



CHARACTER STRENGTH AND POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Good character and development of correct human values is a necessary prospect leading to positive human development. To foster this statement, a study was conducted on the relationship between Character Strengths and Positive Youth Development. The purpose of the paper was to demonstrate the effective relationship between character strengths and positive youth development by emphasising on the need of building the integral youth strengths and thereby promoting the positive youth development through various programmes. The hypothesis stated that the character strengths and positive youth development are correlated through the "Five Cs" by Lerner, 2005- Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character and Caring and how these characteristics define an individual.

Two scales were used to collect and analyse our data with subjects in the age and range 13-17 years; The Values in Action (2004) Survey for Youth and the Positive Youth Development Inventory Scale by Arnold et al. (2012). The VIA Survey was taken up by 125 subjects and out of which, 65 of them took the PYDI Scale. The research laid the foundation of a strong relationship between individual character strengths and their effect on the mass development of youth. For analysing the data, Pearson r correlation and Regression analysis were used as the statistics tools. After careful analysis, It was found that many of the Character Strengths have a significant positive relation with the six dimensions of the Positive Youth Development and also act as their predictors for the youth. Thus, the hypothesis was accepted.

Keywords- effective relationship, character strengths, positive youth development, subjects, foundation of strong relationship, cumulative impact

INTRODUCTION

DEFINING YOUTH

Youth is an evolving concept layered with social meanings and terminology developed over time. Youth is the phase of life between childhood and adulthood associated with both negative and positive attributes. It is the age of strength, beauty, idealism and energy but also inferior characteristics like inexperience, lack of wisdom, hot headedness, naivety and lack of maturity and sense. The current representations of the youth and the moral panic over them are manipulated by older age groups. The collective description of youth with common characteristics is an obvious manipulation of the diversity of youth and a general negative attitude of the more powerful age groups of society.

CHARACTERISTICS OF YOUTH

The first social scientist to talk about adolescence was Stanley Hall, who described it as the age of “marvellous new birth” and a perilous age “suggestive of some ancient period of storm and stress, when old moorings were broken and new higher levels attained”. This age is the only hope for the society, but also a threat to social stability.

Many psychoanalysts describe adolescence as a time of instability and disruption. The sexual and the aggressive drives which follow puberty leads to the storm and stress faced during this period. According to Anna Freud (1984),

“Adolescents are highly egoistic, regarding themselves as the centre of the universe and the sole object of interest, and yet at no time in later life are they capable of such self sacrifice and devotion. They form the most passionate love relations, only to break them off as abruptly they formed them. On one hand, they throw themselves enthusiastically into the life of the community and on the other, they have an overpowering longing for solitude. They oscillate between blind submission to some self-chosen leader and deviant rebellion against any and every authority. They are selfish and materially minded and at the same time full and lofty idealism.”

This description given by Anna Freud is specifically highlighting the glory and ill repute associated with the transitioning youth. Thus, youth is the era to be celebrated and deplored and young people can be depicted as both heroes and villains in society (Jones, 2009).

YOUTH AS SCHOOL STUDENTS

In regard to the youth-as-student identity, it is described in the concepts of life stages and biological and cognitive development. They illuminate how life, and in particular schooling and the programs within, have an impact on the successful transition of youth into adults. Much of how we interpret this is guided by the cognitive developmental stages as defined by Piaget namely the sensorimotor stage ages 0-2 years, the preoperational stage ages 2-7 years, concrete operational stage ages 7-11 years, and formal operational stage ages 11 and above (Maxwell, 2018). These cognitive stages guide how to order curriculum development, how public institutions need to organise themselves, and how teacher education and pedagogical instruction should be designed (Harlan, 2016).

POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT: AN INTRODUCTION

Early psychologists had deficit views on adolescence and considered it a problematic phase. Stanley Hall termed it as an age of “storm and stress”. Sigmund Freud focused his research on the basis of psychosexual development while neo freudians focused on the social environment and social relationships.

Later psychologists took up a more positive approach based on strength views instead of the early deficit views. They talked about the plasticity and diversity in adolescents and how they have more preferences, choices, possibilities and opportunities than any other age group. According to the ecological perspective, the fusion of nature and nurture is what defines youth development. As per Bronfenbrenner, human development is strongly influenced by environmental factors beyond family setup. It amalgamates the work of elements like teachers, friends, society, culture and life experiences (Ryan, 2012). The positive youth developmental models all generally focus on the strength, developmental plasticity and internal and external strengths.

