



Left and center: Shutterstock
Right: © Rocking the Boat

Positive Youth Development

Authored by

Alex Russ, Cornell University

Introduction

On the East Coast of the United States, teenagers are leading efforts to monitor microplastics in the Bronx River. In Uganda, students are working alongside scientists to protect wildlife.¹ In these places, and in many more around the world, young people are taking the lead to help protect the environment and build stronger communities. They are part of programs that integrate environmental education and positive youth development to create space for young voices to be heard, encourage informed action, and spark civic engagement across generations.

Environmental education builds on many of the tenants of positive youth development (PYD), including the idea that young people have personal assets and skills that should be fostered and developed.² Programs based on this idea create learning environments and activities that give students the support they need to build life skills and become productive community members. PYD programs are based on collaborative partnerships, are learner-driven, and are framed around the assets that each learner brings to the table. These programs can be successfully integrated in formal and nonformal educational settings. This chapter explores the ways in which PYD and environmental education intersect to create more civically engaged and environmentally conscious learners.

Framework

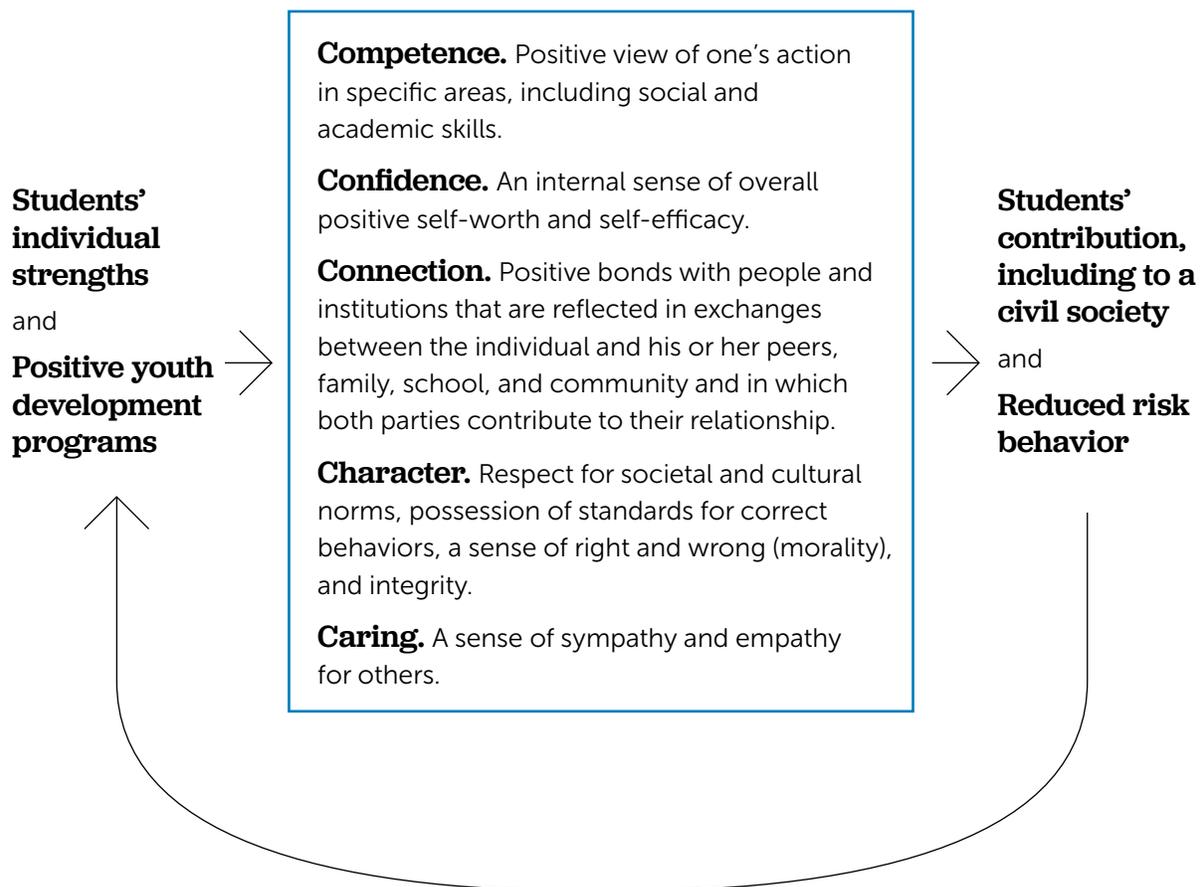
PYD programs differ significantly from educational models that are based on hierarchies and discipline. An analysis conducted by the Annie E. Casey Foundation³ in 2011 showed that programs incorporating community-based supervision, coaching, and skill building—combined with therapeutic counseling when appropriate—can lead to measurably positive outcomes. And, not surprisingly, programs that instead use deterrence, discipline, and surveillance were often unfruitful, and even counterproductive.

