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Embedding Positive Youth Development in India: A Case Study of Anubhav Shiksha Kendra's Strength-Based Approach

[1]Pranav Raj P, [2]Dr. Keerthana Ramadas, [3]Mahendra Kumar

[1]Indian Institute of Technology Tirupati, Research Scholar, Amity University Chhattisgarh) Email: pranavrajp@yahoo.com.

[2]Pediatric specialists, Narayana Vaidyer's Ayurveda Chikitsalayam Kerala, India

[3]Amity Institute of Behavioral and Allied Sciences, Amity University Chhattisgarh, mksahu4135@gmail.com.

Abstract: India, home to the world's largest adolescent population, faces critical challenges in safeguarding youth mental health and development. Traditional deficit-based models have often failed to address the holistic needs of young people, reinforcing the need for strength-based alternatives. This study explores the integration of Positive Youth Development (PYD) within the Indian context through a single-case design of the Anubhav Shiksha Kendra (ASK), a youth-centered initiative operating across Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. Using observation and archival analysis, the research documents ASK's evolution, core values, program components, and outcomes. Findings demonstrate that ASK operationalizes PYD by fostering youth motivation, exchange, civic engagement, and leadership, while nurturing the "Six Cs" of development—Caring, Confidence, Character, Connection, Competence, and Contribution. Evaluations reveal significant impacts on participants' social responsibility, civic awareness, and employability skills. By embedding PYD principles into practice, ASK provides a replicable framework for NGOs, educational institutions, and policymakers aiming to strengthen adolescent well-being and resilience. The study underscores the urgent need to mainstream PYD in India's youth policy agenda, positioning young people not as passive recipients of services but as active contributors to social transformation.

Keywords: contributors, institutions, employability, passive

Introduction

India has recently overtaken China as the most populous country, with a population of 1,425,775,850 people [1]. Projections from the United Nations suggest that this population growth will persist for the coming decades[2]. As of 2021, children and adolescents represented 34.8% of India's population—the largest such demographic share globally[3,4]. These early life stages are particularly crucial for mental health, as the surrounding environment has a profound influence on developmental outcomes and future well-being5. Developmental disabilities, broadly defined as conditions arising from impairments in physical, cognitive, or behavioral functioning, are of major concern during these formative years [6]. Frequently observed conditions include attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), sensory impairments such as vision and hearing loss, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and specific learning disorders. Alongside these, mental health concerns like depression, anxiety, and behavioral difficulties also significantly affect this population [7,8].

Within this demographic context, safeguarding the mental health of children and adolescents is particularly pressing. Findings from a UNICEF–Gallup survey in 2021 showed that only 41% of Indian youth aged 15–24 considered

professional mental health support to be helpful, highlighting the widespread reluctance to seek care [9]. Globally, approximately one in ten children and adolescents live with a mental disorder, and one in seven individuals aged 10–19 is affected. Collectively, these conditions contribute to 13% of the global disease burden for this age group[5,8.]

In 2016, an estimated 52.9 million children under the age of five were identified as having developmental challenges, with boys comprising 54% of these cases. Autism spectrum disorder was found in about one in every hundred children, and strikingly, 95% of children with developmental difficulties lived in low- and middle-income nations[10,11]. The *State of the World's Children Report 2021* emphasized that South Asia, East Asia, and the Pacific accounted for the largest numbers of adolescents facing mental health difficulties[12]. Indian studies reinforce these concerns: Malhotra et al. reported prevalence rates of 23.33% in school-based samples and 6.46% in community-based cohorts[13]. Similarly, the National Mental Health Survey (2016) estimated adolescent prevalence at 7.3%, without significant gender variation. Urban metropolitan areas, however, showed higher prevalence, with anxiety disorders affecting 3.6% and depression 0.8% of adolescents[14].

Ensuring the mental well-being of children and adolescents is a shared responsibility of parents, educators, policymakers, and the community[15]. Unaddressed mental health difficulties in adolescence often extend into adulthood, undermining both psychological and physical health and constraining life potential8. Evidence supports the integration of mental health education within school curricula to promote resilience and positive youth development, provided such approaches are rooted in evidence-based practice[15]. Despite this, multiple barriers continue to hinder progress. Many children hesitate to disclose their concerns due to stigma, fear of bullying, or mistrust of adults linked to negative experiences at home. Structural limitations, such as the lack of dedicated counseling facilities, insufficient cooperation from school administrations, limited numbers of trained counselors, and poor privacy safeguards, further complicate access to support[15]. Mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression have also been associated with absenteeism and reduced academic performance[8].

