Embedding a Racial Equity Perspective in the Positive Youth Development Approach

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Introduction

Positive youth development (PYD) is a strengths-based approach used by programs to support the development of young people's skills, nurture their interests and values, seek and incorporate their input, and connect them to positive adults and useful resources. Appreciation for the value of youth development has grown in recent years—both because its positive approach is attractive to staff in programs that serve young people, and because an increasing evidence base from research and evaluation studies demonstrates its benefits.[i] As a result, interest in PYD has expanded beyond more traditional youth development programs to different types of programs, including employment readiness, risk behavior prevention programs, and summer programs.

At the same time, program leaders who work with youth and young adults have sharpened their focus on inequities that youth of color experience due to their racial or ethnic backgrounds, and the disparities in their outcomes that result from these inequities. Despite some notable progress, such as declining gaps between racial and ethnic groups in rates of high school graduation,[ii] teen childbearing,[iii] and infant mortality,[iv,v] racial and ethnic inequities and discrimination[vi] remain an issue in the United States. This has led to discussions about appropriate and effective interventions to enable youth of color to develop positively and successfully.

Our [work and emerging research on positive youth development](#) suggest that racial equity is an important framework to further enhance the development and outcomes of children and youth of color.[vii] PYD and racial equity practices are complementary, and a focus on racial equity is critical to strengthening programs that implement a PYD approach.

The primary purpose of this brief is to explain how programs that use a PYD approach (PYD programs) can embed a racial equity perspective so that they can more effectively engage with, support, and meet the needs of youth and young adults of color whom they serve. To do so, we begin by defining the terms *positive youth development* and *racial equity lens*. Next, we provide a set of principles to guide all PYD programs, regardless of their setting, in embedding a racial equity perspective in their practices. Finally, as an example of a new setting for using PYD, we provide information about the Annie E. Casey Foundation's [Generation Work](#) initiative, a workforce training model for young adults, and highlight some ways in which Generation Work is embedding a racial equity perspective in its practices.

Understanding the Terms

Before describing how programs serving youth and young adults can apply a PYD approach using a racial equity lens, we define both terms.

What it means to use a positive youth development approach

The federal Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs provides the following definition of PYD:

> Positive youth development is an intentional, pro-social approach that engages youth within their communities, schools, organizations, peer groups, and families in a manner that is productive and constructive; recognizes, utilizes, and enhances youths' strengths; and promotes positive outcomes for young people by providing opportunities, fostering positive relationships, and furnishing the support needed to build on their leadership strengths.[i]

Because PYD is an approach rather than a specific curriculum or program, it can be used in many types of interventions and programs that serve youth and young adults. Importantly, PYD is not only an approach but also a set of outcomes. PYD programs typically identify positive goals for their participants and seek positive measures to assess these outcomes. For instance, PYD programs do not focus on measuring whether they prevent or reduce negative behaviors and outcomes, such as substance use, high school dropout, or unemployment; instead, they focus explicitly on promoting positive outcomes such as improved social and emotional well-being, access to social capital, positive relationships, or career advancement.

What it means to embed a racial equity perspective

Embedding a racial equity perspective means making a conscious effort to identify and address systemic barriers that impede the healthy development of children and youth of color. Racial equity is achieved when race is no longer a predictor of young people's experiences and outcomes. Beyond actively promoting social change so that rights are upheld and individuals are treated with respect, programs that embed a racial equity perspective also consider ways in which they can change programmatic and organizational policies and structures so that race is no longer a source of pervasive disparities among those the programs serve.[viii]

How Programs Serving Young Adults Can Apply a PYD Approach Using a Racial Equity Perspective

Think intentionally about how program services are offered and to whom.

To embed a racial equity perspective, programs should actively recruit and engage youth of color. PYD programs are expected to ensure that youth and young adults are able to participate in high-quality programs that recognize and develop their strengths, promote positive goals, and provide support to reach these goals. However, embedding a racial equity perspective requires PYD programs to consider whether this happens consistently for *all* of the young people they serve—and if not, what changes may be needed. Moreover, programs should also consider whether they are reaching young people of color who may benefit the most. Programs that incorporate a PYD approach can contribute to systems change—and thus advance

racial equity—by forging alliances with other collaborators to change policies and practices that contribute to disparate outcomes by race.

Build program staff capacity to recognize personal biases and structural inequities.

Because many youth and young adults of color have negative experiences in schools and in the larger community that stem from structural inequities and the biases they reflect, ensuring that these youth have supportive and respectful relationships with PYD program staff can take on added importance. Relationships are, of course, important to all youth (and all adults), but using a racial equity lens helps programs see the value of building staff members' capacity to identify their own biases and recognize the inequities that young people of color may experience. When staff are equipped to do this, they will be able to engage with youth in a respectful and affirming manner and build strong relationships with them. Therefore, programs should provide staff with training on racial equity and related topics to help them understand how structural racism, interpersonal racism, and cultural norms affect young people's experiences in the program and the workplace.

Ensure that youth and young adults of color are represented, visible, and heard in program leadership spaces.

