



NCYOJ's School Responder Model Podcast Series

EPISODE 2: POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT



INTRODUCTION

Thank you for joining us in part two of the NCYOJ's School Responder Model discussion on positive youth development or PYD. In this podcast, NCYOJ's Darren Cosgrove and Catherine Kramer are back, talking with Dr. Brandow about challenges and barriers related to implementing PYD, those elements in schools and communities that can facilitate a strong PYD framework, and key principles of positive youth development.

If you missed part one of this conversation, please feel free to stream the content, which covers some of the PYD essentials and details how this framework supports a School Responder Model.

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| Crystal Brandow:

So we've heard your experiences, and we also talked a little bit about PYD in the context of a School Responder Model. What else would you say positive youth development looks like when it's put into action?

| Darren Cosgrove:

Well, there are definitely some core principles of PYD and maybe Catherine and I can run through those and offer a couple of examples of what those principles might look like in action. One of the core principles is connecting young people with at least one caring adult. So in the example that I used, and I can really speak to this both as having been a young person, a member of the group, and then having for many years, worked in a professional capacity as the advisor of the group. And the advisors of the group really emphasized and spent a lot of time making sure there were opportunities to build trust and rapport between group members and the advisors. Advisors regularly made themselves available outside of group meetings to be a supportive resource, to function in some ways, as a mentor. Or at times when needed, really work as an advocate for that young person, whether that was doing some advocacy in the community, in the young person's school environment, or sometimes advocate on behalf of the young person, if there was any difficult situations at home.

| Darren Cosgrove:

And I know, again, having been on both sides of that relationship, just how important that having that really caring adult in your corner is. And like Catherine shared, the adults that she had worked with as a young person, just really were a strong and influential, positive adult relationship. I certainly feel that way about the folks who were the advisors of my group, and hope that I was able to offer that to the young people that I served when I was an advisor. But that connection with at least one caring, supportive adult, is really essential to positive youth development.

| Catherine Kramer:

So the second item that we'll look at is connecting to school and connecting to other youth serving organizations or agencies. So the importance really of developing those social and emotional competencies and connections through the involvement in those groups or those organizations. And I think for both Darren and I, as you heard us talk about our examples, for me, in the example that I spoke about, my connection to that program, made school a really important place for me to go.

I Catherine Kramer:

So I was always a good student, a decent student. By no means was I the best student at math or science. And I always kind of felt that's what really mattered in my school, was being good in those subjects and I was okay. But in this program I really excelled. And it made me feel connected to my school. It made me feel connected to adults in the school in a way, and it also built my kind of emotional resiliency in managing other underclassmen.

I Catherine Kramer:

So when I was a junior, working with freshmen and sophomore and building relationships with them and really kind of managing their activities out in the community. So all of this forged connections to the agencies and organizations that I was part of and the people who did them. And I think you heard a lot of that in Darren's example, as well.

I Darren Cosgrove:

A kind of a third piece, that's related to the core principles of positive youth development is, engaging young people with peers who have pro-social orientations. So again, just to go back to the example I shared about the program I used to work with. The group not only focused on producing these educational outputs for the community, it also really prioritized young people's need for connectedness and belonging.

I Darren Cosgrove:

And that was really evident in the group, that there was this double mission, and that it was a related mission that our educational services were really good, because we were a group that deeply cared about one another and about our mission. We had this really strong sense of identity and connectedness to one another, and I think that that influenced the quality of the work we were doing. And the work, the outputs, provided a tangible project for us to be working towards, but the group definitely emphasized the value of connectedness, the value of belonging.

I Darren Cosgrove:

Oftentimes, our group meetings had portions of time that were just strictly dedicated to team building, to group games, to group members, just being able to hang out and have these informal and supportive conversations with one another, with the adults that were involved. And then those types of activities that our weekly meetings were also supplemented by really intentional opportunities for us. Our advisors often would bring us to go to leadership conferences, where we might be able to connect with other young people who are doing similar work. So there was a lot of opportunity for us to connect with other peers. And that was just such an incredible experience.