The individual strengths and environmental resources were defined by Benson (Benson, Scales & Syvertsen, 2011). as developmental assets. Specifically, it contains 20 internal assets and 20 external assets. The internal assets are the positive traits of an individual such as one’s own skills and competencies and external assets are the features of development acquired by interaction with the social system. These assets if present in higher levels are linked to lower risk behaviour.

In adolescence, the individuals have the cognitive, behavioural, and social relational skills to contribute

actively and often quite effectively to his or her own developmental changes. Adolescence is an ideal “ontogenetic laboratory” for studying the plasticity of human development and for exploring how coupling individuals and contexts within the developmental system may promote positive development during this period.

William Damon (Damon, 2004) noted that indicator of PYD and youth thriving is engagement in pursuits that serve the common welfare, and makes meaningful contributions to communities. Damon assesses the ways in which youth go beyond their own self-centred needs and extend outward to the pursuit of goals that benefit the world beyond. These individual assets represent the talents, energies, strengths, constructive interests, and “sparks” that every young person possesses. Thriving occurs as a result of aligning these individual strengths with a community's "external" or ecological assets, which are conceived as "environmental, contextual, and relational features of socialising systems" and are organised into four categories:

1. support
2. empowerment
3. boundaries and expectations
4. constructive use of time.

PYD as a Philosophy or Approach to Youth Programming

Scholars have defined four domains of individual assets that represent health and well-being in adolescence:

1. physical development
2. intellectual development
3. psychological and emotional development
4. social development.

Building on the work of both Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2003) and Blum (2003), as well as others, Lerner (2004) argued that there are three fundamental characteristics of effective PYD programs. These "Big Three" characteristics are:

1. Positive and sustained adult-youth relations, relations (relations between a young person and an adult who is competent, caring, and continually available, for at least a year, such as a mentor, coach, or teacher)
 2. Life-skill building activities (e.g., enhancing skills pertinent to the selection, optimization, and compensation skills we discussed earlier.
 3. Opportunities for youth participation in and leadership of valued family, school, and community activities.
- Lerner argued as well that these features of youth programs needed to be simultaneously and integratively present for PYD to be effectively promoted.

The Targeting Life Skills model details the life skills encapsulated by 4-H's Heart, Hands, Head, and Health (Hendricks, 1996); this model is meant to serve as a plan for youth programming. Each of the four components is composed of two general categories of skills, with the two categories composed of more specific life skills. For example, "Hands" is divided into working and giving; giving is further divided into community service, leadership, responsible citizenship, and contributions to group effort; working is further divided into marketable skills, teamwork, and self motivation. The model helps to identify specific skills that a youth-based program should focus on, rather than being a theoretical model of development .

The Four Essential Elements of Youth Development are identified as belonging, mastery, generosity, and independence and were originally proposed as the "Circle of Courage" (Kress, 2003). These four elements were further subdivided into eight elements that were identified as critical to developing positive youth outcomes in youth development programming. Belonging includes having relationships with caring adults, an inclusive environment, and a safe environment; mastery includes opportunities for mastery and engagement in learning; generosity consists of the opportunity to value and practice service for others; and independence

includes opportunities to see oneself as an active participant in the future and the opportunity for self-determination.

FIVE C'S MODEL OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

In turn, as noted earlier in the discussion of the Lerner, Lerner, and colleagues' relational developmental systems model of the PYD process the Five Cs model of youth development conceptualises PYD as composed of Five Cs - Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character and Caring. The Cs are a means to operationalize the developmental characteristics that a youth needs to become a successful and contributing member of society. These Five Cs were linked to the positive outcomes of youth development programs reported by Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2003). In addition, these "Cs" are prominent terms used by practitioners, adolescents involved in youth development programs, and the parents of these adolescents in describing the characteristics of a "thriving youth". The Five Cs model predicts that youth who experience positive and supportive relationships with adults and who have opportunities for leadership and skill building will show positive development as indicated by the five Cs of competence, confidence, caring, connection, and character (Lerner & Lerner, 2011). The five Cs in turn lead to a young person who contributes back to society; contribution is sometimes referred to as the "sixth C."

4-H THRIVING MODEL BY ARNOLD

The 4-H Thriving Model originally proposed by Arnold (2018) has three structures that describe and predict the effect of 4-H programs on youth development.

The first structure is the 4-H developmental context, which comprises the setting and experiences provided by 4-H for youth. The developmental context is made up of four elements: (a) facilitating youth sparks, (b) fostering developmental relationships, (c) following principles for high-quality youth development programs, and (d) promoting youth engagement. Youth sparks are defined as a "passion for a self-identified interest or skill, or a capacity that metaphorically lights a fire in an adolescent's life, providing energy, joy, purpose, and direction".

