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# Promoting Positive Youth Development

## The Miami Youth Development Project (YDP)

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The Miami Youth Development Project (YDP) had its beginnings in the early 1990s as a grassroots response to the needs of troubled (multiproblem) young people in the community (Arnett, Kurtines, & Montgomery, 2008, this issue). YDP is an important outcome of efforts to create positive youth development interventions that draw on the strengths of developmental intervention science outreach research in the development of community-supported positive development programs (i.e., an approach that focuses on meeting community needs as well as youth needs by generating innovative knowledge of evidence-based change intervention strategies that are feasible, affordable, and sustainable in “real world” settings, (Kurtines, Ferrer-Wreder, Cass Lorente, Silverman, Montgomery, 2008, this issue). Now completing its second decade, YDP represents an effort to bring together a more empowering model of knowledge development for

research involvement in the community, a nuanced and contextualized notion of youth and their development, and methodologies that richly reflect rather than reduce the experiences of the young people whose development the authors seek to promote.

**Keywords:** *positive youth development; community supported interventions; developmental intervention science; applied developmental science*

The Youth Development Project (YDP) began in Miami in the early 1990s as a grassroots effort to help troubled youth in disempowering contexts. We were investigating intervention strategies for facilitating identity exploration in college students at a time when needs of youth in the local schools became increasing apparent to us (and the rest of the world) because of immense social changes brought about by unprecedented waves of immigration from Caribbean, Central, and South American countries into the United States. Our community was ill prepared to meet the needs of these individuals. Many youth were exposed to the myriad risks known to abound in low-income, urban community contexts, in addition to those associated with acculturative stress. Many young people were coming of age in disempowering contexts characterized by pervasive violence, crime, abuse, and limited access to resources, with many displaying histories of attendance, behavior, or motivational problems in the high schools.

As we moved out of our labs and into the community and its schools to gain access to these students, we also began to look to existing literatures for direction and guidance. This combination of experiences served to further exacerbate and legitimize our growing awareness and concern about the background perspective that appeared to have played a role in our move from the academy to the community, viz., a view of the community as a laboratory for conducting research on aspects of youth development that were theoretically interesting to us, a perspective that appeared to be not uncommon in the developmental and intervention science-based literatures of the time. Our concern was that our approach seemed to have some (indeed, perhaps many) of the qualities of the type of “research” agenda that might

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**Authors' Note:** This article describes the work of the Youth Development Project of the Child and Family Psychosocial Research Center, Department of Psychology, Florida International University, Miami, Florida. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to William M. Kurtines, Department of Psychology, Florida International University, Miami, Florida 33199. We would like to thank Donette Archer, Marlene Arzola, Alan M. Berman, Janene Bussell, Kyle Eichas, Arlene Garcia, Clary Milnitsky, Seth Schwartz, Silvia Sullivan, Sara K. Swenson, Rachel Ritchie, Rebecca Wang, and Aida Varela.

appear from some perspectives (e.g., those beginning to emerge in the diversity/multicultural literatures of the time; Sue & Zane, 2006) to be yet another instance of exploiting disempowered populations under the guise of "knowledge development." Though clearly not our explicit or intentional aim, this concern loomed large in the background.

As we searched for guidance, we soon discovered a match between our needs and emerging literatures on developmental science, intervention science, prevention science, outreach research, and positive youth development. We viewed the fusion of these literatures to have the potential to bring together (a) a more empowering model knowledge development for research involvement in the community, one that includes meeting both community and youth needs as well as knowledge development needs; (b) a nuanced and contextualized notion of youth and their development; and (c) methodologies that richly reflect rather than reduce the experiences of young people whose development we seek to promote. These literatures formed a framework we felt comfortable with and in which the Miami YDP was launched and evolved.

Currently, the objective of the YDP is to foster the development of community-supported positive youth development by creating community-supported intervention programs (at the time of this writing, primarily providing counseling services, both individual and group) for multiproblem culturally diverse youth. Now coming to the end of its second decade of existence, the Miami YDP has grown and evolved into an outreach research and service project of Florida International University (FIU) that, in the spirit of the "ideal" of the university community "giving back" to the community that nurtures it, goes beyond the needs of the troubled young people in our counseling program in meeting university and community needs at many levels.

## **Research That "Reaches Out": The Changing Lives Program (CLP)**

The Changing Lives Program (CLP), one of the programs currently being developed (and the focus of this article), is implemented as a selective/indicated youth development program that targets multiproblem youth in alternative high schools. CLP uses a participatory and transformative approach to create contexts in which troubled (multiproblem) young people can change their lives for the better by taking responsibility for their lives and their communities. CLP's basic implementation strategy is "bottom-up versus top-down." Consistent with the collaborative model, we integrate the implementation of CLP into the ongoing flow of each school's regular activities (e.g., as part of the school's ongoing counseling program, outreach social services). In the alternative high schools, students participate

in program services either through self or counselor referral. The types of counseling services available to them through the YDP include psychoeducational services, individual counseling, and counseling groups (the groups include abuse, anger management, alternative lifestyles, relationships, self-esteem, substance use/abuse, teen parenting, troubled families, and so on).

In implementing CLP, the most immediate and direct goal is to address the presenting problems that youth bring into counseling (i.e., relationship issues, life choices, anger management, substance use, and so on). The immediate focus is on addressing identified presenting problems, whereas the long-term focus is on promoting positive development.

