Evidence Brief

Six Good Practice Principles for Positive Youth Development

This Evidence Brief summarizes Kathryn Seymour's article, Building on Strengths: A New Framework for Positive Youth Development Practice (2017). Seymour outlines **a strengths-based approach to youth development program practice** that is informed by academic, youth, and practitioner expertise.

The framework consists of **six good practice principles** that "operate as a whole, linked to and supporting one another in an ecological approach to youth program viability" (p. 6). It was developed in Queensland, Australia, as part of the Queensland Youth Development Research Project (YDRP), an adult-led, youth-inclusive, participatory action research program involving eight Queensland organizations.

Principle 1: Learning and Development
A culture of lifelong learning supports the educational needs of youth and staff, and benefits organizations by promoting program sustainability. Utilizing a strengths-based approach to education means recognizing that "learning involves persistence, resilience, experimentation, and creativity – all of which come from giving yourself and others permission to try and to fail, and to release the fear of failure" (p. 6).

> **Five Good Practices**
> a) **Address barriers to participation.** Organizations should increase access to formal and informal learning and development opportunities. Encourage staff and participants to identify their learning needs and goals, and connect their skills to future opportunities. Offer participation incentives by recognizing and celebrating achievements.
> b) **Design educational opportunities with youth in mind.** Activities should be "fun, meaningful, relate to everyday life experiences, foster a world-view, and encourage a positive vision for the future" (p. 7). Evidence suggests that the most important activities for youth are those that support their future career, goals, and identity development (p. 7).
> c) **Meet youth where they are at.** Recognize that youth have different skills, knowledge, learning styles, and needs, and that they will differ in age and developmental levels. Consider using mixed learning methodologies, such as instruction, observation, experience, and critical reflection.

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d) **Share knowledge and skills across the organization.** Consider rotating people across roles to build skills across the organization, achieve a fairer workload, and reduce loss of staff through burnout. This can contribute to program sustainability, as different people move into and out of roles.

e) **Provide opportunities for professional development.** Staff can benefit from peer-to-peer coaching and mentoring, regular staff meetings, and dedicated support roles. Recognize existing skills within the organization while noticing and developing each person's potential.

Principle 2: Leadership and Decision-making

Youth engagement in leadership and decision-making is a central feature of strengths-based programs and organizations. Young people benefit from the opportunity to build core life-skills, such as critical thinking, self-management, and communication skills. When youth are engaged in program design, activities are also more likely to be accessible, engaging, and relevant.

Two Good Practices

a) **Create new leadership opportunities.** Youth-serving organizations experience the loss of organizational capital when young people 'grow up' and leave leadership roles. Implement succession planning for targeted youth roles, and support the transition of retiring youth leaders into other leadership positions.

b) **Offer diverse opportunities to build leadership skills.** Programs should include multiple components and roles in order to allow a broad range of participants to take responsibility for different tasks and activities. If possible, involve a wider group of young people beyond the leadership group in decision-making that is "active, purposeful, valued, and respected" (p. 10).

Principle 3: An Inclusive Ethos

Strengths-based organizations can nurture an inclusive ethos by fostering a culture of inclusion and respect for all people, regardless of their backgrounds, opinions, experience, skills, interests, needs, and capacity. This principle necessitates a commitment to social justice – addressing power imbalances, challenging bias and discrimination, and promoting practices that are just and equitable.

Six Good Practices

a) **Promote inclusion through organizational policies.** Create a governance framework with policies, procedures, strategies, and actions that uphold values of inclusion and respect. Engage in evaluation to ensure high-level policies are effectively implemented and translated into practice.

b) **Foster a culture of openness to new ideas, freedom, and innovation.** Organizations should be open to change and make space for different points of view. New ideas can help programs to "remain vibrant and relevant to different circumstances, youth, community

and social needs, and to respond to shifting social, cultural, place, and spatial contexts" (p. 12).

c) **Support program flexibility.** Youth come to programs with different social, developmental, economic, demographic, and cultural needs. Organizations can accommodate these diverse needs by designing programs that are flexible and responsive.

d) **Promote staff diversity through targeted recruitment and retention strategies.** Diverse program environments can attract youth from different backgrounds, foster an understanding of difference, and challenge stereotyping and discrimination.

e) **Create a positive social and psychological environment.** Foster a safe space "where challenge, diversity, and failure can be experienced positively" (p. 13).

f) **Make participation voluntary.** When youth choose to participate in activities, they gain the opportunity to build on potential strengths by exploring their own responsibility, autonomy, and identity.

Principle 4: Community Service

Community service brings short- and long-term benefits to young people, their social networks, and the community. Service-learning can support social justice initiatives by promoting cooperation, understanding, and sharing among people of all ages. Evidence suggests that community service can be transformative in young people's lives (p. 15).

Three Good Practices

a) **Create safe and positive service-learning activities.** Be mindful of how service activities are resourced, planned, and structured. Strengths-based service-learning engages youth "as decision-makers, leaders, and change-makers in meaningful, negotiated, and understood activities" (p. 14).

b) **Engage in evaluation.** Make time for structured individual, team, and group reflection in order to promote a deeper understanding of social issues, and to discuss challenges, outcomes, and lessons learned.

c) **Recognize individual and group efforts.** Actively and publicly acknowledging young people's contributions can help promote participation and sustain community partnerships.

Principle 5: Partnerships and Social Networks

Partnerships and networks can help build social capital, produce knowledge, and strengthen youth and community resilience. Successful partnerships are at the centre of strengths-based youth organizations. They enrich young people's experiences by introducing them to new activities and facilitating interactions with different people.

Four Good Practices

a) In the **early phase** of a partnership (p. 15):
   - Adopt a governance framework to support partnership development.

- Allocate sufficient lead-time for pre-implementation planning.
- Work within existing community and organization protocols.
   b) In the **middle and sustaining phase** of a partnership (p. 15):
      - Document agreed roles, tasks, and responsibilities.
      - Ensure communication protocols support sustained, consistent dialogue.
      - Celebrate key milestones.
   c) In the **end phase** of a partnership (p. 16):
      - Build capacity to end a partnership in a positive way.
      - Disseminate knowledge about successes and lessons learned.
      - Support everyone through the closure process through discussion, reflection, and celebration.
   d) **Nurture strengths-based relationships.** Safe, positive relationships built on trust and respect contribute to positive developmental outcomes, and are important for young people's continued engagement. Organizations should structure activities and train youth workers to encourage new networks, connections, and friendships.

Principle 6: Ethical Promotion

Ethical promotional strategies and practices produce positive organizational, program, and youth profiles. They can help organizations build a trusted reputation, gain funding, and attract staff and program participants.

Three Good Practices
   a) **Adopt an ethical or values-based promotional framework.** Include guidelines, policies, and strategies that support a consistent and ethical approach to promotional work.
   b) **Convey positive messages about young people.** Organizations should affirm youth as valued community members. Counter negative messages by providing positive role models or profiling successful youth and intergenerational partnerships. Consider working with young people to document and publish evidence of their achievements and positive development.
   c) **Maintain core program features.** Program recognition can contribute to informed participation decisions. Core features "give the program a common purpose, and reflect the values that underpin the program, and methods of program delivery, style, and structure" (p. 18). Maintaining core features can also help programs gain funding and resources.

Seymour, K. (2017). Building on strengths: A new framework for positive youth development program practice. *Queensland Review*, *24*(1), 5-22.