

Conceptual Framework Underlying the Development of a Positive Youth Development Program in Hong Kong

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Introduction

Many theorists and practitioners regard “conceptual frameworks” as one of the central and potentially important components of bridging the theory-practice gap (e.g., Hills & Gibson, 1992). The utilization of a conceptual framework is not only created and used by scholars and scientists but also for those who apply them in the real-life settings. The synthesis of concepts provides meanings for entities, offers stability in understanding, and helps practitioners to refrain from sheer diversity and minute fraction of knowledge (Smith & Medin, 1981). Before implementing a program, conceptualization is regarded as the foundation and provides effective ways to highlight the emphases of the program and helps practitioners to develop competence in its utilization (Hills & Gibson). As such, the purpose of this chapter is to outline the conceptual framework underlying the Project P.A.T.H.S. in Hong Kong.

Several decades ago, the term “victimology” would best describe the characteristics or major tasks of the psychologists (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In other words, the focus of psychology was devoted to identifying psychological problems (especially mental illnesses) of humankind (Carr, 2011; Snyder, Lopez, & Pedrotti, 2011), and it had also become a science of healing (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi). With the influence of Freudian thoughts, adolescence was conceived as a period of “storm and stress” which automatically exists in young people. However, this “pathological”

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view about adolescence has been criticized on two levels. Primarily, there is little evidence showing that adolescence is necessarily a stormy period with mental health problems (Benson & Scales, 2009). Besides, the image of adolescents under this perspective is negative in nature, thus overlooking the positive attributes of young people. In contrast to perspectives that focus on child problems, such as learning disabilities and substance abuse, Damon (2004) advocated the field of positive youth development (PYD) to emphasize talents, strengths, interests, and future potentials in children. The word “positive” stresses on developing human assets and seeks the fundamental strengths of humankind (Seligman, 1998). With the growth of positive psychology in the past two decades (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi), there is an increasing awareness in seeing youth as resources and the ones with potentials and strengths.

Emphases and Models of the Positive Youth Development Approach

Focus on Positive Development

Positive psychology forms a backdrop for human happiness, optimism, and fulfillment rather than for pathology and deficits that have driven psychology for at least the last 50 years (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In both the Western and Chinese contexts, growing attention has been devoted to developmentally oriented variables which can promote the development of adolescents (e.g., Benson & Scales, 2009; Sun & Shek, 2010). Most of the recent studies included the notions of personal well-being and maximum personal fulfillment (Benson & Scales), which go beyond the applied developmental systems and enhance the greater role of the influence of ecology on personal development and the interactive influence between the ecology and self.

Theoretically speaking, positive psychology has its root in humanistic psychology which maintains that human beings are “angels” instead of “devils.” Huebner, Gilman, and Furlong (2009) pointed out that there were three breakthroughs of positive psychology: from deficit-based to strength-based perspective, from adult orientation to adolescent orientation, and inclusion of community-based activities. Besides, positive youth development also has a root in transpersonal psychology which is concerned about human potentials and different states of consciousness (Scotton, Chinen, & Battista, 1996).

Ecological Emphasis

Besides focusing on the strengths of young people, the influence of ecology on personal actualization is also stressed in the positive youth development approach (Benson & Scales, 2009; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Lerner, Brentano,

Dowling, & Anderson, 2002). The basic assertion of the ecological model is that there is a bidirectional fusing of self and context, with individual behavior being influenced by different personal and environmental factors with reference to different systems. Lerner et al. (2002) further articulated three developmental principles of the influence of ecology on individual behavior: (1) temporal embeddedness (the potential for change in person-context relations across the life span), (2) relative plasticity (the potential for system change), and (3) developmental regulations (the person's active agency on his or her own development that stimulates changes in persons and his or her contexts). This articulation acknowledges the countless paths for adolescent positive development and thriving with ongoing negotiation between one's unique self and his or her contexts, striking a balance between individual capacity or strengths and the "growth promoting influences of the social world" (Lerner, 2004, p. 44).