I Catherine Kramer:

So the last one that we'll talk about is the ways that PYD really facilitates creating a network of social capital to provide aid, social supports, and resources to young people. So in a lot of ways, I was a very fortunate person, in terms of my family and the social supports and economic supports that I got at home. Not all young people are in that situation. And I'll say from the example that I talked about, this kind of service learning program, that the connection that that program brought between young people, other people in the school, other people out in the community, how that helped.

I Catherine Kramer:

I know the two leaders that ran the program, they helped people with their college applications, with their essays, things that maybe a person didn't have connection to in their own life, in their own family. And so by their involvement in that program, they really were brought together with this kind of supportive structure around them, that kind of surrounded the young people that were involved in this. And I'll say that it delivered benefits far beyond the things that we even talked about. But really tangible things in terms of preparing for jobs, preparing for entering colleges and things like that.

I Darren Cosgrove:

I think that there are really some key takeaways, because I think positive youth development can sometimes feel like this really abstract paradigm. In some ways it is, but there are these core guiding principles. And there's also, just to kind of summarize some key points here, is the idea that positive youth development really focuses on personalizing and customizing opportunities and experiences for young people with a focus on identity development and exploration of possible self.

| Darren Cosgrove:

It's very possibility focused. As Catherine mentioned previously, it sort of is ... Not sort of, it is definitely a move away from a deficit based focus to really a strength based focus, that provides an opportunity to explore who young people are, how their identities are developing. And we're seeing that as a really exciting, healthy, and really formative time in a young person's life.

| Darren Cosgrove:

Positive youth development also really emphasizes the importance of exercising voice and choice. Youth are provided with opportunities to self-direct and self-determine. Certainly that can happen with adult support. Adults can help initiate tasks and projects that can be scaffold in ways that are developmentally appropriate.

| Darren Cosgrove:

So this might involve helping young folks break a complex task into some smaller, tangible steps, as they work towards their goals. But that that goal setting and that leadership is really directed and grounded by young people's lived experiences and self identified needs and goals. So I think that that voice and choice is so important, that it is not a sort of a tokenistic use of youth. Sometimes youth are touted as being in leadership roles, but those leadership roles don't actually come with any authority or decision making power. And positive youth development really recognizes the need for youth's voices to have space to be shared, to be listened to, to be respected and for youth to really have choices in these types of programs.

| Darren Cosgrove:

And then finally, positive youth development has a focus on pursuing educational and economic opportunities. Adults can provide structures, through which young people can discover their unique self, their talents, and therefore get connected to future opportunities. And I think both Catherine and my examples really spoke to how the programs that we were involved in, certainly had a focus and a goal. Maybe a tangible output in my case; these educational programs, but also provided these networking opportunities.

| Darren Cosgrove:

I can recall as a young person going to different advocacy days at the State Capitol and meeting legislators, meeting different organizations and agencies that I later ended up working for, because of those connections that were made during that time in the group. So I think it's a great way to help support young people's exploration of career goals and furthering and supplementing some of the both educational and again, economic opportunities that might be there in the future.

| Crystal Brandow:

Wonderful. On the other side of this, what would you say are some of the challenges and the barriers associated with positive youth development and actually implementing this in a school or even in a community setting? Catherine, what would you say?

| Catherine Kramer:

Yeah, I would say that the challenges or barriers would likely be similar in both school and community settings. So I think one big barrier that Darren and I spoke about earlier, was the deficit orientation that really pervades the structure and design of many youth serving agencies and organizations. So like schools, community based mental health services, as well as just youth serving professionals kind of overall.

| Catherine Kramer:

So I think one challenge, is that the funding and resources that are there for services are often tied to treating problems. There are very few resources that are available for prevention and basic development. So, we kind of, in a lot of ways, leave young people to kind of develop on their own, in their communities, in their family units. And then if there are problems, they suddenly come to the attention of service providers in some way. And I think the lack of kind of services and funding around doing some of that initial preventative work, is definitely a significant barrier.

| Catherine Kramer:

And then of course, as we spoke about before, many youth serving professions are also organized around treating problems, rather than building on strengths and abilities. And so, if we think about social worker or mental health professionals, we really in a lot of ways, are trained to intervene when a young person has some kind of mental health issue, having some kind of symptoms, having some kind of problems.