Programs that apply a PYD approach foster opportunities for young people to contribute and belong. They do this by establishing youth advisory councils, including young people in organizational advisory groups, creating opportunities for them to lead or mentor others, and seeking their input on decisions. In this way, programs honor the voices of the young people they serve. Racial equity practices emphasize the importance of engaging young people of color in these activities and working to involve them in decision making. This input can strengthen the appropriateness and effectiveness of programs and provide important developmental opportunities for youth and young adults of color.

Ensure that program settings are trustworthy and safe for young people of color.

Programs using a PYD approach should be places where all young people feel safe and view staff as trustworthy. However, youth and young adults of color often work in settings in which they face heightened physical and psychological dangers, such as being required to work long hours with limited breaks.[ix] Therefore, it is critical for program staff to assure young people, by word and deed, that they will be safe in a program and their eventual job placement.

Examine disaggregated and cross-tabulated outcomes data to gauge PYD programs' progress and effectiveness.

To monitor the effectiveness of racial equity approaches, PYD programs need to examine outcomes for racial and ethnic subgroups. For example, as appropriate, a program could examine a change in youth and young adult outcomes over time, and separately, for Black, Latinx, Native American, Asian, and White youth; this would allow the program to compare whether and by how much outcomes might improve for each subgroup. For PYD programs, disaggregating outcomes data by race and ethnicity can be helpful for determining how to target supports toward groups that have specific needs.

How Generation Work Applies PYD Using a Racial Equity Perspective

Generation Work is a workforce training initiative for youth and young adults that is being implemented in five local partnership sites in the United States. Generation Work employs PYD strategies to prepare young adults for demand-driven jobs,[x] with an intentional focus on integrating a racial equity lens in all aspects of their work. At the systems level, program, foundation, and government partners participate in trainings and share approaches for integrating racial equity into their policies and practices, such as their fundraising strategies and hiring practices. At the program level, this focus involves efforts to improve the capacity of staff to better support young people of color as they enter the workforce.

As a national research partner for Generation Work, Child Trends provides technical assistance and research support by helping to document how Generation Work is applying PYD in workforce and employment settings, and by sharing lessons learned from that work.[xi] To inform this research brief, Child Trends team members interviewed leaders and staff in the five partnerships to gather information about how they are embedding a racial equity perspective in the PYD approach they are using in their workforce development programs. A few of the promising racial equity practices that partnerships are implementing are described below.

Diversifying program staff and leadership

Across sites, programs raised concerns about the lack of diversity among staff in leadership roles or other positions of power and discussed how they are addressing this issue. For instance, one interviewee noted that they are using data to understand racial disparities in hiring practices among partner organizations and to assess their progress in diversifying their staff and leadership. This individual emphasized the importance of knowing "the real numbers for who's getting employed in your agency and these five employer partners, and how many of them are people of color—how many people of color are represented on your senior leadership team and board."

Generation Work

Launched by the Annie E. Casey Foundation in 2015, Generation Work™ aims to connect more of America's young adults with meaningful employment by changing the way public and private systems prepare them for jobs. As part of the initiative, partners in five sites across the nation — Cleveland, Hartford, Indianapolis, Philadelphia and Seattle — are working to align various education, employment and support services to help young people develop the skills required to succeed in the working world; link them with employers; and increase advancement and earning opportunities.

By combining employer-facing strategies that are aligned to labor market needs with positive youth development techniques — such as hands-on learning and mentoring — the initiative aims to blend services into more cohesive pathways that promote equitable employment opportunities for all young people.

Building staff capacity to discuss racism that young people may experience in the workplace

Interviewees also discussed the importance of building the capacity of staff to support young people of color who may be facing racial discrimination in the workplace. By doing so, programs may help young people become more empowered to respond to the discrimination they experience. According to a program

manager in one Generation Work site, "A lot of our students on that pathway to a high-quality job are still starting at places where there is very real racism. [Being] prepared to respond to that and think [about] who you're going to have a conversation with, either in the organization or externally or with mentors, [is] a really core professional skill for any young person of color."

Using data to assess progress in youth and young adult outcomes

Interviewees also discussed the importance of using data to understand whether or how programs may need to adapt their programming to ensure that participants from all backgrounds are achieving progress in target areas. For example, using tools that they received through a racial equity training and technical assistance process, leaders from one site have started to talk about how they are measuring participants' outcomes and progress by race and ethnicity. Leaders are also examining how their partnerships are disaggregating data by race and ethnicity to explore ways to improve programs. The sites understand that there may be inequities in their programming that lead to differential outcomes for young people. In particular, as one interviewee stated, programs are exploring "how [we] change our programming/process to not have specific disparities."

Conclusion

As an approach to serving youth, positive youth development has not focused explicitly on addressing structural racism and institutional discrimination; thus, programs that use PYD alone may not achieve more equitable outcomes across racial and ethnic groups. However, by intentionally embedding a racial equity perspective in their goals and practices, PYD programs can more effectively support youth of color to develop positively and successfully: The two approaches are complementary, and can and should be used together. Generation Work provides an example of how this can be done.

Acknowledgements

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