Although referral to mental health professionals is often recommended for children showing signs of difficulty, such measures are not always effective. Families may face obstacles such as financial hardship, lack of transport, inflexible work schedules, or language barriers, all of which restrict consistent attendance at clinical appointments[15]. Schools thus hold a vital role in supporting students' psychosocial needs, particularly during emergencies or crises[12].

India's policy framework has increasingly acknowledged the significance of youth well-being and holistic development. The *National Youth Policy (NYP) 2021* underscores the need to cultivate an enabling environment that allows young people to achieve their fullest potential, thereby strengthening India's position in the global community . To advance this vision, the policy identifies five core objectives and highlights 11 priority areas. These include education, skill development and employment, entrepreneurship, health and healthy lifestyles, sports, promotion of social values, community participation, engagement in politics and governance, leadership opportunities for youth, as well as inclusion and social justice (13).

The implementation of these policy goals relies on collaborative action, with the Department of Youth Affairs working closely with non-governmental organizations, universities, and colleges to design and execute youth development programmes (13). Within this broader framework, documenting practical experiences of Positive Youth Development (PYD) becomes especially relevant, as such documentation not only provides guidance for NGOs and higher education institutions but also contributes to shaping more responsive and evidence-based youth programming (14).

In this context, the present article seeks to position the PYD approach within the Indian landscape while tracing the historical evolution of the *Anubhav Shiksha Kendra (ASK)* and its integration of PYD principles into practice (14).

Theoretical Overview

Youth work has historically been guided by multiple approaches, each carrying distinct assumptions about young people's needs and roles in society. Cooper and White identified six models—treatment, reform, radical advocacy, non-radical advocacy, radical empowerment, and non-radical empowerment [15]. The treatment model views youth as deficient or deviant, requiring correction or conformity to social norms. In contrast, the reform model emphasizes addressing structural disadvantages through incremental changes. Advocacy models highlight the importance of tackling systemic inequalities, with radical advocacy stressing institutional reform, while non-radical advocacy relies on external actors for change. Empowerment-based approaches shift the focus to building young people's agency, with radical empowerment encouraging independent action, and non-radical empowerment supporting personal growth within existing frameworks.

The **positive youth development (PYD)** paradigm emerged as a counterpoint to deficit-oriented models. PYD emphasizes three interlinked ideas: development as a lifelong process, recognition of young people's strengths, and intentional practices that nurture growth [16]. Rather than seeing youth as passive recipients, PYD highlights their active role in shaping their own development and communities.

Organizations such as **ACT for Youth** define PYD as a community-based framework for organizing services, opportunities, and supports that enable young people to realize their full potential [17]. Key features of this approach include a focus on strengths, meaningful youth participation, inclusivity across diverse groups, community collaboration, and sustained long-term engagement.

PYD operationalizes three essential components: **services, opportunities, and supports**. Services enhance well-being and functioning, opportunities allow youth to take active roles in society, and supports foster interpersonal connections and access to resources [18]. These principles are rooted in several theoretical traditions.

One major influence is **Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory**, which conceptualizes development as the product of reciprocal interactions between individuals and multiple layers of their social environment, including families, schools, peer groups, and communities [19]. PYD draws from this ecological perspective by recognizing that youth thrive when both individual agency and supportive contexts are present.

The field of **prevention science** has also informed PYD. Prevention approaches emphasize identifying risk factors for negative outcomes (e.g., violence, substance use) and strengthening protective factors through primary prevention strategies. These priorities overlap with PYD's focus on empowerment, participation, and resilience [16].

Similarly, **resilience research** has underscored how certain internal traits (e.g., coping skills) and external supports (e.g., caring adults) buffer youth from adverse outcomes. Werner and Smith's work highlighted that resilience is not simply innate but cultivated through relationships and supportive environments [20].

Another significant contribution is the **developmental assets framework** developed by the Search Institute. This framework identifies 40 internal and external assets—such as values, skills, opportunities, and positive relationships—

that promote thriving. Empirical studies demonstrate that greater numbers of assets are linked with positive educational and behavioral outcomes, while fewer assets increase vulnerability to risky behaviors [21,22].

Collectively, these theoretical perspectives shaped PYD into a strengths-based, holistic approach that focuses on both individual growth and systemic support, positioning youth as active contributors to their own development and to society.

Methodology

This study adopted an **interpretivist single-case design**, which is well suited for exploring complex social phenomena within their real-life contexts. A case study, as defined by Thomas [23], is a holistic analysis of individuals, events, decisions, projects, policies, institutions, or systems examined through one or more research methods. Importantly, case selection in such designs is not random but often guided by its potential to serve as an unusual, critical, or revealing example [23].

In this research, the **Anubhav Shiksha Kendra (ASK)** was purposively selected, as it represents a particularly illustrative case of adopting the Positive Youth Development (PYD) approach in the Indian context. Rather than aiming for representativeness, the study employed **information-oriented sampling**, prioritizing depth and richness of insights over breadth.

