

# Positive Youth Development: Implications of Research for European Policy and Practice

## Commentary

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*This book is about making a better world.* The discussion within is guided by positive youth development (PYD), a relatively well-established and studied approach in the United States of America yet still an emerging one in Europe. Sharing certain common grounds with positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and based on Relational Development System Theory (Lerner, 2007), this unique approach stresses the importance of the two-way interaction of internal (individual) and external (social, family, school, community) development assets for developing the “5Cs” (competence, confidence, character, connection, caring), which together maximise their positive life outcomes (e.g. prosocial behaviour, contribution) and minimise negative life outcomes (e.g. early school leaving, aggression, anxiety). In the PYD perspective, adolescents should not be treated as the source of trouble but as human beings holding considerable potential to become active co-creators of the world of the future.

*This book is about research.* By comprehensively considering research on PYD from around the world, it pinpoints the research gap in the field in the wider European context and particularly in Norway, Slovenia, Kosovo and Spain. Due to the PYD framework’s US origins, the book emphasises the testing of the PYD questionnaires and confirming of their validity in the respective European cultural contexts. Results of several empirical studies conducted re-affirm the need to study the PYD model across different cultures (e.g. different levels of the 5Cs and the different roles they play

in different national contexts) as well as the overall significance of development assets for PYD (e.g. bullying in the school environment as a negative external development asset) and its varying roles for adolescents from different backgrounds (e.g. gender, migrant status). The book convincingly demonstrates that further research is needed for PYD to be fully understood, meaningfully implemented in European practice, and appropriately supported by policy.

*This book is about practice.* Although PYD is a standalone and well-rounded perspective, its main advantages are its openness to related perspectives and adaptability to different contexts. Thus, as shown in the book, its goals can be achieved through various interventions, including the development of social and emotional learning. While the school environment (and the relationships within it) is an important developmental asset, teachers' social and emotional competencies should not be overlooked in this regard. The PYD understanding of adolescents – as human beings possessing several strengths and potential and not as sources of several deficits and troubles – chiefly calls for the implementation of prevention and intervention and less so compensation approaches in practice (also see Geldhof et al., 2014). The particular needs of specific groups of adolescents (e.g., gender, age, migrant status, type of school) indicate they may benefit from targeted and tailored interventions that would allow them to establish nurturing relationships and stay on a good and stable path towards their future.

*This book is about policy.* In Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, an individual dynamically interacts with several contexts in the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-systems. Policies may be understood as the exo- and macro-systems, which support PYD. Consistent with Benson (2007), the asset-building community and asset-building society depend on policies which will determine the availability of development assets and, hence, the number of thriving indicators that youth report. This makes it crucial that policies are established which nurture developmental assets in various youth contexts (Benson, 2007). Considering adolescents as whole-personalities and the several developmental assets that support their development, a cross-sectoral policy approach to PYD is required. An approach coordinated among several sectors (e.g. education, youth, social care, health) should support the building of effective policies as well as appropriate norms and behaviours, which will support PYD in broader society. In this respect, the cooperation of policy, research and practice is of particular need for

developing evidence-based policies grounded on theoretically based models and longitudinal empirical support.

*This book is about PYD in Europe.* National policies supporting PYD can draw on several existing mechanisms of European cooperation. A comparative policy study, examining how various countries in Europe support different developmental assets, might be a useful source in this sense. Still, the development of national policies should carefully consider their own national cultural, political and structural context, as well as the general state of well-being in the country. Also beneficial might be longitudinal research that looks at the impact of particular public policies (such as the exo- and macro systems) on PYD. As concerns EU cooperation in the field of education, the concept of PYD is not explicitly evident. However, the research reveals that its recognised positive outcomes are closely contributing to genuine EU priorities like the personal, social and professional fulfilment of all citizens whilst promoting democratic values, equality, social cohesion, active citizenship, and intercultural dialogue and concrete goals such as reducing low-achievement and early school leaving (Council of the EU, 2021). Coherence with the PYD perspective is also seen in the Personal, social and learning to learn key competence as one of the eight key competencies for lifelong learning (Council of the EU, 2018). In addition, the PYD understanding of adolescents as a group with distinct developmental needs and potential is close to the UNESCO Sustainable Development Goals where social inclusion is defined as a process of decisions and practices that accept diversity and create a sense of belonging based on the belief that each individual has meaning, potential and the need to be respected. As part of striving for social inclusion in the education system, the equality of educational opportunities, namely, a necessary condition for all citizens in modern societies to have equal opportunities for success in life, should be assured (UNESCO, 2020). Altogether, the evidence shows that even though PYD is under-represented in European research and policies, with appropriate contextualisation, it can be understood as an important measure for realising current and future educational goals across Europe.

To conclude, given the recognised paucity of research on PYD in Europe, this book provides unique, comprehensive and international comparative insights into the field. Its particular strength is the combination of rigorous empirical research conducted in various countries and the investigation of the role different PYD developmental assets play in youth outcomes. By presenting a systematic review of existing studies and original

research findings, it convincingly shows the importance of PYD and the responsibility of research, practice and policy to support adolescents on their way towards becoming successful adults, contributing to a better European society and a better world.

### Acknowledgements

The Slovenian Research Agency supported this article as part of the project *Positive Youth Development in Slovenia: Developmental Pathways in the Context of Migration* (PYD-SI Model) [J5-1781]

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