The relationships between youth and adults in 4-H form the second element of the developmental context. Youth-adult relationships are considered developmental when they express care, challenge growth, provide support and empowerment, share power, and expand possibilities for youth (Roehlkepartain et al., 2017). Developmental relationships also grow and change over time in alignment with a young person's developmental needs (Bowers, Johnson, et al., 2015).

The third element of a developmental context is adherence to the eight features of youth development settings identified by Eccles and Gootman (2002): physical and psychological safety, appropriate structure, supportive relationships, opportunities to belong, positive social norms, support for efficacy and mattering, opportunities for skill building, and integration of family, schools and community.

The final element is promoting youth engagement in the program, considering the duration, intensity and breadth of participation (Weiss et al., 2005).

APPLICATIONS OF POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

The field of PYD recognizes the good in young people, focusing on each other and every child's unique talents, strengths, interests and future potential. It is a newer movement in the field of working with youth not only in the juvenile justice system but also the entire youth community. PYD approaches focus on developing positive social capacities by using the resources available within the focus person's home community. The 5C's of positive development referring to Lerner's model of PYD, competence, confidence, character, caring and connection have been associated with adaptive development amongst youth. It is an umbrella term that covers many streams of work- interdisciplinary research, a program description and a professional identity. It serves as a critical foundation for a variety of youth progress.

Youth led programs are rooted in the PYD approach, its core principles and its features of positive

developmental settings . Such programs embrace the notion of youth voice and youth involvement through a variety of models of engagement including community service projects, service learning opportunities, serving on an advisory board or serving in governance.

Core principle of PYD-

1. **Youth are instrumental in their own development-** they are not passive receivers of youth development programming but rather are resources capable of creating the environments that promote their own healthy development. It embraces the notion that young people have a right to be heard and respected on issues that affect their lives.
2. **Focus on all youth-** PYD targets development of the positive strengths of all youth ,not just these considered at risk. It recognizes that all youth have the ability to grow and change.
3. **The entire community is responsible for PYD** - It asserts that it is the responsibility of every citizen (family,neighbours,schools and community members) to focus on the health and well being of young people.
4. **Multiple contexts which impact Youth Development-** both micro (family, school and community)and macro (broader norms and value of the culture) impact PYD. Youth are more successful in navigating adolescence when the settings are aligned.

According to the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine(2002), for mass PYD and engagement of the youth, following features should be present: Physical and psychological safety; Appropriate structure; Supportive relationships; Opportunities to belong; Positive social norms; Support for Efficacy and mattering; Opportunities for skill building; and Integration of family, school, and community efforts.

For youth empowerment to occur, adult allies across sectors must recognise the need for the inclusion of the positive youth development models and thriving adults models within the systems of the society to engage in a youth empowerment model as a mechanism to becoming competent, successful and healthy adults.

GOOD CHARACTER BUILDING

Good character and development of correct human values and internal assets is a necessary prospect leading to positive human development. Individuals with a positive human character have a desire to do the right thing , and lead a healthy, long life which can buffer against stress and trauma in the long run.

Character strengths are a family of positive traits expressed through a person's thoughts, feelings and behaviours that are universally recognised for the strength that they create in individuals and communities. The concept of character strength was given by Martin Seligman (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). Making children aware that everyone of them has all 24 character strengths, provides the foundation for genuine self confidence grounded in self awareness. They are not about ignoring the negative, instead, they help us overcome life's invertible adversities .For example; one can't master self control without being tempted first. These are often considered as Values in Action (VIA) as each strength is related to the application of certain virtue and reflects psychological mechanisms fostering its practice.

VALUES IN ACTION

This assesses the components of good character in people i.e. what is right about people . It mentions that there should be top five positive traits recognised as signature strength and interpreted in an overly rigid way. The youth is least likely to show components like self regulations , forgiveness and spirituality and more likely to show love, gratitude and humour. The five necessary components to live a good life in all the 24 components are-gratitude, hope, zest, curiosity and love.

Character strengths, individually, gave this research a direction to be followed. The VIA (Values in Action)

Classification of Character Strengths and virtues classify the 24 character strengths into 6 virtues:

- 1. Wisdom and knowledge-** cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge creativity. For instance, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning and perspective.
- 2. Courage-** emotional strengths that involve exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, either external or internal. Like, honesty and authenticity, bravery, perseverance, zest
- 3. Humanity-** interpersonal strengths that entail “tending and befriending” others. For example, kindness, love and social intelligence.
- 4. Justice-** civic strengths that underlie healthy community life. Like, fairness, leadership, teamwork
- 5. Temperance-** strengths that protect against excess forgiveness. Like, modesty, prudence and self-regulation.
- 6. Transcendence-** strengths that build connections to the larger universe and provide meaning appreciation of beauty. For instance, gratitude, hope, humour, spirituality and religiousness.

