



Adolescence and Education

Equity-Oriented Positive Youth Development

Edited by

**Erica Van Steenise
Daniela Kruei DiGiacomo**

Equity-Oriented Positive Youth Development

Adolescence and Education

Series Editors

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And

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University of Kentucky, USA



United Kingdom – North America – Japan
India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Emerald Publishing, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street, Leeds LS1 4DL

First edition 2026

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-80592-274-2 (Print hardback)
ISBN: 978-1-80592-276-6 (Print paperback)
ISBN: 978-1-80592-273-5 (Ebooks)
ISBN: 978-1-80592-275-9 (EPUB)

Typeset by TNQ Tech
Cover design by TNQ Tech

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Mara Schanfield, MEd, CAGS specializes in accelerating positive youth outcomes through data-driven participatory processes. She provides training and technical assistance for school improvement and social-emotional learning (SEL) implementation. Her expertise includes systemic SEL, Multi-tiered Systems of Support, advisory programs, and sports-based youth development. Schanfield previously served as an administrator and School Transformation Specialist in the Boston Public Schools. Schanfield holds a K-12 School Counseling License and Master of Education in Prevention Science and Practice and Certificate of Advanced Graduate Study in Counseling from Harvard Graduate School of Education. She currently serves on the Minneapolis Community Commission for Police Oversight and chairs the Police Policy and Research Committee.

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Jennifer Shubert, PhD, is an Associate Professor of Psychology at Utah Valley University, where she teaches courses on developmental psychology, positive psychology, and career preparation. Her research focuses on positive youth development and understanding how families, schools, and communities can promote character and civic engagement in young people. She is passionate about finding ways to help youth thrive and believe that nurturing character and civic development can create a ripple effect of positive change in society.

Sydney Simmons is a doctoral student at Northwestern University, exploring the intersections of design/operations, STEM, identity, community relationships, data analysis, and learning ecosystems. Her research employs both quantitative and qualitative methods – including ethnography, design-based research, and statistical analysis – to understand how design processes shape communities and foster STEM identity. Currently, she's focused on how programs integrate within their ecosystems and influence girls, families, and STEM facilitators.

Naomi Thompson, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Learning Sciences in the Graduate School of Education at the University at Buffalo. She earned her PhD in Learning Sciences from Indiana University and completed a postdoctoral position at Northwestern University in the School of Education and Social Policy. She is interested in the ways crafting, art-making, and other design activities can intersect with and enhance equitable learning in both formal and informal environments. Particularly, she seeks to design educational experiences in ways that highlight and honor voices and practices that are traditionally minoritized and undervalued in educational settings.

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Deepa S. Vasudevan, EdD, is a researcher at the American Institutes for Research (AIR). Drawing on sociocultural and sociological perspectives to inform her work, Deepa examines social experiences within community-based education spaces and studies the implementation processes of social service programs and school-community partnerships. Over the past 15 years, Vasudevan has worn many hats in relation to understanding youth development, including as a college lecturer, researcher, program evaluator, professional development trainer, community nonprofit board member, and youth worker. She is a co-editor of the volume *At Our Best: Youth-Adult Partnerships in Out-of-School Time Setting*. Vasudevan holds an EdD in Culture, Communities, and Education and an EdM in Educational Policy and Management from Harvard Graduate School of Education.

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FOREWORD

Ben Kirshner
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I first became familiar with the words, ‘youth development,’ in 1993, when I started as a youth worker at the San Francisco Conservation Corps’ (SFCC) *Youth in Action* program. As I look back now, the agency’s history mirrored transformations going on more broadly in the field. In 1983, the SFCC launched the first ‘urban’ Youth Corps, inspired by the Civilian Conservation Corps of the New Deal era.¹ Initially designed to support employment and transitions for young people who had not completed high school or who had been incarcerated, SFCC expanded over time. When I walked through the doors of its Mission District satellite office, I encountered a host of programs, including *Youth in Action*, where SFCC’s young adult ‘corpsmembers’ worked as mentors, coaches, and supervisors to 6th, 7th, and 8th graders. In its emphasis on community projects, leadership development, and positive relationships, Youth in Action embodied core features of the emerging youth development movement that was gaining clarity and momentum nationally.

