Advancing Environmental Education Practice

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Published by Cornell University Press

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POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Highlights

- Positive youth development entails designing programs to foster social, emotional, intellectual, and physical well-being among youth.
- Positive youth development approaches to environmental education help youth acquire assets important to their success and to their ability to engage in environmental behaviors and collective action.
- Self-efficacy, bonding with others, trust, and civic participation are assets that enable youth to contribute to environmental goals.
- Environmental education programs foster youth assets by providing youth with a sense of belonging, challenges that lead to new skills and ways of thinking, and opportunities to have their voice heard and to make meaningful contributions.

Whereas politicians often pit environmental against social concerns, in fact environmental education can contribute to positive youth development. Often community centers in low-income neighborhoods see environmental activities, such as community gardening or monitoring water quality, as a means for youth to develop job, communication, civic participation, and other skills critical to their future. By partnering with youth development professionals, environmental educators can expand their networks, audiences, and programs, particularly in low-income and ethnic minority communities.
What Is Positive Youth Development?

If positive development rests on mutually beneficial relations between the adolescent and his/her ecology, then thriving youth should be positively engaged with and act to enhance their world.

(Lerner et al. 2011, 6)

Starting in the 1990s, interventions to support families and children took a turn away from focusing on problem behaviors of troubled teens. Instead scholars turned their attention to what factors are present when youth experience healthy physical, intellectual, emotional, and social development (Eccles and Gootman 2002; Catalano et al. 2004; Lerner and Lerner 2011). An outcome of this work is an asset-based approach, referred to as positive youth development, which assumes that all youth have the capacity to become successful adults, given appropriate support (Eccles and Gootman 2002; Lerner et al. 2005).

Developing youth to their full capacity as human beings entails attention to the interactions of youth with their social and physical environment. Thus, positive youth development scholars and practitioners consider both youth assets and the characteristics of settings that enable youth to develop those assets (Eccles and Gootman 2002). Assets include self-efficacy, pro-social norms, and meaningful relationships with peers and adults, as well as, more broadly, social, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and moral competence (Catalano et al. 2004). One approach to positive youth development focuses on the “Six Cs,” defined as competence, confidence, connection, character, caring, and contributions to community and civil society (Lerner et al. 2005).

Positive youth development emphasizes the two-way interactions between youth and their contexts. As youth develop the ability to contribute to their community and environment, they change the context in which they and other youth are able to realize assets. This is referred to as individual ↔ context relations. The feedback between youth and their surroundings is generally thought to be mutually beneficial (Lerner et al. 2011). For example, in an urban agriculture internship program in Brooklyn, New York, environmental educators provided a social context for youth interns to develop assets including responsibility, social connections, and leadership. In turn, experienced interns created a social context emphasizing belonging and acceptance for new interns. The interns also worked at an urban farm and farmers’ market, as well as advocated to preserve community gardens, thus improving the physical environment for other youth and community members. Such social and physical improvements become part of the context for future youth development (Delia and Krasny 2018).
Six C’s of positive youth development (Lerner and Lerner 2011)

**Competence**

Social: interpersonal skills including communication, assertiveness, conflict resolution  
Cognitive: critical thinking, problem solving, decision making, planning, and goal setting  
Academic: school achievement, attendance, graduation rates  
Vocational: work habits and career choice explorations

**Confidence:** self-esteem, self-efficacy, identity, belief in the future

**Connections:** building and strengthening relationships with other people and institutions such as school

**Character:** decreasing engagement in health-compromising (problem) behaviors, respect for cultural or societal rules and standards, a sense of right and wrong (morality)