Developmental Assets

Developmental asset is another cornerstone concept in the positive youth development literature (Benson, 2001; Benson & Scales, 2009; Roehlkepartain, 2012). A call for the development of adolescent developmental assets has evolved to spin the world of youth development in a different direction. The 40 developmental assets weaved together and introduced by Benson have become one of the main streams cultivating and empowering youth's strengths (Benson). By promoting external assets (including support, empowerment, boundaries and expectation, and constructive use of time) and internal assets (including commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity), a scaffold is created in which adolescents are able to establish strong lives and become compassionate, engaged, purposeful, and hopeful (Benson, 2010). Findings from a recent research conducted by Benson and his colleagues in the Search Institute that explored life goals for youth in Australia, Cameron, Canada, India, Thailand, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and the United States showed that 80 % of youth from these countries shared common pursuit of life goals. The five important life goals are (1) being hopeful about the future; (2) having a sense that life has meaning and purpose; (3) making the world a better place; (4) protecting the earth's air, land, and water; and (5) knowing what is unique and valuable about ourselves as humans (Benson, p. 6). These findings are encouraging because young people held these aspirations and goals for themselves. In the past decade, adults gave full energy in developing youth's assets with the assumption that there might be some inadequacies in pursuing their life goals or excelling their potentials. However, with Benson's recent research, it suggests that adolescent development is a matter of discovery. The assets are intrinsic to adolescents, and what we should do is to discover and aid adolescents to discover. The assets suggested by Benson (2001, 2010) require adults to create positive, long-lasting relationships with young people, and this scaffold is a tool to catalyze community visioning and social change (Roehlkepartain).

In their reflections on the work regarding positive youth development, Pittman, Irby, Tolman, Yohalem, and Ferber (2003) highlighted several principles of youth development. The first principle is “problem free is not fully prepared” which underscores the importance of development of positive attributes in young people. The second principle is “while academic competence is critical, it is not enough” which emphasizes the importance of holistic development of adolescents. The third principle is “competence alone, while critical, is not enough,” an assertion which underscores the dynamic nature of youth development. The fourth principle is that the four “Cs” (competence, confidence, character, and connectedness) are important. The fifth principle is that the three “Ls” (learning to be productive, learning to connect, and learning to navigate) are important learning tasks for young people. Based on these principles, a review of the literature shows that several developmental ideals are intrinsic to positive youth development. These include competence, confidence, character, connectedness, contribution, compassion, and care.

Psychosocial Competence

The concept of developmental asset is closely related to the core components of social and emotional learning. According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), social and emotional learning is “a process for helping children and even adults develop the fundamental skills for life effectiveness. SEL teaches the skills we all need to handle ourselves, our relationships, and our work, effectively and ethically. These skills include recognizing and managing our emotions, developing caring and concern for others, establishing positive relationships, making responsible decisions, and handling challenging situations constructively and ethically. They are the skills that allow children to calm themselves when angry, make friends, resolve conflicts respectfully, and make ethical and safe choices” (<http://casel.org/why-it-matters/what-is-sel/>). Weissberg and O’Brien (2004) pointed out that social and emotional learning has several components: (a) self-awareness (knowing one’s feeling and having a realistic assessment of our own abilities, constructs such as spirituality and self-efficacy), (b) social awareness (ability to sense what others feel and take others’ perspectives, constructs such as moral competence and prosocial involvement), (c) self-management (ability to handle emotions and delay gratification and having perseverance when facing frustrations, constructs such as emotional competence and resilience), (d) relationship skills (ability to maintain relationships and handle emotional problems, dealing with interpersonal pressure and conflicts, and seeking help when needed, constructs such as bonding and behavioral competence), and (e) responsible decision-making (ability to assess risk in a realistic manner and generate alternative solutions and taking personal responsibility for one’s decisions, constructs such as beliefs in the future and cognitive competence).