In retrospect, I believe this emerging movement embodied some elements of the equity commitments that the chapters in this volume by Daniela Kruei DiGiacomo and Erica Van Steenis explore. Positive Youth Development (PYD), at its start, offered a critique of deficit-based language, made clear the limits of ‘risk’ and ‘prevention’ as a motivating frame, and called for more holistic approaches to working with youth. Subsequent developments by PYD scholars sharpened our focus on equity, such as the theorization of Social Justice Youth Development (SJYD) developed by [Shawn Ginwright and Julio Cammarota \(2002\)](#), which brought in a critical analysis of “the complex social, economic, and political forces that bear on the lives” of youth, such as racism, poverty, and sexism (p. 82). Related arguments for centering young people’s community and cultural practices ([Kenyon & Hanson, 2012](#); [Koller & Verma, 2017](#); [Lerner et al., 2021](#)),

emphasizing race conscious programming (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Travis & Leech, 2013), and treating agency and activism as core elements of PYD also emerged (Watts & Flanagan, 2005). Taken together, this early commitment to equity from PYD scholarship has helped to shape our current understanding of the limits and opportunities in the field.

Which brings us back to the need for this volume. You could be forgiven, if by 2020, you thought that the term equity had been so widely accepted as to be benign or uncontested. Equity had taken on a buzzword quality, similar to terms like *voice* and *participation* – signaling a performative commitment but lacking definition or force (Leal, 2007).

And yet. Mirroring broader struggles for access, opportunity, and rights in a multiracial democracy, the equity imperative for PYD remains urgent. In fact, what might have felt like a steady march forward has been set back by political challenges that have dangerous consequences for young people, particularly youth of color, LGBTQ+ youth, and youth from immigrant families. Higher education offices that support access and inclusion for students with minoritized or marginalized identities have been closed or cut in multiple states (Gretzinger et al., 2024). Philanthropies are stepping back from equity commitments and de-prioritizing racial equity as a guiding lens for their giving (Bowermaster, 2024; Daniels et al., 2023).

It is in this context that this book, *Equity-Oriented Positive Youth Development* is urgent and necessary. This volume of empirical studies and descriptive accounts includes arguments for equity-centered youth development and offers ample evidence for the value and benefits – and continued need – for youth programs to take equity seriously in their design and implementation.

This purposeful focus on equity in theory and practice is not just for countering its opponents. Less well appreciated, I think, is the fact that well-intentioned youth organizations need to continue learning and improving their ability to enact commitments to anti-racism, access, and equitable treatment of young people staff (see Baldrige, 2019; Baldrige et al., 2024). Organizations may need to unlearn old habits around staff promotion, be more aware of the hidden influence of donors who may be distant from the communities served, and stay constantly attuned to shifts in the everyday lives and cultural practices of youth.

To do so, this book is a terrific guide. Infusing equity with meaning and force means pairing it with a compelling and evidence-based theory of learning, which DiGiacomo and Van Steenis do in their introduction. Decades of learning sciences research about the cultural nature of human development provide a strong foundation for programming that treats cultural and ethnic diversity as a resource (Nasir et al., 2020). Moreover, equity will have different contours across different communities and historical contexts, as this collection showcases by highlighting programs in a range of sociopolitical contexts, from military bases in the southeastern US to a LGBTQ+ youth-led organization in the midwest.

We also see an equity lens directed at the experiences and trajectories of youth workers, who play essential roles in PYD but are often not compensated adequately or shown viable professional paths. This issue about the professional lives of youth workers is given valuable attention in this volume.

When I think back to when I started in this field, in the 1990s, I wish I had had more access to equity-centered frameworks and professional learning. I remember a general sense that we were making this up as we went along. The collaborative, creative elements of the work excited and inspired me. We had some good ideas, but I also reflect now about how much better I might have been with the support of professional learning – including conceptualizations of equity and how to enact asset-based programming in our day to day work.

So, 30 years later, we have this book. I'm grateful to the editors for bringing this together and to the authors of each chapter for sharing their reflections and findings with the field. Happy reading!

NOTE

1. The Civilian Conservation Corps was created in 1933 and enlisted men ages 18–25 in work programs to improve public lands as part of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal initiative to lift the United States out of the Great Depression (National Park Service, 2018).

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The editors of this volume, Dr Erica Van Steenis and Dr Daniela Krueh DiGiacomo, would like to express gratitude for one of our advisors, Dr Ben Kirshner, who encouraged us to think expansively about youth learning and development through his mentorship in both exposure to theory and engagement in practice.