**Caring:** empathy and identification with others (in environmental education, this would include nonhuman life)

**Contribution:** to one’s community through civic engagement

Social justice youth development takes into account structural inequities and barriers to youth acquiring assets, such as poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia, violence, and drugs (Ginwright and Cammarota 2002; Sukarieh and Tannock 2011), including in developing countries with severe gender inequity (Briggs et al. 2019). It seeks to cultivate among youth an awareness of social justice, the ability to respond to oppressive forces, an understanding of the root causes of social problems, and the ability to take social action that addresses larger political forces (Ginwright and Cammarota 2002). Social justice youth development draws on Freire’s (1970) notions of critical consciousness (conscientização), where learners question their historical and social context and related injustices, and of praxis, or reflection and action in order to transform the world. Critical pedagogy of place is an environmental education approach that similarly engages issues of power and justice (Bowers 2002; Gruenewald 2003; see also chapter 9). The urban agriculture intern program in Brooklyn, New York, in which students examined structural issues impacting access to healthy foods, illustrates social justice youth development and critical pedagogy-of-place approaches (Delia and Krasny 2018).
Why Is Positive Youth Development Important?

A positive youth development approach enables environmental education to partner with organizations that address social concerns of a local community. By working together, environmental and community groups demonstrate that environmental issues need not be pitted against social issues.

- Positive youth development programs attract youth who may not have strong environmental interests and thus would be unlikely to participate in a more traditional environmental education program (Stephens 2015).
- In communities where youth face poor schools, poverty, and other threats to their development, environmental activities like community gardening become part of efforts to help youth succeed in school; form positive relationships with adults, peers, and family members; and develop communication skills, feelings of self-worth, social commitment, and responsibility (SEER 1985; Lieberman and Hoody 1998; Schusler and Krasny 2008, 2010, 2014; Riemer et al. 2014; Schusler 2014; Stephens 2015; Delia and Krasny 2018).
- Positive youth development contributes to environmental education goals of changing individual behaviors and collective action (Schusler and Krasny 2010; Schusler 2014). Once young people have developed communication skills, positive relationships with others, and a commitment to helping their community, they will be more likely to engage in other positive behaviors and collective actions, including those that integrate environmental and social outcomes (Flanagan and Levine 2010).
- The ability to address youth development goals enables environmental education programs to partner with youth and community development organizations, thus broadening environmental education’s influence and outcomes (Fraser et al. 2015; Krasny, Chang, et al. 2017; Krasny, Danter, et al. 2017).

How Does Positive Youth Development Contribute to Environmental Behaviors and Collective Action?

Youth with social, intellectual, and emotional assets are more likely to engage in environmental behaviors and collective action (figure 14.1). For example, self-efficacy (or locus of control) is both a developmental asset and a predictor of environmental behaviors (Hungerford and Volk 1990; Chawla 2009;
see also chapter 10), and critical-thinking and decision-making skills are needed to solve environmental problems (see chapter 6). Additionally, positive youth development programs provide volunteer, service learning, and other opportunities to develop trust and social connections, or social capital, which enables collective action to conserve commonly held resources such as forests or urban parks (Ahn and Ostrom 2008; see also chapter 13). Finally, youth who are engaged in civil society are more likely to continue that engagement as adults (Flanagan and Levine 2010). As a leader of an environmental action program explained,

I think it’s very important that [youth] have the opportunity to learn, to have the experience of giving back to the community because if they have a positive experience as seniors in high school, they’ll be more likely to be lifelong stewards, giving back to the community in some way. (Quoted in Schusler et al. 2009, 117)

**FIGURE 14.1** Youth assets like self-efficacy and communication skills enable youth to engage in community action. Positive youth development may also be a desired outcome for community environmental education.
How Can Environmental Education Nurture Positive Youth Development?