Data collection was undertaken using **two primary methods**:

1. **Observation** – facilitated by the direct involvement of one of the researchers in the project, providing access to lived experiences and first-hand insights into the evolution of the program.
2. **Archival analysis** – including a systematic review of project proposals, annual reports, and evaluation documents sourced from institutional archives, which offered comprehensive and authentic information regarding the program's implementation and outcomes.

The collected data were examined through a **narrative analysis** framework, allowing the researchers to reconstruct the development of ASK and its alignment with PYD principles in a descriptive and interpretive manner.

A key limitation of this case study lies in its **contextual subjectivity**. The findings reflect the alignment of ASK with PYD principles from a particular interpretive standpoint and, therefore, cannot be generalized to all youth development interventions in India. Nonetheless, the purpose of the study was not generalization but rather to document a **revelatory example** that may serve as a conceptual framework for future interventions and empirical research in youth development.

Case of Anubhav Shiksha Kendra (ASK)

The **Anubhav Shiksha Kendra (ASK)** has been a prominent youth-centered initiative for nearly two decades, operating across twenty districts in Maharashtra and two districts in Madhya Pradesh. Conceived as a collaborative venture among seven partner organizations, the program aims to nurture socially responsible and engaged citizens by equipping young people with the knowledge, skills, and values required for social transformation.

The consortium is spearheaded by *Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action (YUVA)*, a Mumbai-based voluntary organization committed to social justice and grassroots empowerment. ASK's early development drew support from the *Students Mobilisation Initiative for Learning through Exposure (SMILE)*, established by the Indo-German Social Service Society. Subsequently, sustained backing came from international agencies such as the *Swiss Development Corporation (SDC)* (since 2000), the *Katholische Zentralstelle für Entwicklungshilfe (KZE)* (from 2003), and later *Misereor*. This international and local collaboration provided ASK with a strong foundation to evolve into a long-standing youth development platform.

The program is underpinned by a set of **core values** that continue to guide its activities: social and gender justice, ecological sustainability, honesty and integrity, secularism, democracy, and the dignity of labor. These principles inform both the program's philosophy and its practice, ensuring that youth participation is not limited to passive engagement but extends to active social action.

Participation within ASK is structured into **three progressive levels**, each representing a deepening commitment to the program's ideals:

- **Mitra (Concerned Citizen):** At this entry level, young participants, called *Anubhav Mitras*, are introduced to the values of ASK through at least four orientation programs. This stage emphasizes reflection and awareness, encouraging youth to recognize social realities and their potential role in addressing them.
- **Sahayogi (Change Agent):** A subset of Mitras who demonstrate greater interest and regular engagement transition to the role of *Sahayogi*. These youth act as motivators within their communities, encouraging peers to participate in the ASK process and serving as catalysts for local change.
- **Sathi (Leader):** The highest level of participation is reserved for *Sathis*, who not only embody the values of ASK but also mobilize and lead others. Sathis often take initiative in organizing events, building networks, and even establishing independent groups or organizations. At this stage, the values of ASK are not merely understood but fully internalized, becoming evident in participants' actions and leadership.

Over the years, ASK has consolidated its strength by aligning program activities with the **core themes of livelihoods, governance, and sexuality**—issues that are central to the lived realities of young people in India. By anchoring its interventions in these domains, ASK ensures its continued relevance and capacity to engage youth in meaningful social action.

Key Dimensions and Outcomes of ASK

The Anubhav Shiksha Kendra (ASK) structures its work around several core dimensions that reflect the principles of the Positive Youth Development (PYD) approach, particularly the role of NGOs and educational institutions in creating services, opportunities, and support systems for young people. These dimensions are designed to motivate, engage, and empower youth to become active agents of social transformation.

1. Youth Motivation

This component focuses on mobilizing young people to participate in the development process. Activities include orientation sessions, social awareness campaigns, youth fairs (*melavas*), and training or capacity-building programs. These initiatives aim to spark interest, foster reflection, and instill a sense of civic responsibility among participants.

2. Youth Exchange

The exchange component seeks to broaden perspectives by exposing youth to diverse development practices both within and outside their geographic regions. Through core group gatherings, exposure visits, and structured opportunities for experience-sharing, participants gain valuable insights, appreciate different approaches, and strengthen their capacity for collective problem-solving.

3. Youth Forum Building

The youth forum serves as a platform for participants to articulate their concerns, engage in dialogue, and take positions on socio-political issues. Activities include organizational development processes, mobilization campaigns, outreach initiatives, and issue-based workshops and seminars. These forums empower young people to become visible stakeholders in civic spaces and encourage democratic participation.