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INTRODUCTION TO THE VOLUME

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Western societal norms, particularly in White, middle class cultural contexts, tend to associate socially appropriate activities, tasks, preferences, and/or work to developmental age bands. Beliefs about youth as incapable of contributing meaningfully to society or intellectually within their communities persist. For instance, in the United States, youth cannot vote until they turn 18. They may also be thought unable to have honest conversations about the social issues that most affect their lives like race and racism or making informed and embodied decisions about their gender and sexuality. As the co-editors of this volume on Equity Oriented Positive Youth Development (PYD) who have dedicated their research and practice to create more equitable spaces for youth participation, we begin with this mundane reminder: dominate modes of developmental stratification prevail in the United States. White, middle-class, heteronormative, colonial, and patriarchal forces shape the ways in which we understand adolescent development. These forces, often in subtle ways, shape educational contexts and the contexts in which youth development take place.

Nevertheless, we believe that incredible progress in the scholarly field of youth learning and development has taken place in the past several decades. Researchers, practitioners, and youth alike push the field to think in asset-based rather than deficit based ways about what it really means for youth to thrive. We also see bright spots where more equitable design and implementation of youth development are taking places. In her work, Daniela sees several

contemporary examples of the agency and power of youth in her work alongside the Kentucky Student Voice Team (KSVT), a group of middle and high school students and adult allies in Kentucky who engage in collective organizing across the country. In the midst of political pressures from various groups to restrict what and whose history is taught in K-12 schools and to limit what books children have access to in libraries, KSVT students come together to make their voices heard. KSVT youth routinely conduct youth participatory action research projects that have led to the passing of state level legislation that is responsive to young people's lived schooling experiences and needs.¹ Frustrated by adults who make choices about them, without them, and decisions that limit what they can or can not learn, student voice groups and youth-led organizations like KSVT are increasing in size, scope, and power across the country.

In her own research partnerships, Erica works alongside adults who intentionally design learning environments that cultivate equitable and authentic relationships with youth so that youth can more easily discover who they are, cultivate abilities to shape their own lives, and learn how to engage with and contribute to the world around them. School and youth-serving teams across the country work tirelessly to shift the dominant paradigm that youth must act and participate in narrow rather than expansive ways. Educators think about the intentional ways they can shape their activities and approaches to more powerfully build relationships with their students. And, youth-serving practitioners facilitate appropriate program structure and design the conditions under which youth can flourish in out-of-school time contexts. There is no doubt that youth and adult relationships provide the foundation for youth to pursue their interests, passions, and future trajectories (Pekel et al., 2018; Scales et al., 2019; Sethi & Scales, 2020)

What we see in these examples, from the type of youth-led, intergenerational organizing taking place in a program like KSVT to adult facilitation of young people's positive development, is genuine intellectual and emotional work being done collaboratively *and* in developmentally appropriate ways. It may not be the case that the youth hold exactly the same roles as adults in their communities, families, schools, and afterschool programs, or that they are assumed equal in all parts. Rather, we believe that the guiding assumption must be that through an intentional design of learning environments that encompass inclusivity, joint activity, and meaning-making, a greater good for youth is achievable. Simply put, it is by and through the authentic contributions of young people in relation to their varied social and cultural contexts, including their adult allies, that a more humanizing and justice-centered approach to youth development becomes possible. We hope those who read this volume can keep this orientation to youth development in mind to continue progress made in recent years by those in the PYD field, who remain the thought leaders in the design and study of contemporary out-of-school education for adolescents.

THE CORE DIMENSIONS OF PYD

Historically, PYD has recognized youths' strengths and assisted in shaping programs, services, and supports for youth. PYD emerged to counter the dominant paradigm that youth are limited, fraught with problems, and in danger of participating in risky behaviors (Benson et al., 2011; Damon, 2004; Larson, 2000, 2006). Early PYD scholars and practitioners recognized the limited nature of this frame and shifted our understanding from a deficit orientation to recognizing youths' assets (Benson et al., 2011; Damon, 2004; Larson, 2000, 2006).

We now understand that as youth acquire internal and external assets they have more developmental nutrients to shape their present and future outcomes (Benson et al., 2011; Syvertsen et al., 2019; Roehlkepartain & Blyth, 2020). Furthermore, paired with developmental assets, developmental relationships are a critical ingredient to youth thriving (Li & Julian, 2012; Pekel et al., 2018). Young people do not experience positive development by accident or in isolation. Rather, supportive relationships and close connections have a positive ripple effect in igniting youth development. Developmental relationships help youth discover who they are, cultivate their identities, and learn how to engage with and contribute to the world around them (Pekel et al., 2018). Close connections, both those occurring dyadically and across communities, can lead youth to experience greater social and emotional competencies, higher academic motivation and sense of belonging in school, and greater progress toward education and career goals (Van Steenis et al., 2025). Youth have the potential to thrive when their development is intentionally designed for and supported across contexts like within schools, families, and community organizations.