This research helps to categorise people who are creative, unique, sensitive towards the feelings of other people and nature and try to sense a purpose in their life from those on the contrary. It intends to understand the characteristics an outgoing, inquisitive person and an emotionally intelligent person possesses than one who isn't curious or emotionally indulged.

The Positive Youth Development Inventory measures the five C's of positive development model (Park, 2009)

Competence, measured through an individual's creativity and desire to learn new things. The individual's social relationships, ability to handle disappointment and sensitivity towards others needs is checked in this section.

Character, measured through respect for one's own moral values, ability to keep promises and act responsible and trustworthy and appropriate behaviour in all situations.

Connections and **confidence** as a characteristic of positive youth development is measured through involvement in friend circles and social groups, importance of friends and healthy relationships with adults, satisfaction with one's abilities and ability to provide required help at all times.

Lastly, a youth's **contribution** towards the world can be reported through the desire to benefit others and drive to make a difference in the world.

The research focuses on a range of character strengths from cooperation in groups to a sense of forgiveness, optimism, loyalty, curiosity, leadership. It also lays emphasis on humour being a desirable behaviour or skill which can be used to make others feel good, to gain intimacy, or to help buffer stress. Along with gratitude, hope, and spirituality, a sense of humour belongs to the set of strengths positive psychologists call transcendence; together they help us forge connections to the world and provide meaning to life. Appreciation of humour correlates with other strengths, too, such as wisdom and love of learning. And humour activities or exercises result in increased feelings of emotional well-being and optimism.

METHOD

Purpose: The purpose of the paper is to demonstrate the effective relationship between character strengths and positive youth development by emphasising on the need of building the integral youth strengths and thereby promoting the positive youth development through various programmes.

Variables:

1. Dependent: Positive youth development
2. Independent: Character strengths

Hypothesis: There will be a positive significant relationship between the character strengths and the dimensions of positive youth development.

Sample: Adolescents from ages 13 to 17 years who study in a school environment and are day scholars were selected as the sample for this study.

Sampling: Convenience and purposive sampling was used.

Inclusion criterion

- Students who are in the age range 13-17 years.
- Students who study in a school setting where they regularly go to school and interact well.
- Individuals who are day scholars.

Exclusion criterion

- Students beyond the given age limit.
- Students who are homeschooled or take private tuitions without the guidance of a school.

Tools Description: Two scales were used.

1. **The Values in Action (VIA) Youth survey:** This survey is the revised and improved version of VIA Youth Survey (2004) launched in October, 2021. It is used to measure the strengths of character that contribute positively to growth and development. It contains revisions to all 24 scales. All scales have 4 items with the exception of teamwork (6) and spirituality (9) and have 103 items. The VIA Youth survey helps in measuring the 5 C's of a person which are 24 in number and categorised into 6 virtues. This survey is taken of children in the range 13-17 years.
2. **Positive Youth Development Inventory (PYDI) Scale:** This 55-item scale for age range 13-17 years is used to assess aspects of youth development before and after participating in an educational or youth development program. This was introduced by Arnold et al. (2012) and follows the five-Cs model of youth development, by measuring the constructs of confidence, competence, character, caring, and connection.

Procedure: Firstly, a Google form was made for both the VIA Youth scale and PYDI scale. The VIA scale was shared with adolescents of 13 to 17 years of age. Rapport was established so that they felt at ease while filling the form. Then, the same subjects were asked to fill the PYDI scale. The scores were tabulated in the Google sheet and the manual of the respective scale was used for the data tabulation. SPSS software was used to analyse and frame the statistics of the tabulated data.

Research Design: The research is a Cross-Sectional study.

Ethical Considerations:

- **Voluntary Participation:** The participants are free to opt in or out of the study at any point of time according to their convenience.
- **Consent:** The participants are fully informed about the purpose, benefits, risks and funding behind the study before joining.
- **Anonymity:** Personally identifiable information about the participants is not collected or shared.
- **Confidentiality:** The personal information about the participants are kept for research purposes and hidden from any other source.
- **Potential Harm:** Any physical, social, emotional or psychological harm towards the participants is prevented.

Scoring: For scoring purposes, the manual of the tool was used.

