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Positive Youth Development

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POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Tania M. Schusler, Jacqueline Davis-Manigaulte,
and Amy Cutter-Mackenzie

Highlights

- Positive youth development is an assets-based approach for cultivating competencies essential to personal well-being.
- When environmental education enables children and youths to contribute to improving urban environments, it can not only increase cities’ sustainability and resilience but also foster young people’s personal growth.
- Participatory action research, peer education, and youth civic engagement are three educational approaches that can lead to positive change for both urban environments and youths living within them.

Introduction

Environmental education is often associated with environmental learning and pro-environmental behaviors. Some approaches to environmental education, however, also enable young people’s personal growth through the development of confidence, self-efficacy, and other assets that support an individual’s well-being. This chapter explores the intersection of urban environmental education and positive youth development. It can inform teachers, environmental educators, science educators, youth workers, and others who want to advance environmental learning and advance a positive developmental trajectory for young people

in varied educational settings, such as school classrooms, after-school programs, community organizations, youth development organizations, churches, camps, nature centers, science centers, museums, and gardens.

We begin by defining positive youth development and applying it to environmental education. We then describe three programs from the United States and Australia to illustrate different pedagogies for integrating positive youth development in environmental education aimed at urban sustainability. By “youth,” we refer to the transitional period between childhood and adulthood, which varies across cultures. The United Nations defines youth as individuals age fifteen to twenty-four, but others include children younger than fifteen or young adults older than twenty-four in their definitions. The programs we describe also included some children younger than fifteen.

Positive Youth Development in Environmental Education

A paradigm shift in the youth development field has occurred, from a focus on reducing specific problems like unintended pregnancy or drug use to “positive youth development,” which builds upon young people’s strengths to develop competencies essential to well-being. Among multiple frameworks describing positive youth development, one of the most comprehensive describes four categories of personal assets promoting well-being: physical (e.g., good health habits); intellectual (e.g., critical thinking, good decision making); psychological (e.g., positive self-regard, emotional self-regulation); and social (e.g., connectedness, commitment to civic engagement) (Eccles and Gootman, 2002). In addition to its emphasis on strengthening assets, positive youth development acknowledges that developmental experiences do not occur as isolated events, but they occur throughout young people’s daily lives as they interact with peers, family, and nonfamilial adults in schools, after-school programs, and their broader communities.

Settings that promote positive youth development in the United States have been found to share similar characteristics (Eccles and Gootman, 2002):

- Physical and psychological safety (e.g., safe facilities, safe peer interactions);
- Appropriate structure (e.g., clear and consistent expectations);
- Supportive relationships (e.g., good communication);
- Opportunities to belong (e.g., meaningful inclusion);
- Positive social norms (e.g., rules of behavior, values and morals);
- Support for efficacy and mattering (e.g., responsibility granting, meaningful challenge);

- Opportunities for skill building; and
- Integration of family, school, and community efforts.

The more of these features within an urban environmental education program, the more likely that positive youth development outcomes will result. All features need not be present, however, and some might require adaptation to be culturally relevant in other countries.

Youths’ physical and psychosocial development is also influenced by the quality of the urban environment, such as environmental toxins, noise, indoor air quality, and access to green space (Evans, 2006). Urban environmental education can enable young people to play a role in ameliorating environmental conditions that negatively impact well-being. Around the globe, youths have demonstrated their capacity to assess and act to improve environmental conditions in cities (Hart, 1997; Chawla, 2002). When youths have genuine opportunity to address environmental concerns, they can develop valuable personal assets and also increase their own and others’ well-being by enhancing urban environments (Figure 17.1). In short, urban environmental education can promote positive

