



# Youth-centred practice: Positive youth development practices and pathways to better outcomes for vulnerable youth

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 18 June 2014

Received in revised form 19 August 2014

Accepted 22 August 2014

Available online 1 September 2014

### Keywords:

Positive youth development

Resilience

Risks

Outcomes

Services

## ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a longitudinal study of 1012 youth (aged 13–17 years). Half were clients of two or more services and were followed for three years to enable analysis of the impact over time of services delivered using positive youth development practices (PYD). Youth completed self-report questionnaires administered by trained interviewers. It was hypothesised that youth reporting two positive service experiences at Time 1 would report better wellbeing and resilience and lower risk at Time 3 than youth reporting inconsistent or two negative service experiences at Time 1. MANCOVA was used to determine the relationships between service quality and wellbeing, resilience, and risk, with three covariates that assessed the presence of positive relational resources (with caregivers, friends and school) around youth. Results indicated that service quality at Time 1 had a positive effect on wellbeing and resilience at Time 3, but not on risk levels. The importance of consistent use of PYD approaches across services is discussed, as is the need for services to more directly address risk levels for vulnerable youth.

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## 1. Introduction

Positive youth development theory and practice (PYD) is increasingly shaping the adolescent research, policy and practice agenda (Lerner, 2005). It has an important role to play in building our understanding of the issues confronted by vulnerable youth and the configuration of services and supports that can best assist this group of young people to develop and thrive. Because of its emphasis upon the theory–research–practice nexus, PYD has an important contribution to make in this specific domain of youth research (Lerner, 2005). The current study seeks to shed light on the role that multiple service involvement plays in positive outcomes for youth who are exposed to elevated levels of adversity and who may also have fewer resilience resources with which to manage this exposure. The study is concerned with understanding whether, and under which circumstances, multiple services constitute positive resources vulnerable youth can draw on as they navigate a pathway through adolescence.

### 1.1. Positive youth development

Drawing on work from positive psychology and the strengths-perspectives, PYD redefined adolescence so that young people were no longer primarily understood as being:

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

[Lerner, 2005]

This shift in focus from adolescence as a period of deficit and difficulty to one characterised by tremendous growth and potential was important for the overall study of adolescence, and it was critical for research and programme development with vulnerable young people where their problems had historically defined them as risky and as problems to be solved (Case, 2006). A PYD lens redefines the risks youth confront as zones of challenge to which positive resources can be applied in a manner relevant to their particular socio-cultural context. This does not mean that risks should be dismissed or diminished but rather that they must be understood as comprising only one part of a young person's social ecology. In this way, PYD constitutes an optimistic orientation and vocabulary that speaks of potential and recognises the plasticity of human development, even in the face of significant adversity.

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As an ecological approach, PYD focuses attention on the young person in their social and cultural context (Lavie-Ajayi & Krumer-Nevo, 2013). It recognises that there are diverse pathways through adolescence and that these pathways reflect the dynamic interplay between each young person's own individual characteristics and the resources and risks arrayed around them. Whilst not the only relevant factor in terms of adolescent wellbeing, for instance material resources (Ungar et al., 2007) also play an important role, relationships are nonetheless a critical dimension of the adolescent developmental project (Lerner, 2005). From a PYD perspective, when young people have mutually beneficial relationships with the people and institutions in their social world they will thrive and contribute (Heinze, 2013). This applies equally to youth who have many supportive resources as it does to those who are facing significant challenges. In this context, a key task for researchers and practitioners is to locate the places that hold potential for positive growth and development. Positive youth development occurs when opportunities are made available to youth in meaningful ways and when relationships support young people to develop their own unique capacities and abilities. The current paper focuses on relationships as a particular sub-set of supportive resources. Equally, however, we recognise that material resources play an important role in outcomes for youth facing high levels of risk. As Ungar et al. (2007: 295) note in their elaboration of the seven resilience tensions, access to material resources including financial, educational and employment opportunities, as well as access to basic resources such as food and safe shelter are a fundamental part of resilience for vulnerable youth. Development is dynamic and bi-directional; young people actively engage with their social and physical environments and the people within them, shaping and being shaped by these interactions (Benson, 2006). Psychosocial services can potentially form part of this dynamic equation and contribute both relational and material resources that enhance development. Whilst supportive relationships cannot compensate for a lack of material resources, relationships do have the potential to open up new networks and to provide opportunities for emotional connection and attachment; factors that have a powerful influence on outcomes in adulthood (Schofield & Beek, 2009). Whilst the current paper focuses upon relationships as supportive resources, this is not an argument for ignoring the role of material resources in positive outcomes for youth facing adversity.