Environmental action programs (Schusler and Krasny 2008, 2010; Schusler et al. 2017; Delia and Krasny 2018), residential and outdoor adventure programs (McKenzie 2003; Stern et al. 2010; D’Amato and Krasny 2011; Powell et al. 2011; Ardoin et al. 2015; Ardoin, DiGiano, O’Connor, and Holthuis 2016; Williams and Chawla 2016), youth programs conducted by community organizations such as the YMCA and Boys and Girls Clubs (Larson 2000; Larson and Angus 2011; Lerner and Lerner 2011; Salusky et al. 2014), environmental clubs (Johnson et al. 2007; Johnson-Pynn and Johnson 2010; de Vreede et al. 2014; Comber 2016), and private-sector internships integrated with high school

Author Reflections

My undergraduate major was in adolescent development, and I volunteered as a tutor for youth living in detention facilities. After completing graduate degrees in forest ecology and becoming a professor at Cornell University, I came to see how youth development professionals were integrating environmental stewardship into their programs. I also came to appreciate the opportunities programs such as Rocking the Boat in the Bronx and East New York Farms! in Brooklyn provide for developing youth assets through collective environmental action. My friend and colleague Akiima Price calls these practices community environmental education, the goal of which is to enhance a community’s wellness through thoughtful environmental action. Community environmental education fosters collaborative learning and action, taking into account the social, cultural, economic, and environmental conditions of a community (Price et al. 2014). For me, the beauty of community environmental education is that it recognizes the environmental work already going on in low-income communities and communities of color—such as community gardening, urban farming, neighborhood cleanups, and linking restorative justice for criminal offenders with environmental justice—and connects with and supports these existing efforts. Generally, the leaders of these initiatives are focused first and foremost on youth development, and use environmental stewardship, advocacy, and other environmental activities as a pathway for youth to build developmental assets.
classes (Stephens 2015) all offer opportunities for youth to acquire developmental assets. Youth programs that foster positive youth development have several elements in common:

- They are long-term in duration and integrated with family, school, and community efforts.
- They provide physical and psychological safety and a sense of belonging.
- They foster positive and sustained relationships among youth and between youth and adults.
- They include activities that build life skills through setting expectations, posing challenges, and providing recognition.
- They empower youth by providing increasingly challenging opportunities for them to use these life skills as both participants in and as leaders of valued community activities.

(Roth and Brooks-Gunn 2003; Lerner and Lerner 2011; de Vreede et al. 2014; Schusler 2014; Stephens 2015)

Below we focus on how environmental action and outdoor adventure programs foster positive youth development.

Environmental Action Programs

_It wasn’t dictated by me and it wasn’t just created by them either._

(environmental educator, quoted in Schusler et al. 2017, 14)

Environmental action programs follow “a participatory pedagogy in which learners analyze the causes of environmental problems and take action with others to generate and implement solutions” (Schusler et al. 2017, 533; see also chapter 5). Through voluntarism, service learning, and related forms of civic participation, youth develop assets (Lerner and Lerner 2011) and connect with their community. They also engage in critical reflection, sometimes focusing on issues of power and injustice (Schusler and Krasny 2010; Delia and Krasny 2018). One educator leading an environmental action program described her work as “preparing youth for future roles as voters who think critically about issues” and as “agents of social change within their communities” (Schusler et al. 2009).

Although youth are often painted as autonomous leaders in environmental action programs, educators play a critical role as they negotiate the “autonomy-authority duality of shared decision-making.” Adult authority stems from decision-making power as well as from experience and wisdom. Approaches to balancing youth autonomy with adult authority described by
educators include “structuring youth participation, supporting youth, valuing mutual learning, and communicating transparently to develop equitable partnerships” (Schusler et al. 2017, 533).

- **Structuring youth participation.** Educators structure youth participation to reflect learning goals, organizational and community contexts, and participants’ existing assets. This entails creating a structured process for youth decision making by setting overall program goals while allowing youth to decide routes to achieve them. Educators also help youth envision and weigh the pros and cons of various options to achieve program goals. Example strategies range from allowing youth to decide what project they want to undertake and how to implement it; to the educator deciding the project focus and youth and adults sharing decision making about implementation; to the educator directing classroom activities while allowing youth to direct related activities in an after-school program.