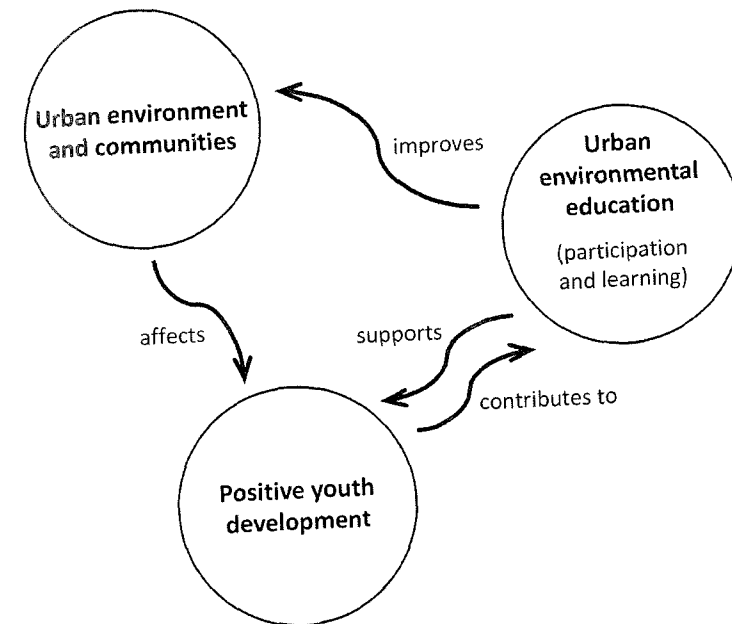


FIGURE 17.1. Urban environmental education that encompasses young people’s participation in improving urban environments can build assets promoting their well-being, while also changing environmental conditions that impact youth development.

youth development, and youths, in turn, can positively contribute to urban sustainability and resilience.

Studies suggest that when youths participate in programs where they act positively for the environment, they themselves grow positively in various ways (Schusler and Krasny, 2010). For example, Hawaiian students working together to select, investigate, and act on a local environmental issue improved their critical thinking; reading, writing, and oral communication skills; familiarity with technology; self-confidence; and citizenship competence (Volk and Cheak, 2003). A food justice education program in New York City proved a valuable developmental experience for youth because it offered somewhere to belong, an opportunity to be pushed toward developing one's potential, to grapple with complexity, to practice leadership, and to become oneself (Delia, 2014). The evaluators of two environmental service-learning programs in East Africa, Roots & Shoots and Wildlife Clubs of Uganda, found that youths in both programs most valued forming relationships with club members, leaders, and community members as an outcome of environmental education (Johnson-Pynn and Johnson, 2010).

While more research is needed into the opportunities and barriers inherent to integrating positive youth development with urban environmental education, the two can be synergistic when programs are intentionally designed with both in mind. To illustrate the synergy that arises between urban environmental education and positive youth development when youths are offered genuine opportunity to effect environmental change, we describe three programs below. The first involves young people in participatory action research through a child-framed approach. The second develops young people's leadership capacities as peer educators. The third facilitates youth civic engagement through local environmental action. In each urban environmental education example, young people were given the opportunity to understand and effect change in urban environments and, as a result, also developed assets promoting their own well-being (Figure 17.1).

Youths as Co-researchers

Children and youths are experts on their own lives, yet research involving children is often conceived of and led by adults. Barratt Hacking, Cutter-Mackenzie, and Barratt (2013) call for including children as researchers rather than objects of investigation. To that end, the project "Is 'Nature' Diminishing in Childhood?

Implications for Children's Lives" engaged young people in Australia in research about childhood and nature from their own perspectives. The project used a child-framed methodology incorporating qualitative and quantitative research in five distinct stages. It involved ten children ages nine to fourteen as co-researchers in each of two sites, one urban and the other an urban fringe suburb.

Stage 1 involved training sessions where the children learned about qualitative research, specifically ethnography (participant observation, semistructured interviews) and arts-based methods (photography, video, mapping), which enabled the children to study themselves and local culture (Cutter-Mackenzie, Edwards, and Widdop Quinton, 2015). One child's description of this experience was typical: "I am excited about being able to voice my opinion. . . . There are lots of young people who are passionate to be heard, but this is the only project I have heard of or taken part in that allows them to do so." Such opportunity to be heard may contribute to positive developmental assets, such as self-efficacy and a sense of social integration.

