Positive Youth Development in Diverse and Global Contexts

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Abstract

A new special issue Child Development *focuses on a number of efforts around positive youth development—both within the United States with vulnerable populations as well as in global settings. The volume offers a wealth of information about how positive youth development efforts need to be tailored to specific and unique contexts, and why imposing program models or curricula on diverse populations often fails. Practitioners will gain an appreciation for the power of positive youth development to transform lives when programs are intentional, well-planned and targeted. This special issue is available online at:* http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cdev.2017.88.issue-4/issuetoc.

Ironically, at a time when the current U. S. administration is retrenching and focusing on "America First," youth development is experiencing a resurgence of interest around the globe. Finland, for example, has created youth councils in every municipality to ensure that youth have a voice in public affairs. Nepal has formalized youth development priorities in the Ministry of Youth & Sports and has recognized that the future of their country lies in supporting young people today (defined broadly as up to age 35) as the foundation of the country's future. Nicaragua is teaching entrepreneurship programs in partnership with 4-H and others to youth in remote areas like the Wawashung region, Nueva Guinea and Jalapa. Likewise, many other countries are clamoring for support from the United States—through such groups as Winrock, Partners of the Americas and other USAID-funded NGOs—to train leaders in positive youth development theory and practices. Yet the United States remains the only country that has not signed the U. N. Charter on the Rights of Children.

Hence, a recent publication by the Society for Research in Child Development is a welcome compendium of various efforts going on around the globe as well as in the United States with highly disadvantaged and vulnerable populations. The articles—from researchers on five continents—illustrate the importance of culture and context in supporting social identities and positive youth development. Bottom line: "…high quality science can improve the effectiveness of interventions" (Leman, Smith, & Peterson, p. 1042). Positive youth development, though, should not be understood as a program or curriculum but rather as an approach or "a set of practices designed to achieve one or more positive outcomes" (Moore, p. 1175). By striving to establish linkages between specific contexts and outcomes of positive youth development, we have the ability to raise the level of PYD above the status of advocacy science.

This is not a volume that should be read sequentially. Practitioners will want to focus on those articles most pertinent to their own interests since the topics cover toddlers, early childhood through late adolescence and young adulthood. Articles cover vulnerable populations in the United States, but also include a study of Turkish children, Greek and other immigrant youth, young children in the United Kingdom, Zulu youth in South Africa, Arab-minority infants in Israel and infant/parent interactions in three African contexts—rural, middle class and poor families.

Of particular note are the commentaries provided part way through the volume by Karen Pittman and Richard Lerner. As Pittman reflects on 50 years of research on youth development, she emphasizes that positive youth development (a) is intimately connected to program quality and starts in kindergarten; and (b) positive youth development in adolescence is intimately connected to teens' ability to engage in self-transformation in the contexts in which they grow up. Thus, the primary focus of interventions for young people who are marginalized or vulnerable should be on "promoting positive functioning in less than optimal conditions" (Pittman, 2017, p. 1173). Pittman continues to stress the importance of readiness.

Lerner, on the other hand, focuses on the evolution of developmental science over the past 112 years—which was primarily dominated by a focus on a deficit model. For him, the key element in the evolution of the science of youth development has been the focus on youth's strengths to enhance the direction of their lives.

> *Indeed, the key hypothesis of the PYD model is that if the specific strengths of youth and the resources in their contexts (assets for positive development found in their homes, schools, out-of-school-time activities, and faith communities, for instance) are*

*aligned across development, then the lives of all youth can be
enriched (Lerner, 2017, p. 1184).*

These commentaries and others provide the reader with useful summaries and perspectives on the entire volume. Moore makes a good case for the development of some common measures for building a strong positive youth development knowledge base. Yet she also recognizes that "we cannot assume that the same competencies and the same contexts support development across cultural groups nor can we assume that the same measures are appropriate across cultural groups" (Moore, 2017, p. 1176).

For some practitioners, this volume will seem too dense and unapproachable because of its heavy academic and research tone. One limitation might be that practitioners, who are looking to ferret out best practices or lessons learned from all these diverse and global contexts, might be dissuaded because of the nature of the articles themselves. In my view, this would be unfortunate since there is much to learn from these articles with a little patience, perseverance and persistence—just like youth development. The article on the association between popularity and aggression and how this affects friendship dynamics is a case in point.

Another limitation for youth development practitioners will be the articles focused on very young children—2 and 3 year olds. The articles regarding children's motivation for helping others after accidentally harming others is just one example of research that while important, will be of marginal value to those working in after-school programs.

These articles provide affirmation that after-school programs can foster and strengthen positive youth development if programs are structured appropriately, supportive of helping youth develop powerful personal identities and authenticity, and offer engaging interactions. Together, these articles contribute to extending a structure and coherence to an often disparate field of studies and initiatives in positive youth development (Pittman, 2017). But the real core message from this volume for practitioners is that a cookie cutter approach doesn't work. The contexts in which youth grow up are so vastly different, especially when considering a global context, that standardized approaches, canned programs, or generic strategies are bound to fall flat. Those practitioners who want to know how income, family structure, parenting, peer relationships, race, ethnicity, gender, school climate, and other contexts impact positive youth development, identity formation and efficacy will find valuable information in these pages.

References

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