- **Support.** Educators provide the support necessary for youth to succeed by conducting advance training for youth and scaffolding activities, asking guiding questions, facilitating reflection on individual performance and the group’s collective progress, and helping youth to resolve conflicts.

- **Mutual learning.** Educators recognize themselves as learners alongside youth and value youths’ experience and knowledge. One educator described this as “pilgrimage teaching,” explaining that “I can either tell you, or I can show you, or I can go with you. And all . . . of us go with our students. We don’t have the answers, but we have the energy to go with them and learn with them” (Schusler et al. 2017, 544).

- **Transparent communication.** Educators voice their opinions and explain why they make certain decisions, while allowing youth a safe space to express their own perspectives (Schusler et al. 2017).

The roles of youth and adults may change over the course of a program as youth take on greater responsibility and leadership. In the East New York Farms! urban agriculture internship program, adult leaders initially provide youth with a sense of belonging, but increasingly push them to take on ever more challenging tasks and to grapple with complex concepts related to plant growth, composting, and food justice. As the interns return in subsequent years, they take on greater program responsibilities, such as providing workshops for younger interns and community members, mentoring younger interns in their farm and farmers’ market tasks, and participating in protests to preserve community gardens (Deia and Krasny 2018). Educators’ work with youth demonstrates “authentic care,” or making young people feel safe while challenging them to reach beyond what they
think they can accomplish, or what society is telling them they can accomplish (Valenzuela 1999). The urban agriculture intern program also illustrates a social justice approach, as youth develop critical consciousness through posing questions about food security in their low-income community of color, which enables them to perceive, understand, and potentially counter oppressive food systems (Freire 1973; Delia and Krasny 2018).

Outdoor Adventure Programs

In outdoor adventure programs lasting several weeks or months, participants develop assets through the challenges, intensity, and novelty of the experience, and through opportunities to spend time in nature and be part of a tight-knit community (McKenzie 2000; D’Amato and Krasny 2011). Participants often describe these programs as transformational, which can be attributed to experiencing a “disorienting dilemma” (Mezirow 2000) stemming from living in the wilderness and adopting a lifestyle radically different from everyday life. To help participants process these dilemmas and acquire assets, instructors maintain a supportive social community, set expectations, provide opportunities to master the physical and social challenges inherent to such programs, and set time for self-reflection to process feelings of disorientation (McKenzie 2000, McKenzie 2003, D’Amato and Krasny 2011). These strategies may be adapted for shorter-term, nearby outdoor adventure or challenge experiences.

In short, environmental educators seeking to foster positive youth development should provide youth with a sense of belonging and with positive social connections, while pushing them to take on increasing responsibility and leadership. As educators navigate providing guidance and allowing youth to realize their potential, they constantly reflect on their own role and are open with youth about their reflections. They are also willing to adapt their approach as youth acquire newfound abilities.

Assessing Positive Youth Development

Surveys are available for measuring youth assets in developed and developing countries. In addition to asking youth about their perceived self-efficacy (see chapter 10), trust (chapter 13), and well-being (chapter 15), surveys include questions about youth engagement in advocacy, mentoring younger youth, clubs and after-school programs, and volunteering (Lerner et al. 2005; Zaff et al. 2010; Hinson et al. 2016; see appendix). Surveys of parents’ perceptions of their children can also be used to assess changes in youth assets and civic engagement.
Open-ended and narrative interviews and participant observation conducted using an appreciative inquiry process provide in-depth understanding of how youth acquire assets. For example, graduate students may embed themselves in youth development programs, helping the educators with program activities while making observations of how youth develop assets over an extended period. Embedded assessment activities, such as youth journaling and conference presentations, also enable evaluators to gain insight into the feedbacks between participants and program context (Delia and Krasny 2018; Briggs et al. 2019).

Additionally, educators can assess their program to determine how well it is providing a context for youth development. For example, you might ask whether your program provides a safe space for youth of multiple ages, genders, socioeconomic classes, and ethnicities to express their ideas and feelings (Hinson et al. 2016).