, 2003; Hazen et al., 2004; Kroll et al., 2002; Loeber, Farrington, Stouthamer-Loeber, & Van Kammen, 1998;) and with poorer outcomes for very vulnerable young people (Berzin, 2010). The study reported on in this paper examines the possible mediating influence of resilience on wellbeing outcomes, accounting for the quantity and quality of services by a cohort of youth facing high individual and contextual risks. It also considers the way in which youth perceive the risks they face, the quality of the services received, the presence of resilience resources and the wellbeing of youth by age, gender and ethnicity. Of central concern is understanding whether or not service delivery that takes a Positive Youth Development approach (PYD) has the potential to boost the resilience resources of youth making them more able to achieve positive outcomes when they confront high levels of risk.

A Positive Youth Development Approach (PYD) to Supporting At-Risk Youth

Despite having its origins in the development of generic programs for youth in community settings, positive youth development theory (PYD) is relevant to the delivery of programs to young people who face enduring risks and vulnerabilities and who become clients of multiple service systems. PYD has redefined adolescence so that, as Lerner notes (2005), rather than being seen as

... broken, in need of psychosocial repair, or [as] problems to be managed (Roth, Brookes-Gunn, Murray and Foster, 1998)... all youth are seen as resources to be developed.

This positive orientation to understanding adolescence is important to the study of at-risk youth who have often been defined primarily in terms of their exposure to risk factors such as abuse and neglect, the difficulties they face in adapting positively and in the troubling behaviors they exhibit (Case, 2006).

Key components of PYD programs include the encouragement of personal agency in youth, respectful approaches to youth and their families, and a focus on young people's strengths and competencies alongside the risks and challenges they may confront. PYD argues that when these positive components inform program delivery the likelihood that all young people will develop into citizens who thrive and contribute to society increases (Lerner, 2005, 2006; Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005; Pittman, 1999). Because a key feature of adolescence is growing autonomy, the PYD emphasis upon the active involvement of youth in decision making is important. Positive relationships are a critical dimension of adolescent development (Lerner, 2005) and they are central to PYD definitions of effective programs; when young people have mutually beneficial relationships with the people and institutions in their social world they will thrive and contribute (Heinze, 2013). Others have also observed when services are respectful and provide opportunities for at-risk youth to exercise agency that better outcomes are achieved than when these characteristics are not features of professional practice (Duncan, Miller, & Sparks, 2004). Relationships can open up new networks and provide opportunities for emotional connection and attachment; factors that have a powerful influence on outcomes in adulthood (Schofield & Beek, 2009). These factors are also likely to boost resilience processes – those relational and personal resources youth can draw on as they cope with adversity and stresses and challenges. Positive youth development occurs when opportunities are made available to youth in meaningful ways and when the people around youth support them to develop their own unique capacities and abilities.

The components of PYD identified above have relevance for work with youth who have high risk burdens both in terms of their own behaviors and in terms of levels of exposure to neighborhood and family risks. Evidence is beginning to suggest that positive gains can be made with at-risk youth when a PYD approach guides practice (Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003; Heinze, 2013; Scales, Benson, & Mannes, 2006). The PYD focus on growth and development is a valuable characteristic of practice with such youth because it emphasises that change is achievable even for youth who confront significant adversity, who may engage in very harmful behaviors and who are clients of multiple services. There are three reasons why PYD approaches work well with at-risk youth.

First, young people who have been exposed to abuse and neglect and who face enduring individual and contextual risks experience compressed childhoods and accelerated transitions to autonomy (Rogers, 2011; Stein, Ward, & Courtney, 2011); their childhoods end early and often abruptly, and they take on adult responsibilities at a young age. Programs that encourage personal agency and participation in decision making provide opportunities for young people who have had compressed childhoods and accelerated autonomy experiences to be supported to learn how to use their autonomy in pro-social ways; these approaches have the potential to build the resilience resources available to these youth. Such programs also avoid the risk of infantilising youth for whom childhood ended early. Second, the strengths emphasis provides an antidote to the predominant focus upon risks, problems and deficits in work with this population of youth (Case, 2006). It recognises that at-risk youth are more than the sum total of the challenges they face and that they have capacities, competence and resilience resources that can be used to good effect in the treatment process (Cheon, 2008). Third, the ecological emphasis of PYD approaches increases the chances that interventions will be respectful of and responsive to the particularities of the individual youth and their family. This means that interventions are more likely to take account of and adapt to the realities of youth circumstances thereby increasing the chances that interventions will be meaningful and relevant. Furthermore, such approaches are more likely to make a positive contribution to the resilience resources already around youth (Ungar et al., 2013; Bottrell, 2009). The service quality measure used in the current study assesses the presence of these PYD dimensions of practice in order to ascertain whether or not they are linked to better resilience and to positive outcomes.

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