Psychosocial competence has been regarded as an important protective factor in youth development. Hauser (1999) stated that protective factors are “key

constructs in conceptualizations of resilience” which “moderate the effects of individual vulnerabilities or environmental hazards, so that a given developmental trajectory reflects more adaptation in a given domain than would be the case if protective processes were not operating” (p. 4). There are protective factors at different levels, including individual, family, community, and cultural aspects. Smith and Carlson (1997) similarly suggested that factors at the individual, family, and external support systems serve as important protective factors in children and adolescents experiencing environmental hazards. Obviously, by strengthening the psychosocial competence of adolescents, their ability to cope with challenges would be promoted. While the concept of protective factor has commonly been used in the prevention science literature, it is also utilized in positive youth development programs. In a meta-analysis of 213 school-based universal programs focusing on social and emotional learning in children and adolescents ($N=270,034$ children and adolescents), results showed that SEL programs led to improvement in social and emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance in the program participants Durlak et al. (2011). Similar findings can be seen in the review of Catalano et al. (2012).

Character Strengths

There has been a revival in the research work on character strengths in the past two decades. Based on the literature, Park and Peterson (2005) proposed 24 character strengths which contribute to optimal lifelong development and good life. These character strengths can be organized under six broad categories of virtues. First, five character strengths including creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, and perspective can be subsumed under the virtue of “wisdom and knowledge.” The second virtue is “courage” which includes honesty, bravery, persistence, and zest. Third, kindness, love, and social intelligence are clustered under the virtue of “humanity.” Fourth, the virtue of justice consists of three character strengths, including fairness, leadership, and teamwork. The fifth virtue is temperance, which covers forgiveness, modesty, prudence, and self-regulation. Finally, transcendence as a virtue includes five character strengths (appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, and religiousness).

In a series of empirical studies using the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS) (Moore & Lippman, 2005), Park and Peterson (2005) showed that all the character strengths contribute to fulfillment, with certain character strengths having closer relationship with positive youth development and good life. Cardemil, Reivich, and Seligman (2002) further found that character strengths in school students reduced depressive symptoms. Based on a sample of 6,000 youth in Grades 6–12, Scales, Leffert, and Vraa (2003) found that the strengths of planning and decision-making and love of learning (characters related to wisdom and knowledge) were positively related to adolescents’ thriving and school success.

Thriving and Spirituality

Thriving is another popular concept in the PYD literature. Lerner et al. (2002) suggested that the thriving process involves the growth of functionally valued behaviors across development (including competence, character, connection, confidence, as well as caring and compassion) and their impacts on the attainment of structurally valued behaviors (including contribution to self, family, community, and civil society). Thriving is termed as an “underutilized” construct and is only rarely employed to denote either a status or process of adolescent development (Benson & Scales, 2009; Lerner et al., 2002). As Masten and Curtis’s (2000) research suggested, competence is “the adaptational success of an individual in the developmental tasks” (p. 533), and “thriving” hints beyond developmental competence exhibiting more than being successful in accomplishing basic developmental tasks (Benson & Scales). Benson and Scales recognized that the emphasis of positive youth development has aided adolescents in accomplishing basic developmental tasks. However, they reminded the field that the development might only denote adolescents’ attainment of what is needed or just “doing okay” (Masten, 2006). Larson (2000) lamented in his review that “many youth do their schoolwork, comply with their parents...but are not invested in paths into the future that excite them or feel like they originate from within” (p. 170). Therefore, a distinction should be drawn between “adequacy” and “thriving.” “Thriving” should not only be treated as an outcome predicted by experiencing personal and social assets (Theokas et al., 2005). Thriving should go beyond the “point-in-time status” and represent the dynamic interplay of young people being intrinsically (“from within” as Larson mentioned) animated and energized by discovering their uniqueness and potential (Benson & Scales). The “thriving paths” vary within each young person, yet provision of intended platforms by adults (in family and in school) for discovery during adolescence is crucial in helping the adolescents to overcome life hurdles to pursuing their passions and igniting life energy.