I Catherine Kramer:

And I think that even in education, where folks are certainly working to develop all young people's education and abilities, I think a disproportionate amount of attention is focused on those that we consider to be at risk, right? So once they're suddenly come to the attention of the educators as potentially failing to meet the mark, so to say, suddenly that's when investments happen and far less so at the onset. And I think that pervades the way things are funded, the way that we're organized and even the way that we're trained as professionals, to kind of interact with young people.

I Catherine Kramer:

I will also say that youth serving systems, such as schools and community based services, are very disjointed and siloed. Darren and I spoke about how part of PYD is really this idea of having synergy across these environments that each of us as a service provider, we think of, we treat or attend to one aspect of a young person. So an educator, I'm there to educate that young person. If I'm a social worker that's working with a young person, maybe I'm concerned about their mental health or their social emotional development. And we all kind of divide up young people in ways that we know that's not how people function, right? That people are people; they're their integrated selves. All of those components are part of who that person is.

I Catherine Kramer:

And our systems don't work very well together. So each system kind of has its separate funding, streams, separate regulatory and accountability demands, and that can make it really hard to work in those synergistic ways that Darren and I spoke of.

I Catherine Kramer:

And then lastly, I would say that, I think maybe we see this potentially now more than ever, although I suppose that's been said over many generations, but there is this friction and problem; friction between generations and this problem of adultism. So having a deficit or problem oriented view of youth by adults has a very long history. And there is certainly evidence that that presumption is potentially growing, in some ways. We see a lot of animosity and kind of friction between baby boomers, between millennials. And I think more of that might be intensifying in some ways, and it can be problematic. It can spill over into our professional lives and in our work with young people.

I Crystal Brandow:

So what about the elements that can help with facilitating the implementation of positive youth development in either of these settings, rather than focusing on the challenges and barriers, what would you say are those helping factors?

I Darren Cosgrove:

Yeah, I can speak to that. And Catherine, I feel like you're getting like the ... Each of these questions you're tackling the challenging side of everything; the brave stuff and so-

I Catherine Kramer:

That's okay.

I Darren Cosgrove:

We'll have to reevaluate our division of labor and opportunities in the future. So yeah, there's lots of facilitative factors. I think that one of the most important, is that there absolutely has to be a commitment on the part of the leadership at the school or community based mental health setting. Leadership has to have buy-in to want to bring about a shift in how we all work with youth and how that work is approached. There also really needs to be a real lining of the mission and goals or priorities of the school or community setting, to reflect the principles that Catherine and I previously spoke about; the principles of positive youth development.

I Darren Cosgrove:

Catherine had previously been speaking about the very real experience of siloing, and that is something that we need to really consider. A significant facilitator or support for positive youth development, is the ability for there to be interprofessional and interdisciplinary collaboration across professions; including educators and mental health providers. There really needs to be an active breaking down of silos between professions. And that can be achieved by organizing around a more sort of holistic perspective of a young person, just like Catherine was sharing about. We really need to look at young people holistically and then find ways to holistically collaborate to, to not have this fragmented sort of approach to work with youth.

I Darren Cosgrove:

Hopefully, there's a growing interest in peer relationships and incorporating youth participation in leadership and governance structures of schools and community based organizations. And this could involve having a youth on the board or being part of formal structures that inform organizational opportunities. And again, back to that idea of voice and choice, this has to involve young people being involved in real meaningful ways, that actually carry some decision making power and not in tokenistic ways.

I Darren Cosgrove:

Positive youth development can also be supported by shifting priorities in the policy environment, legislation, such as The Every Student Succeeds Act, happening in education at the federal level, as well as greater attention to the handling of youth who become involved in the juvenile justice system. For example, raise the age; really suggests that policy is catching up to what is known about adolescent development. And these directions also place a greater emphasis on trauma and on social and emotional learning, which is very much aligned with positive youth development.

I Darren Cosgrove:

Of course, taking some steps back and thinking about who we recruit into youth serving professions and how we train those staff is really important, rather than having to sort of support professionals, adult professionals, in the process of transcending and sort of undoing what they may have already learned; maybe from a deficit model or perspective of youth, and really trying to engage people that have been steeped in or are engaged in more strength based in positive youth development paradigms to begin with, can get us moving in the direction we need to be moving.