In stage 2, children conducted research over two months examining nature deficit disorder within their own cultural settings. The children received a device with Wi-Fi and GPS for mapping everyday experiences, appropriate research protocols, and a secure dropbox for uploading data. The latter encouraged children not only to take responsibility for their data but also to begin preliminary analysis (Barratt Hacking, Cutter-Mackenzie, and Barratt, 2013). Stage 3 involved children analyzing their data during research think tanks completed over one intensive session. Participants presented, discussed, mapped, and analyzed their findings. Focus group interviews with the children co-researchers and their parents or guardians also served to triangulate the research findings.

Stage 4 incorporated an online survey that the children co-researchers co-developed with Cutter-Mackenzie. Finally, stage 5 centered on disseminating the young people's research to academics, practitioners, and other children. The young people prepared ways to communicate their findings including a documentary and photomontage (Figure 17.2).

Together the stages of this child-framed methodology highlight how youth can genuinely engage as research collaborators. Through such experiences, children may develop positive developmental assets, such as self-efficacy, connectedness, and research, critical thinking, and communication skills. The results of children's research also may enhance understanding of children's experiences of nature in ways that can inform design and management of urban environments (Figure 17.1).



FIGURE 17.2. Photomontage designed and created by young co-researcher showing what she described as “nature by road” with photos taken at different times throughout the day. She explained that roads in her community both connected (like “blood lines”) and disconnected children to nature. Credit: Graciella Mosqueira.

Youths as Peer Leaders

Peer education involves people with similar characteristics or experiences learning from each other. Used successfully in the health field, it also can be effective in other arenas, including environmental issues (de Vreede, Warner, and Pitter, 2014). Evidence suggests that educating teens to facilitate learning experiences for younger youths can have positive developmental impacts for both younger program recipients and “teens as teachers” (Lee and Murdock, 2001). This strategy provides teens with ownership over the direction of program activities, leading to investment in the outcome of their work (Larson, Walker, and Pearce, 2005).

A peer education or “teens as teachers” strategy was piloted in a 4-H environmental education initiative in New York City during the summer of 2015. 4-H is the youth development component of the Cooperative Extension System at many U.S. public universities. Twenty New York City 4-H teens attended the 4-H Career Exploration Conference at Cornell University, where they participated in science and leadership minicourses led by faculty and staff. During the closing assembly, New York City 4-Hers engaged more than four hundred peers and adult volunteers in creating “Pollinator Seed Bombs” as part of the National Pollinator Initiative, a U.S. presidential directive to conserve pollinators and thus protect the nation’s food supply. Seed bombs are compressed bundles of clay, compost, or soil containing seeds that can be tossed into a bare patch of land

to grow new plant life (<http://kidsgardening.org>). The 4-H teens and adult volunteers pledged to share their new knowledge and seed bombs with friends and 4-H clubs in their respective communities. One New York City 4-H peer educator reflected, “I could see action being taken to improve the world and I was proud to have been a part of it!” This illustrates how participating as an environmental peer educator contributed to this teen leader’s self-efficacy and feelings of maturing, which are positive developmental assets.

When they returned home, the New York City 4-H teens also served as “teen teachers” for the 4-H Exploring Your Urban Environment summer day camp



FIGURE 17.3. In New York City, “teen teachers” in the 4-H Exploring Your Urban Environment program guided younger children releasing butterflies as part of their environmental stewardship project. Credit: Taishoun W. Florental-Kovallier

program (Figure 17.3). The teens were trained to implement a five-week program with younger youths in eight community agencies in New York City. The teen leaders connected 392 youths to their communities through service-learning opportunities that promoted environmental stewardship and community beautification. In a survey assessing program impacts, all thirty-five teen teachers agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I can make a difference in my community through community service”; such commitment to community service is a social asset for positive youth development. Teens’ psychological assets were also enhanced as reflected by their agreement or strong agreement with the statement, “I am more confident in helping others.” These results align with our conceptual framework (Figure 17.1), highlighting the positive impact that connecting youths to their environment in meaningful ways can have for the youths as well as their environment and communities.