Spiritual development, which explores the virtues and traits reflecting strength of character, is claimed as a thriving marker of adolescents (Benson & Scales, 2009; Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005). Given the ambiguity and complexity of the term, fewer than 2 % of scientific publications on adolescents address spiritual development (Benson & Roehlkepartain, 2008). The attempt to review and integrate the domain of spirituality into youth development theory, policy, and practice is scant (Roehlkepartain, 2012; Sun & Shek, 2012). However, Benson and Roehlkepartain cautioned the field that the continuous negligence of addressing spiritual development among adolescents is “thwarting healthy growth” of them (p. 13), and Roehlkepartain furthered argued that spiritual development is a “focus on what it means for youth to thrive” (p. 33). As spirituality has significant potential to strengthen young people, spiritual development becomes the priority in youth development and aids to nurture young people holistically within a global and pluralistic context.

According to Roehlkepartain (2012), thriving is one of the major advocacies in positive youth development and is sustained as a crucial developmental element in

recent years. Actually, spirituality is one of the indicators of thriving in positive youth development (Benson & Scales, 2009). A research on the spiritual lives and interests of over 10,000 freshmen of 200 colleges and universities released by the Higher Education Research Institute of UCLA (Astin, Astin, Lindholm, & Bryant, 2005) reported that two-thirds of the students perceived that spirituality was a source of joy for them. Moreover, the students considered that it is essential to seek opportunities to search for meanings in life and help them grow spiritually. The spiritual development presses the youth to look inward to accept and discover their potential to “grow, contribute, and matter” and to look outward to connect with life (Benson & Roehlkepartain, 2008, p. 20). The deepening interconnectedness within themselves and among the significant figures in their lives aids adolescents to develop clearer identity formation and hence being a full human being (Larson, Hansen, & Moneta, 2006). Researchers further argued that these interconnectedness and authentic relationships established are critical for adolescents to discover and nurture their inner sparks (Benson & Scales, 2009; Roehlkepartain, 2012; Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2011). The power of human spirit ameliorates the thriving experience of adolescents and therefore enhancing their positive youth development.

There are researches highlighting the important role of thriving in adolescent well-being (Benson & Scales, 2009; Roehlkepartain, 2012; Scales et al., 2011; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). These developments could have been termed as what Benson (2007, 2010) suggested as the “think tank” to move the field toward more professional development. The “action tank,” which mobilizes the significant others to nourish the youth, shares the same importance in excelling adolescents’ potentials in the positive youth development. There is an Ethiopian proverb stating that “when spider webs unite, they can tie up a lion.” It is understandable that people might count on the policy-oriented strategies to aid adolescents in a country. Benson (2010), however, argued that much of the capacity of fostering adolescents’ growth lay within the people of the community, and Roehlkepartain echoed with Benson’s argument that the people of the community have the power within themselves to build young people’s assets. Through systematic and evidence-based designed programs, systems, and policies, every adult can participate in nurturing the adolescents’ growth and advance the vision of asset-rich communities (Roehlkepartain). The togetherness of the whole community might echo with the favorite lines of Benson (quoted from Roehlkepartain) that “if you breathe, you’re on the team” (p. 32).

Engagement and Connectedness

Engagement is another hallmark of positive youth development. In their research, Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, and Damon (2001) defined the “good work” with three “Es,” which are “excellent,” “ethical,” and “engaging.” The term “good” aids the adolescents to develop a vision of pursuing quality work (“excellent”) and searching for personal meanings (“engaging”) while maintaining the connection with the

community and society and considering its consequences on others (“ethical”). These engagements foster adolescents to understand the connection of their learning at school with the world of work and thus develop a sense of purpose. Damon, Menon, and Bronk (2003) found that early development of a sense of purpose in adolescence is vital to positive youth development as “purpose is a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond self” (p. 121). To be engaged in meaningful tasks in adolescents’ lives is one of the major developments in positive youth development (Lerner, 2004). The development of purpose drives the adolescents to strive for their personal meanings and hence thrive along their growth pathways.