4. Anubhav Samaj

Introduced in 2014, *Anubhav Samaj* seeks to create a sustained civil society network by bringing together alumni, particularly those who have progressed to the roles of *Sathis* and *Sahayogis*. Regular gatherings and collaborative processes within this component ensure continuity, intergenerational learning, and long-term engagement with ASK values.

Outcomes and Impact

Evaluations of the ASK program reveal significant developmental outcomes for participating youth. Engagement in these initiatives fosters an expanded understanding of both internal and external realities, enabling participants to critically reflect on themselves and their social environment. Young people are able to access new opportunities for learning and exchange, thereby strengthening their developmental insights and practical skills.

Participants also internalize ASK's core values, evolving into socially responsible citizens who contribute meaningfully to their communities. In addition to social awareness and civic engagement, ASK-trained youth acquire competencies essential for employment, including organizational skills, leadership capacity, and problem-solving abilities.

Furthermore, involvement in ASK nurtures the **"Six Cs" of PYD**—

- **Caring**: cultivating empathy and sensitivity toward others;
- **Confidence**: building self-belief and resilience;
- **Character**: fostering responsibility and integrity;
- **Connection**: strengthening positive bonds with peers and mentors;
- **Competence**: enhancing the ability to function effectively in social and professional settings;
- **Contribution**: encouraging active involvement in community forums and social initiatives.

Collectively, these outcomes demonstrate how ASK operationalizes the PYD framework in the Indian context by combining value-based engagement with practical skill-building, ensuring that young people emerge not only as beneficiaries but also as leaders and change agents within society.

Discussion and Conclusion

Evidence from global evaluations highlights the effectiveness of the Positive Youth Development (PYD) approach across multiple developmental domains. Randomized and quasi-experimental studies demonstrate that PYD programs contribute to positive behavioral, educational, and employment-related outcomes. For example, Amin et al. [24], Díaz and Rosas [25], Alcid [26], and Jewkes et al. [27] documented significant improvements in youth participation, social empowerment, and life skills development. A systematic review by Plaut and Moss [28] further established that PYD interventions enhanced young people's employability by strengthening assets such as savings, entrepreneurial knowledge, and business planning capacity. Similarly, Catalano et al. [29], in their comprehensive review of over 21,500 articles and 3,700 evaluation reports, identified 94 PYD programs implemented in low- and middle-income countries, 35 of which included rigorous designs. The findings consistently revealed positive effects on developmental, employment, and health outcomes. Complementary evidence from Catherine et al. [30] and Horrillo et al. [31] underscored PYD's value in improving college readiness, career planning, and long-term employability, particularly for youth from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In the Indian context, empirical evidence remains limited but promising. Achyut et al. [32] found that PYD initiatives enhanced gender equality among adolescents, while Das et al. [33] and Miller et al. [34] demonstrated its role in transforming gender norms and preventing gender-based violence. Beattie et al. [35] showed that PYD programs helped adolescent girls remain in school, delayed child marriage, and reduced entry into sex work. Mental health benefits have also been documented; Srikala and Kishore [36] reported improvements in emotional resilience through school-based PYD life skills education, while Saha and Shukla [37] observed increased emotional regulation and caring behavior among participants.

Taken together, systematic reviews and country-specific studies confirm PYD's potential to address critical issues such as gender inequality, at-risk behaviors, and adolescent mental health. Beyond individual benefits, PYD also fosters civic awareness and social sensitivity, enabling young people to contribute meaningfully to community well-being. With India's rich network of educational institutions, NGOs, youth clubs, and civil society organizations, there is a strong opportunity to mainstream PYD into national youth development efforts. Embedding PYD principles into formal and non-formal programs can support the Government of India's broader vision of *Aatma Nirbhar Bharat* (self-reliant India) by positioning youth as co-creators of social change rather than passive recipients of welfare.

Recommendations

1. **Establish a national-level youth work association** to collaborate with government bodies and provide expert recommendations on emerging approaches in youth development.
2. **Integrate PYD into schools and colleges** through partnerships with social work educators and youth development professionals, thereby complementing the efforts of NGOs and aligning with the objectives of the National Youth Policy.

3. **Expand PYD interventions to child care and residential institutions**, which currently remain underserved. Such initiatives can address the developmental needs of highly vulnerable youth populations.
4. **Foster a culture of intervention research** in India to systematically evaluate PYD programs, document evidence, and refine practices based on outcomes. This will strengthen the knowledge base and ensure scalability of effective models.

Ethical Approval

The study was accorded Ethical Approval Ref. No. AUC/RO/Ph.D. RT/2023/5748 dated 31/03/2023. Written/Verbal Informed Consent was taken from all the participants.

The study was carried out in accordance with the principles as enunciated in the Declaration of Helsinki.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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