Youths as Civic Actors

Youth civic engagement refers to young people developing their civic capacities by actively collaborating with others to shape society. One form of youth civic engagement is environmental action, whereby learners collectively analyze a problem and act to solve it. Environmental action can involve directly improving the environment, such as planting native vegetation to restore habitat in a city park, or can indirectly influence others to act through education or policy advocacy. Critical to environmental action is shared decision making; participants collaborate in defining a problem and then envision and enact solutions (Jensen and Schnack, 1997; Hart, 1997). Adults can experience tensions in sharing decision-making power; navigating these tensions is essential to ensuring genuine opportunity for youths’ participation and positive development (Schusler, Krasny, and Decker, 2016).

A youth development specialist and an environmental educator collaborated in an after-school program to facilitate a project in which seven middle school students produced a documentary about “Green Homes” in the city of Ithaca and surrounding towns in upstate New York. The adult leaders chose the project focus—producing a video about green building—and invited youths to participate. The youths then made decisions with educators’ guidance throughout all facets of video production over seven months, from planning to filming, editing, and debuting to area residents their eighteen-minute documentary. The role of the adult leader and youth participants in decision making in this project reflects the results of a study on youth environmental action programs, in which educators spoke about

striking a balance between providing needed guidance as well as opportunities for youth to assume decision making and leadership (Schusler, Krasny, and Decker, 2016).

The students’ video featured three local homes demonstrating building with natural materials, recycled materials, and renewable energy. It also included a “green home” for dogs and cats at the Tompkins County Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. The “pet home” highlighted the use of recycled materials, natural lighting, a geo-exchange heating and cooling system, and native landscaping.

Youths reported gaining knowledge about green building and being motivated to do more. As one youth said, “it’s really inspired me to look more at our environment and what I can do to help.” They also spoke of developing skills in video production, problem solving, communication, teamwork, interacting with adults, persisting to complete a long-term project, and being patient. They valued the opportunity to contribute to their community. As one reflected, “This is going to have an impact on how people build their homes. People that see [the video], at least they’re going to do some of the minor things talked about. And maybe when they see that kids have done something like this, people will give the kids much more respect in the community.” This form of indirect environmental action—youths acting to try to influence residents to make environmentally friendly choices—demonstrates one way that young people develop assets while educating others toward increased urban sustainability (Figure 17.1).

Conclusion

Participatory action research, peer education, and youth civic engagement are three approaches that have been used in urban environmental education to advance sustainability and foster positive youth development. These three approaches are not mutually exclusive; for example, youth environmental action often involves young people as researchers to understand a situation before proceeding in collective action to change it for the better; it thus integrates participatory action research and civic engagement. All three approaches value young people’s capabilities, build upon their strengths, and offer opportunity for genuine, meaningful participation with the potential for impact on their communities and the environment. They also require adult leaders who provide a caring environment and appropriate levels of guidance, expectations, and freedom for youth to take on leadership and other responsibilities. Through such experiences, young people can contribute to creating more sustainable and resilient cities while developing valuable physical, intellectual, psychological, and social assets that enhance personal well-being.

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ADULT EDUCATION

Philip Silva and Shelby Gull Laird

Highlights

- Adult learning theories suggest ways to engage adults in urban environmental education through action-oriented projects and enrichment opportunities.
- Adult urban environmental education includes programs with predetermined outcomes as well as those that enable participants to define their own learning goals.
- Many programs draw on learning theory to integrate both instrumental and emancipatory goals.

Introduction

“You can’t teach an old dog new tricks.” Though this timeworn adage suggests that adults are incapable of learning, we know this to be false. Most adults continue to learn throughout their lives. Indeed, many individuals seek out new knowledge for personal growth or to transition through life events (Knowles, 1984). Most environmental education—urban and otherwise—focuses on children and young adults, either in a classroom setting or through field trips to nature centers, museums, public gardens, or other similar settings. In this chapter we explore opportunities for developing urban environmental education experiences for adults.