We acknowledge this deeply important work, in research and practice, that has laid the foundation for our more current conception of PYD. Indeed it has led to an understanding and way forward for designing for young people's developmental pathways. The framework has underscored new approaches and practices that give credence to youths' developmental strengths and potentials. PYD has also provided a framework that sees youth as agentic and able to participate in activities not always thought possible based on an understanding of developmental stages. And yet, while PYD *has* re-envisioned the role of young people in our society, we pick up the conversation at a critical moment where PYD research and programs across the nation have begun to put equity and inclusion more readily at the fore (Fields & Green, 2025). Like researchers and practitioners before us who challenged a deficit orientation to adolescence, we have become dissatisfied with a framework for PYD that does not acknowledge the differential ways access to adults and community programs youth experience based on their social locations (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright & James, 2003).

DEFINING EQUITY ORIENTED PYD

We see this collection of chapters as a response to a set of criticisms that has faced the field of PYD and as a beginning where we start to carve out a definitional framework for what equity oriented PYD can look like in theory and in practice. We recognize the seemingly ubiquitous use of the term equity in education research and practice today—and we are mindful that its varied conceptualization and use is in part constitutive of its lack of systemization in practice. Yes, there is documented risk in the overuse of the term equity as simply a buzzword or catchall (Baldrige et al., 2024), but there is still the imperative to concretize and operationalize it into the everyday. As we approach what it means to enact and design for equitable PYD, we understand the criticisms and a need for equitable PYD in the following ways.

First, PYD tends to emphasize White middle class values of what it means to thrive (Cammarota, 2011; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright & James, 2003; Lesko, 2012). The discourse of individuality has persisted insofar as a focus on reducing risk behaviors does not move the field away from views of youth as either developmentally able or deficient. Youth seen as needing intervention homogenizes their experiences instead of considering the various identities and cultural backgrounds individuals bring to the table and that thriving may look differently because of them (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). What we believe to be true is that youth development occurs as part of an ecosystem in which individuals function within and across communities where people and institutions in that ecosystem have the power to oppress or help to shape youths' lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

Second, an analysis of the structural issues facing and oppressing youth is a necessary step to understand youth's contextualized realities (Cammarota, 2011; Ginwright & James, 2003). As Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) have long emphasized, the social realities youth face and institutions influence youth well-being and developmental outcomes. Young people, like adults, exist in social worlds deeply shaped by broader societal forces and structures—and consequently, their development cannot, ever, be understood or made sense of in ways that do not attend to that reality.

Third, in response and recognizing that PYD is an approach *and* a set of outcomes (Redd et al., 2020), this volume explores how youth serving organizations, programs, and interventions have infused equity into their approach and design for youth participation. We take the stance that the status quo or stereotype ascribed to communities of color in the United States, or young people more broadly is no longer acceptable. Instead, we look ahead and anew to ask what youth can, could, or might do, in reimagined and redesigned learning environments that are designed to support, rather than constrain, transformative learning opportunities for all.

It is with this context in mind that we introduce the chapters in this book, which build on our burgeoning understanding of equitable PYD in powerful practical and theoretical ways. As will become clear to the readers of this volume, the chapters, while quite distinct, range both in empirical context and object of inquiry and analyze assumptions that help solidify a definitional framework for equitable PYD.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

By design, we bring together a group of researchers and practitioners who explore contexts and opportunities where youth have agency to co-author their own life narratives in ways desirable to them (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006). Simply put, we accepted the chapters in this volume because they illustrate how particular contexts and participation structures can engender ongoing space for youth voice, leadership, and expertise without sacrificing the known best practices in contemporary PYD scholarship. In large part, this is because we have attempted to enact in theoretical and practical ways a type of PYD that is a heterogeneous, fluid process not fixed or defined by historically constructed, and often limited, binaries or stereotypes.

The six main studies in this book not only make visible the tenets of high-quality youth programs, but also help us to think about how to conceptualize and design for equity and access as related to meaningful, robust, and consequential youth participation and outcomes. Authors in this volume have thought critically about the spaces and social structures that shape and animate youth engagement in PYD contexts, being careful not to put PYD in a box. Focusing on PYD for LGBTQ+ youth, military involved youth, and black youth in a predominantly rural state context, the early chapters offer insight from perhaps typically less researched empirical contexts. The latter chapters also include an analytical focus on the essential role of youth workers in youth development, and unpack that youth and adult relationships play an essential role in youth development.