Because PYD revolves around the specific needs and abilities of participating youth, programs based on a PYD model may seem vastly different from each other. But the most successful PYD programs share these foundational building blocks:

- **Youth voices are valued and respected:** Young people participate alongside adults in every phase of the program, from inception, through development and implementation, to evaluation.
- **Trust is key:** Adults—the teachers, educators, instructors, and counselors who serve as mentors—build trust by outwardly demonstrating that they care about the youth with whom they work. Mentors provide emotional support and help young people build skills, set goals, and explore workplace and career opportunities. Adults earn students’ trust by demonstrating consistency, respect, and commitment to students’ success.⁴
- **Diversity is honored:** Different learning styles, abilities, and familial and cultural backgrounds are recognized and respected.
- **Civic engagement is encouraged and supported:** Young people are given opportunities to gain and apply real-world skills and contribute to their communities through service-learning projects.

While there is no one right way to design and implement a PYD program, certain theoretical perspectives can help educators develop activities that are grounded in PYD. The Five Cs perspective⁵ is one such approach. It describes PYD as a self-reinforcing process focused on competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring—the Five Cs. Programs developed around these characteristics have been shown to reduce risk behavior and help students become productive, contributing members of society. By experiencing success in school, growing through collaborative relationships, and participating in civic initiatives, youth are more likely to continue to participate in a program, and their reinvestment then feeds back into and strengthens their 5Cs (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The 5Cs model of positive youth development.⁶



Other frameworks offer techniques and tools to measure the outcomes of PYD programs. The PYD Measurement Framework,⁷ for example, examines these elements:

- **Assets:** Skills, competencies, and other similar strengths,
- **Agency:** Empowerment, as well as an ability to identify, set, and attain realistic goals,
- **Contributions:** Engagement in personal and community matters, and
- **Supportive environments:** The social, normative, structural, and physical environments that characterize PYD programs.

Although PYD programs are based on a range of educational approaches, they all aim to incorporate common elements—the assurances of a physical and psychological safe space, trusting relationships between young people and adults, opportunities for personal growth, and civic engagement that allows students to make meaningful contributions to society.⁸



Photo © Rocking the Boat

PYD and environmental education as complementary approaches

Environmental education often focuses on real-life issues through project-based learning, civic engagement, and citizen science initiatives. These approaches promote PYD by enabling young people to acquire and hone important assets, including problem-solving, cooperative learning, agency, creative thinking, and communication skills.⁹ PYD is a fundamental component of strong environmental education programs involving young people.

Many effective environmental education programs already incorporate tested approaches that foster PYD. As youth learn to trust the adults they collaborate with in educational settings, they can extend that trust into their families and communities.¹⁰ Case studies in this book show how PYD, both as a teaching approach and a learning outcome, creates stronger bonds between youth and their communities and enables them to contribute to environmental and social change.