I Darren Cosgrove:

Individually, we can really spend some time getting in touch with our own experiences as a young person. That can really be illuminating, having the opportunity to remember what mattered to each of us. Listener, what mattered to you as a young person? What were those experiences, positive or negative, that you still remember today, right? We all went through the developmental journey of being an adolescent.

I Darren Cosgrove:

So while it's important to not make assumptions, that our own individual experience will be, or should be the experience of all young people, starting with ourself is a great way to interrogate our own beliefs or assumptions about young people.

I Crystal Brandow:

That's so true. A lot of the trainings that NCYOJ offers, it's not uncommon for there to be an activity that asks participants to reflect on their adolescence in some way, shape or form to identify what were some of the behaviors they had, attitudes they had and so on. Just speak to a little bit of what you're saying, Darren, about really getting in touch with your own experiences as a young person and helping that to inform how you relate to young people today and whatever the working role may be or personal role may be. So thank you so much.

I Crystal Brandow:

And in the last couple of minutes here, I want to tie this more explicitly back to School Responder Models again, and ask Catherine, based on your experience in both of these areas, if PYD was adopted by more schools, including schools during the School Responder Model work and implementing that framework, what do you think some of the outcomes could be for youth in those environments, in just the couple of minutes?

I Catherine Kramer:

Sure. So I think that there's a growing body of research that looks at positive youth development and what kinds of outcomes it can have. So I think if we look to that literature, we can really get some good ideas about what this would look like if this was joined together, if PYD was joined together with a School Responder Model. So I'll run through some of those outcomes. I have five of them that I'll highlight.

I Catherine Kramer:

So really the first is this idea that PYD is associated with youth in their ability to develop social academic, cognitive, and vocational competence. So I think for those who are working within a school, I think this is probably the outcome that

you are most familiar with and your job is really oriented to achieve. And I think that there is a lot of good research that shows that a positive youth development orientation and framework, when joined with the School Responder Model, can actually be really supportive of achieving that primary mission.

I Catherine Kramer:

So the second that I would share is that PYD, and I think you heard this very loud and clear anecdotally, from Darren and I and our experience, but that PYD is really associated with youth developing a general sense of worth of self efficacy of confidence, this idea that they really matter and that they have value. So they develop a sense of hope and it kind of joins with that sense of competence and that sense of confidence, and they have a vision for their future, have a plan for themselves and really feel like they are capable of achieving that.

I Catherine Kramer:

So third, I will say, I think this also came across pretty clear, but PYD is also associated with youth developing connections to peers, family, caring adults, such as teachers, social workers, coaches, principals, and others in schools, and of course in other youth serving organizations, and all such significant others in the lives of young people contribute to their healthy development and their school success.

I Catherine Kramer:

The fourth I'll share is that youth develop character, including a sense of right and wrong, of respect for norms, of really developing ideas about boundaries, about relationships, and about how to be a productive and contributing member to their community, and to have the ability to be resilient, to overcome challenges that they are likely to face throughout life.

I Catherine Kramer:

And finally, I'll share that youth developing care for others with the ability to possess sympathy and empathy for others. And I think that's a really important one. Again, getting to this idea of the outcomes are not isolated to a young person, but they're really can have quite profound impacts on the community overall, when young people are developed in such a way that they have care and compassion for others.

I Crystal Bradow:

Thank you so much, Catherine. I think that wraps up the time we have for this conversation. I really want to thank both you and Darren for joining us and talking about positive youth development in this podcast. Are there any closing thoughts, any final words from either of you?

I Catherine Kramer:

No, thank you so much.

I Darren Cosgrove:

Yeah. I really appreciate the opportunity. And this is something that we're both really excited about and passionate about. So it's always fun to talk about. So thanks.

I Catherine Kramer:

Thank you so much, Crystal. Darren and I are both really passionate about this topic, so we thank you for giving us the opportunity to share it with others.

CONCLUSION

Thank you for listening to this conversation on positive youth development. As always, to learn more about School Responder Models, please visit the NCYOJ's School Responder Model Virtual Toolbox at srm.policyresearchinc.org.