## 1.2. Multiple system engagement and positive outcomes

Over recent years attention has increasingly focused upon understanding the ways in which interventions offered by multiple service systems (e.g., child welfare, mental health, special education and juvenile corrections) combine to have an impact on outcomes for vulnerable youth (Berzin, 2010; Haight, Bidwell, Marshall, & Khatiwoda, 2014). For instance, the contribution of collaborative practice for 'cross-over' youth; that is youth who are concurrent clients of the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, has been considered (Haight et al., 2014). Indeed, young people who face the most risk, or who face the most complex mix of challenges as they move through adolescence, are typically clients of more than one service system (Ungar, Liebenberg, Dudding, Armstrong, & van de Vijver, 2013). Given this, there is good justification for examining the complex interactions between multiple services, the resources youth have available to them from within their own social ecologies, and the relationship of these to risk reduction, resilience enhancement and improved wellbeing (Sanders, Munford, Liebenberg, & Ungar, 2014; Berzin, 2010; Ungar et al., 2013).

As noted above, PYD approaches focus attention upon the wider social ecology of youth (Lavie-Ajayi & Krumer-Nevo, 2013). The relationship between the nature of youth need and the type of services they receive is influenced by the particular needs or risks young people bring into service encounters and by factors in their social ecology (Dodge, Murphy, O'Donnell, & Christopoulos, 2009; National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2009; Santisteban & Mena, 2009;

Skovdal & Campbell, 2010; Swenson, Henggeler, Taylor, & Addison, 2009). In this context, involvement in multiple services could constitute either a developmental asset available to vulnerable youth, mitigating their risks and enhancing their capacity to achieve good outcomes (Mitchell, 2011), or it could constitute a risk factor (Ungar et al., 2013). For instance, there is evidence that suggests that rather than promoting positive outcomes, involvement in more than one service system is related to higher risk and poorer outcomes (Garland, Aarons, Brown, Wood, & Hough, 2003; Haapasalo, 2000; Hazen, Hough, Landsverk, & Wood, 2004; Kroll et al., 2002; Loeber, Farrington, Stouthamer-Loeber, & Van Kammen, 1998). There are a number of reasons why this might be the case. It might be that involvement with more than one service occurs as a result of higher levels of risk and that this causes greater challenges for service providers. It might also be that multiple service engagement reflects a reduced capacity of young people to engage successfully with service providers. However, poor outcomes for vulnerable youth who have been involved in multiple services cannot be attributed solely to their reluctance or inability to engage with providers, to their background risk or to limited availability of resources in their social ecologies. If outcomes do not improve questions also need to be directed at service quality; has this been consistently high across services and were services delivered in ways that were meaningful to young people? Research indicates that the latent capacities and individual characteristics of young people explain only a small amount of the variance in outcomes among service users (Cicchetti, 2010; Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005). Service quality and fit across all service systems have been found to have a greater influence on outcomes than the individual qualities of clients (DuMont, Widom, & Czaja, 2007). Indeed, it has been demonstrated that the quality of the interactions care workers have, and the relationships they build with vulnerable children and youth improve outcomes later in life (Bastiaanssen, Delsing, Kroes, Engels, & Veerman, 2014), again lending support to the contention that service quality plays an important role in improving the chances of good outcomes. Such findings are consistent with PYD practices which emphasise the critical role of relationships, particularly with adults, in creating meaningful opportunities to facilitate good outcomes.

Good outcomes can be achieved irrespective of the personal characteristics of the individual concerned when vulnerable clients are provided with appropriate resources and supports and can form positive relationships with professionals (DuMont et al., 2007). There is evidence to suggest that service provision achieves the best outcomes for youth when professionals encourage active involvement of the young person and demonstrate respect for them, their family and culture (Ungar et al., 2013). Such data provide empirical support for the PYD argument that the social ecology that surrounds vulnerable youth is as important as the particular characteristics of the young person in terms of creating potential for change. This includes the nature of the services they receive (Browne et al., 2001; Obrist, Pfeiffer, & Henley, 2010; Saewyc & Edinburgh, 2010) and in this connection, service delivery can include both socio-emotional and material components. Clients are more likely to make and sustain change when services pay close attention to meeting their needs, as clients understand these (Duncan, Miller, & Sparks, 2004). It is important therefore to understand the features of multiple interventions that do make a positive difference in the lives of vulnerable young people.

There is now a strong evidence-base that links PYD-based practice with positive changes for very vulnerable youth (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003; Gardner, Roth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; Grossman et al., 2002; Heinze, Hernandez Jozefowicz, & Toro, 2010; Larson, 2000; Larson, Hansen, & Moneta, 2006; Scales, Benson, & Mannes, 2006). For instance, in a recent study that examined in detail the quality of a single service experience by youth who were concurrently involved in more than one service system, increased resilience and better outcomes were observed

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