Statistical analysis: SPSS was used for statistical analysis.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 1:

Correlation between youth development and character strengths

Character Strengths	Positive Youth Development					
	Competence	Character	Connection	Caring	Confidence	Contribution
Appreciation	.308*	.269*	.272*	.205	.363**	.187
Bravery	.426**	.385**	.136	.087	.454**	.273
Creativity	.442**	.380**	.207	.028	.391**	.396*
Curiosity	.323*	.205	.230	.137	.232	.294*
Teamwork	.416**	.493**	.445**	.266*	.485**	.359**
Fairness	.126	.204	.226	.055	.247	.284*
Forgiveness	.119	.105	.282*	.239	.241	.132
Gratitude	.396**	.512**	.433**	.506**	.590**	.471**
Honesty	.074	-.001	.147	.039	.227	.114
Hope	.399**	.423**	.215	.377**	.542**	.360**
Spirituality	.411**	.474**	.399**	.337**	.513**	.489**
Humility	.156	.307*	.238	.245	.184	.394**
Humour	.290*	.205	.188	.036	.400**	.142
Judgement	.366**	.505**	.216	.283*	.415**	.284
Kindness	.160	.241	.079	.242	.385**	.215

Leadership	.482**	.409**	.278**	-0.001	.327**	.346**
Learning	.386**	.263**	.019	.051	.307*	.128
Love	.398**	.392**	.583**	.356**	.566**	.319**
Perseverance	.355**	.412**	.340**	.262**	.346**	.373**
Perspective	.449**	.438**	.215	.259*	.457**	.321*
Prudence	.507**	.594**	.111	.284*	.532**	.392**
Self-regulation	.401**	.427**	.281*	.284*	.417*	.392**
Social Intelligence	.285*	.391**	.107	.189	.397**	.337**
Zest	-.018	.116	.061	.077	.107	.084

Note. Table 1 shows the values of the Pearson r correlation calculated between the 24 character strengths and the six dimensions of positive youth development.

- a. * depicts significance at 0.05 level of significance and ** depicts significance at 0.01 level of significance.

Table 2:

Regression between Positive Youth Development and Character strengths

Positive Youth Development Components	R square
Competence	.587
Character	.697
Connection	.526
Caring	.471
Confidence	.724
Contribution	.503

Note. Table 2 shows the values of the Regression analysis (R square*) calculated between the 24 character strengths and the six dimensions of positive youth development.

- a. *R-square values greater than 0.5 are good predictors.

Table 2 clearly depicts that all the character strengths can be predicted through the six dimensions of Positive Youth Development

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the present study was to see the relationship between character strengths and positive youth development, that means, having dominant character strengths will lead to positive youth development in school students. The hypothesis proposed that having dominant traits will have a positive relationship with positive youth development. Thus, the hypothesis is accepted.

It is true that careful emphasis on the Character Strengths lead us to positive emotions and relationships, greater vitality, and meaningful life activities. We flourish when we identify and flex our strengths. Character education based on youth's character strength profile results in a more positive and effective youth development than a general program for all youth. For young people to truly excel in life, proper identification, recognition and celebration of good character is of vital importance, especially through school interventions.

Many educational reforms are on their way and India is currently undergoing massive changes in the school education system in the form of NEP 2020. But, there is a major neglected part in these reforms which is the mental health of the students as less emphasis is paid on this agenda. As this research is based on the effective correlation between character strengths and positive youth development in school settings, through it, it is urged that the curriculum must be designed to accommodate mental health issues and strengths to focus on the overall development of the youth. To begin with, clubs should be made at the school level where students can discuss issues like mental health and strengths. Stakeholders and school counsellors should incorporate themselves with the mental health or psychology clubs and one on one sessions should be held with students to know the strengths and weaknesses of the students on a personal level. Student-led programs can be held so that the youth can connect and relate better. Also, upcoming reforms should focus on sensitive issues like these and not limit themselves to academic and co-curriculars as without proper mental health and definite well-aware strengths, youth can not utilise their power to the fullest. Thriving 4-H model and an understanding of Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory needs to be provided to all educators so that they are guided to prepare proper curriculums, interventions and enrichment structures within the school premises to help the adolescents of the school.

It needs to be visioned that the character strengths are not neglected in the students but rather be identified and worked upon. Schools should not only serve as temples of serving education but also must serve as creating total quality persons who mature and develop into responsible and thriving individuals.

There are certain limitations in this research paper which could be taken as suggestions for further research. Firstly, a small sample of students was taken for the research leading to a less detailed analysis. Thus, it is recommended to take a more voluminous sample of students in further studies to get a detailed analysis which would solidify the research paper. Also, no follow up interview was conducted so qualitative data is lacking in this research paper. It is recommended to conduct interviews with the samples for a qualitative analysis of the data col

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