The safe and respect-filled spaces that are integral to PYD programs provide structure that encourages experimentation, integrates novel experiences, and supports youth as they gain confidence and learn to bridge differences.¹¹ In addition, environmental educators can create opportunities—chances to improve community gardens, clean up beaches, and plant trees—for youth to work alongside adults, experience stewardship, and bring environmental benefits to their communities.¹²

Rocking the Boat, in the Bronx, New York, is an example of a robust PYD program that incorporates environmental learning. We will explore Rocking the Boat as a case study of PYD in practice ([click here](#)). Discussion questions and activities are included below to help educators and learners alike reflect and think critically about this case study and the PYD theories and practices incorporated in Rocking the Boat's approach.



DOWNLOAD THE CASE STUDY
"Rocking the Boat"

Use these activities with students to discuss PYD in the Rocking the Boat case study:

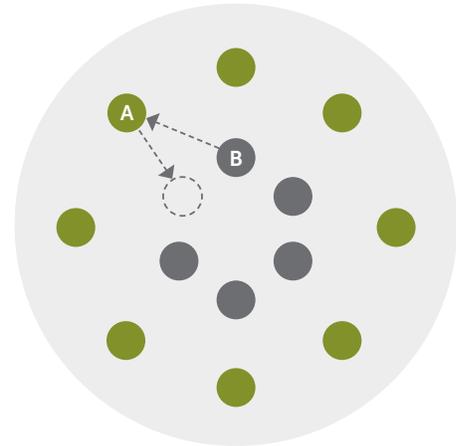
1. **Fishbowl conversation.** Establish a fishbowl, a discussion format in which participants sit in two groups: an inner circle with a small number of chairs (suggest four to six, depending on the size of the whole group), and an outer circle. Members of the inner circle discuss a topic, while members of the outer circle observe the discussion. One chair in the center is reserved, and any member of the outer circle may take this chair and join the discussion at any time. When someone takes this chair, a member of the inner circle must move to the outer circle, freeing up their chair as the new reserved chair for a member of the outer circle. The question for the inner group's discussion is, *"What in this case study about PYD moved or affected you?"*

2. **Pass me your question.** For this three-part, small-group discussion exercise, establish groups of about three or four students. First, task each group with developing one key question about PYD, based on the case study. Each group puts their question in an envelope and passes it to the next group. Second, ask each group to open their envelope and read the question they've received, and then rewrite the question to make it more compelling and conceptual. Ask students to put their rewritten questions back into envelopes, and pass them again to the next group. Third, ask each group to formulate an answer to the new question they received, and later report that question and their answer to the whole class.

3. **Reflection on a paragraph.** Ask participants to read this anecdote from an early draft of the Rocking the Boat case study, and think about other ways in which young people can be recruited to participate in an environmental education or PYD program. The anecdote by Adam Green, of Rocking the Boat:

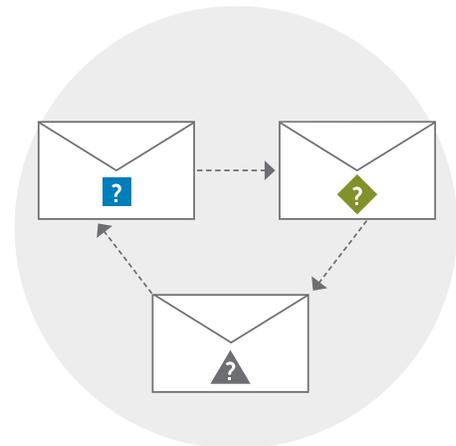
"A good story is that we have been able to engage a number of young people who hang out and are kind of destructive in the park, and get them involved in our programs. We always welcome everybody from the park to Rocking the Boat. Want to use our bathrooms? Feel free, come inside, look at the fish tank, and have some fruit. And often kids' hard edges soften and they turn back into a bunch of kids looking at fish in a tank, getting excited about seeing the crabs, and then walking out hands full of apples and oranges. They just need nourishment and love that they probably have not got."

FISHBOWL CONVERSATION



When someone (e.g., Person A) takes this chair, a member of the inner circle (e.g., Person B) takes the vacant chair.

PASS ME YOUR QUESTION



STORYTELLING