Besides, further connecting oneself to the community and developing a sense of moral responsibility contribute to adolescents’ thriving experiences as well (Barendsen & Gardner, 2010). Substantial literature has already showed that moral character typically starts to form during adolescence and continues to be shaped throughout secondary school and college years (Barendsen & Gardner, 2010; Colby & Kohlberg, 1987). The provision of platforms and opportunities, especially in school contexts, for adolescents’ self-reflections on the meanings of connecting oneself to the outer world is crucial. In addition, the process of self-reflection leads adolescents to breed self-leadership (leading their own lives) and thus become more aware of their responsibilities to lead the society. Furthermore, linking and combining academic lessons with meaningful and experiential learning inside and outside classrooms deepen their understanding of the self- and societal responsibility and encourages the adolescents to take the real lead of “active construction of [their] knowledge” (Colby, 2007, p. 7).

Besides, the connection of young people to different socializing agents is vital to healthy development in young people. Yust, Johnson, Sasso, and Roehlkepartain (2006) lamented that traditions have rarely been in dialogue with young people and traditions have been passed from one generation to the next with relatively little reflections on “why” and “how” (Benson & Roehlkepartain, 2008). A key insight in positive youth development is that children and adolescents are believed as self-directed learners who are taking the lead in guiding their own growth and learning, and the term “development” emphasizes changes across time (Benson & Roehlkepartain) and prevails across their life spans. Benson, Scales, Hamilton, and Sesma (2006) further affirmed that all socializing systems significantly affect all aspects of young people’s development. Schools are well-situated settings in which youth development programs are implemented (Weissberg & Greenberg, 1998). Therefore, it is important for youth workers and educators to provide and create safe and respectful environments where young people can explore and cultivate their own learning and to offer opportunities for young people for explorations without imposing adults’ beliefs on them.

In addition to creating a nutrient-sufficient environment to nurture adolescents’ potentials, young people also need adults as advocates who create conditions to foster growth. Relationships are the oxygen to human developments and it is in the embrace of the relationships that adolescents discover their worth, purpose in life, and their importance in the world (Benson, 2010). Bronfenbrenner and Morris

(1998) argued that the roles of stable relationships among the adolescents and adults “are necessary for [adolescents’] psychological growth” (p. 993). Rhodes (2002), in addition, affirmed in his research that young people benefit from having many caring adults in their lives, where the healthy relationships create a protective buffer against risk behaviors. These research findings pronounce that adults, such as parents, teachers, mentors, and neighbors, are the “assets” of the adolescents’ growth. As the positive youth development programs would be implemented in educational settings, “to start where we are” (Benson, p. 15), teachers and workers in schools are critical figures because they are a daily source of caring words and actions. With the belief that everybody is on the “web” and has efforts to make a difference, adults would undoubtedly be the advocates that adolescents would look for assistance. Yet, the engagement of adults should be on the same level with shared visions that can drive positive changes in adolescents.