In Chapter 1, Uttamchandani and Dennis examine and challenge the concepts of youth leadership development and identity development in *Chroma*, a youth group in the United States for LGBTQ+ and allied youth, aged 12–20. In their chapter, they build on McWilliams' (2016) queer critique of linear progress narratives to describe learning and development that is equity-oriented and centers LGBTQ+ youth. We suggest the readers pay particular attention in this first chapter to the incredible nuance that characterizes how the authors *situate* youth learning and development theoretically by highlighting the limits of linear, normative, and outcome-oriented perspectives on youth and human development.

Chapter 2, PYD scholars Garst and Parry present recent analysis from a study in the empirical context of a military-connected youth program in the Southeastern United States. The youth program is a longstanding collaboration between the Boys and Girls Clubs of America (BGCA) and the US Armed Forces. Military-connected youth face unique developmental challenges due to family member deployment, ongoing disruptions to social support networks, and frequent transitions that require persistent adaptation. Theoretically framed through the lenses of relational systems, youth-adult partnerships, and the seven P's of the youth participation model, this chapter eloquently describes the evolution of the BGCA partnership, highlighting key findings, effective strategies, and lessons learned in serving the needs of military-connected youth and their families. We suggest readers pay particular attention to contextually-driven implications for what it means to design for a particular group of young people who occupy intersectional and overlapping identities.

In Chapter 3, Thompson and co-authors offer insights into processes of youth and identity development in a slightly older population, youth workers aged 18–24 years old. In the context of a program called *STEAMbassadors* that prepares Black, Latinx/e, Indigenous and Asian college students from underserved communities to work with youth from those communities, the authors collected data over the course of multiple years in the form of interviews and reflection sessions. Informed by a conceptualization of equity as freedom of movement, the authors analyzed the ways in which a particular type of program infrastructure can make a range of identity resources available for youth workers as they themselves shift in their own identities and gain more expertise in supporting the PYD of others. We suggest readers take time to consider how careful design of programs can support identity development at multiple levels.

Chapter 4 provides insights into the origin story of a youth development program called *Thunder Fellows* in the Southwest of the United States. In the context of a program aimed at supporting increased black participation in the technology industrial sector, Douglass and co-authors ask (a) What process did the founders use in the development of the program? and b) How did the concept translate into implementation of the Thunder Fellows cohort model? Asking these types of origin questions is an important reflexive practice that we suggest all youth development practitioners and researchers ask because in so doing, we might as a field be able to more thoughtfully push against and/or trouble the “kid-fixing” (Kwon, 2013) origins that have long plagued the PYD field (Halpern, 2002).

With a similarly reflective focus as Douglass and authors take in Chapter 4, Chapter 5 calls attention to the importance of youth worker positionality in PYD spaces and places. Authored by Duret and Fisher, long time youth workers and researchers themselves, this chapter outlines what they call

“authentic” versus performance contribution to PYD spaces, providing empirical evidence from an interview-focused study with young people involved in a youth leadership council. We suggest readers pay particular attention to the four dimensions of authentic contribution that emerged from their analysis (honesty, vulnerability, humility and self-awareness) and consider the ways in which those can be replicated and/or adapted to similar contexts.

Chapter 6, as the final substantive chapter in this volume, is authored by a team of PYD researchers housed in Search Institute, a long time PYD focused research and policy organization. In this chapter, Redmond et al. share the journey of Search Institute in their pursuit of advancing equity in PYD. To do so, they attend to contemporary problems of practice and conclude with how equity may be centered in applied research projects and solutions. Naming PYD’s recent criticisms for focusing still in large part on White youth in resource-rich environments, this chapter takes seriously the field’s need, in practice and research and policy, to focus on the nuances in the development of youth of color and to embrace alternative models that prioritize cultural and ethnic diversity.

This volume closes with concluding remarks for Drs. Femi Vance and Deepa Vasudevan. Both with decades of experience as youth workers and now researchers at the American Institutes for Research, Vance and Vasudevan bring together insights from across the contributing chapters and put them in conversation with their contemporary understandings of where PYD as a field sits today in research, policy, and practice. We are so grateful to have these justice-oriented scholars, who both identify as mother scholars of color, to conclude this volume of *Adolescence and Education*.

NOTE

1. In their Coping with Covid study, the KSVT (www.ksvt.org) led a large-scale state wide mixed methods study to examine student learning experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic, and presented their research to state level boards and departments. Ultimately Kentucky lawmakers enacted a bill that allowed for students to take mental health days, as needed, and avoid punitive schooling consequences. See DiGiacomo, D., Usher, E., Griffiths, C., Kahloon, S., & the KSVT. (2022). Coping with Covid-19: Youth Experiences and Perspectives. *Children, Youth & Environments*, 32(1), 5–34.

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