Positive Youth Development Constructs

In their discussion of the conceptual model underlying positive youth development, Benson and Saito (2000) suggested that adolescent developmental strengths (such as mastery, belonging, engagement, support, identity, efficacy, and competence) could be cultivated by several youth development inputs, including programs, organization, systems, and community. In a review of 77 programs in the USA (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004), it was found that 25 programs were successful. Catalano et al. (2004) identified some common constructs in the successful programs and highlighted the 15 constructs as follows:

1. Bonding: positive relationship with healthy adults and positive peers in different contexts.
2. Resilience: to develop and adapt well under adversity.
3. Social competence: ability to interact well with others and have meaningful social engagement.
4. Emotional competence: ability to recognize and manage feelings in oneself and understand others’ emotions.
5. Cognitive competence: intellectual, creative, and critical thinking abilities and problem-solving skills.
6. Behavioral competence: ability to take action such as having refusal skills.
7. Moral competence: ability to differentiate right and wrong behavior.
8. Self-determination: ability to think independently and having a sense of autonomy.
9. Spirituality: having a sense of purpose, hope, or beliefs in a higher power.
10. Self-efficacy: ability to cope and having beliefs that one has the ability to master.
11. Clear and positive identity: healthy identity and self-image.
12. Beliefs in the future: ability to develop future potential goals and optimistic outlook.

13. Recognition for positive behavior: positive behavior such as prosocial behavior or positive changes in behavior are duly recognized and rewarded.
14. Opportunities for prosocial involvement: making positive contribution to groups and the society.
15. Fostering prosocial norms: developing clear and explicit standards for prosocial engagement.

Use of Positive Youth Development Constructs in the Project P.A.T.H.S.

Theoretically, it is desirable to apply the above Western positive youth development constructs identified in the successful programs to a non-Western context, such as the Chinese culture (Shek, Siu, & Lee, 2007; Sun & Shek, 2012). There are substantial reviews and researches highlighting the important role of positive youth development constructs on adolescent well-being and life satisfaction (Catalano et al., 2004; Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Paxton, Valois, Huebner, & Drane, 2006; Shek, 2010a; Sun & Shek, 2012). The propositions that positive youth development influences well-being and health outcomes of adolescents (Sun & Shek) and that positive youth development attributes, such as owning bonding and social roles, are closely related to life satisfaction (Paxton et al., 2006) have been validated and proven to have strong relationships. In addition, numerous researches have affirmed that positive youth development and life satisfaction are negatively associated with problem behaviors such as substance abuse and juvenile delinquency, sexual risk-taking behaviors, and violence and aggression among adolescents (Catalano et al.; Sun & Shek). However, Shek (2010b) has pointed out that there are comparatively fewer studies on the quality of life of children and adolescents and it is especially rare that the life satisfaction of adolescents in Chinese contexts is investigated. Thus, Sun and Shek conducted a research study on investigating the predictive effects of positive youth development on life satisfaction and problem behaviors by a large community sample of Chinese early adolescents in Hong Kong. The study is an important addition to the literature as it validated the interrelationships among positive youth development, life satisfaction, and problem behaviors in the Chinese context. This research further articulated the effects of life satisfaction on adolescents' future behavior and life outcomes instead of putting the sole focus on the factors that contribute to the experience of life satisfaction (Pavot & Diener, 2008). In conjunction with other findings suggesting that positive youth development programs are able to promote positive behavior and aid adolescents to thrive with life satisfaction, it is recommended that regular curricula-based positive youth development programs should be implemented in the school contexts (Shek, 2010c). Of course, one related issue that should be addressed is whether there are any cross-cultural variations in the use and impacts of positive youth development constructs.

Hill and Gibson (1992) advocated that the understanding of the conceptual framework provides systems and scaffolds to bridge over the theory and practice. The development of the conceptual framework of the Project P.A.T.H.S. was based

on a thorough literature review on the developmental assets, positive youth development constructs, and recent developments of positive youth development, such as thriving, spiritual development of the youth, and the dedication of adults in the process. It is argued that the concept of positive youth development and the related models serve as the background of the development of the indigenous positive youth development program. The 15 positive youth development constructs identified in the existing successful programs are incorporated in the Project P.A.T.H.S. A detailed description and the application of the constructs in the Project P.A.T.H.S. can be seen in two special issues on the conceptual frameworks of the project (Shek & Merrick, 2006; Shek, Sun, & Merrick, 2012).

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