CLP adopts a “bottom-up” implementation strategy that focuses on targeting developmental gains that assist youth in their proactive efforts to change the systems/contexts that have a negative impact on their lives (Kurtines & Silverman, 1999). In many cases, this bottom-up approach provides a useful complement to top-down prevention models designed to intervene at a contextual/ecosystemic level (e.g., with parents, peers, school).

The CLP began in the early 1990s at the Academy for Community Education, the first alternative public high school in Miami, as a grassroots response to an urgent and growing need of this segment of the community’s youth. Now completing its second decade of existence, the Miami YDP has subsequently grown and evolved into a model program that now serves a full range of needs of alternative school students from all over the greater metropolitan Miami area and Miami-Dade County.

CLP counseling services provided by the Miami YDP are currently available to all of the Miami-Dade County Public Schools (MDCPS) voluntary alternative high schools. CLP counseling services are provided on-site in these schools to approximately 200 to 250 students each year. As noted, this is a multi-ethnic population of multiproblem youth, most of whom come to the alternative schools from a community context of disempowerment. Getting these youth invested in and in control of and responsible for changing the negative direction of their lives is the core vision that integrates and drives these efforts.

### **YDP Partnership: Working Together to Help YDP Succeed**

Developing an ongoing community-supported intervention with the capacity to serve a large youth population in serious need required bottom-up efforts (indeed, substantial amounts!). A large part of our outreach effort, for example, involved pulling together the resources to meet their needs. Moreover, although there were specific aspects of conducting

research on youth development that were of particular theoretical interest to us, YDP did not grow (indeed, could not grow) simply because it serviced our needs—it did so because it serviced many needs within the community at many levels (including ours). However, the project grew particularly because it met the direct support needs of the young people who participate in our program and because it provided supplemental support for the needs of teachers, staff, and school administrator who work with these young people on a “real time” basis day to day.

The Miami YDP is currently operated as a community partnership that evolved out of our efforts to take seriously outreach research principles and their key outcome requirements (i.e., that the research meet community needs and be feasible, affordable, and sustainable in a real-world setting). The partnership, after nearly two decades, is still in place and has proved successful. The path to this success has been (and remains) a bumpy one, with many twists and turns as well as setbacks. Nevertheless, the partnership works. Indeed, it has worked very well!

It has worked very well for many reasons, not the least of which is because the community itself cares and is willing to give of itself for the sake of its youth. To date, all of the support needed for the development and implementation of the project and its programs has been drawn entirely from public and private resources locally available to the community. It also works because, in the tradition of effective outreach research, YDP draws on university-community collaborations that are local and particular and, in doing so, serves to meet community and university needs at many levels while also helping to meet the needs of the young people in the program. The current community partners include the following:

*Florida International University.* FIU is an urban, multicampus, public research university located in Miami, Florida’s largest population center. Its mission includes serving the people of Southeast Florida. The coordinating link of the YDP is located in the Psychology Department at FIU, and the counseling services (individual and group) that represent the frontline of the YDP intervention are provided by doctoral- and master’s-level psychology students as part of their supervised practicum and internship experiences in a variety of graduate-level credentialing programs supported by the Psychology Department and the College of Arts and Sciences Outreach Programs.

*Community in Schools (CIS).* CIS provides a direct and critical link between the YDP and the schools in which the intervention is implemented. CIS is the leading private nonprofit community-based organization in the

nation for delivering community resources to schools and partners at the local level with families, schools, and community leaders to create an effective local support system for students. In this partnership, CIS collaborates with both YDP and MDCPS in organizational coordination and resource sharing.

*MDCPS.* MDCPS is the fourth largest school system in the United States, and the core of the partnership operates at the alternative public high schools where the intervention is implemented. MDCPS contributes the key resources (buildings, teachers, support and school counselors, etc.) that make the partnership possible.

*Positive Development Association (PDA).* PDA is a grassroots organization based in Miami. It grew out of the work of the Miami YDP as well as the larger goals of the Positive Development movement. PDA is an affiliate of the International Youth Development Foundation, a nonprofit organization committed to promoting positive youth development.

Finally, the students in alternative high schools where the CLP is offered provide the focal point of YDP and the partnership. As noted, the schools serve a multiethnic population of troubled youth from all over the greater Miami metropolitan area and Miami-Dade County.

The partnership between these four entities works because it evolved in ways that fulfilled a diversity of needs in the service of the ideal of the university community “giving back” to the community that nurtures it. In its implementation, for example, CLP counseling services provide supervised research and service experiences for university students in the university’s developmental and counseling programs (which also serves to get them invested in the local community). In addition, because the CLP counseling services themselves are offered through the office of the school counselor at the high schools and supported by CIS, they provide a useful source of supplemental community support for the school system.

In the tradition of outreach research, YDP’s knowledge development and dissemination efforts also include a community service component at the local, national, and international level. As part of our community service commitment, for example, we offer consultation, training, and support in the development, implementation, and evaluation of outreach research and service programs in a variety of publicly available formats. These include on-site or on-campus consultations; clinical training and implementation workshops; research and evaluation workshops, including both qualitative and quantitative methods; and community service internships for local and national high school and college students.

Finally, and most important, because the YDP evolved as an integrated part of the support infrastructure available to students in the schools, it provides an ongoing source of extra support for the young people in the alternative high schools as they begin making the choices and take actions from among available opportunities that will give direction and purpose to their life course.

Because they evolve in contexts that are local and particular, such programs emerge and remain part of the institutional infrastructure of local communities, increasing the likelihood of long-term effectiveness. In contrast to programs designed and funded externally and whose efficacy has been evaluated by outside specialists, the concepts of “shared ownership that is local and particular” and “evaluation that draws on partner mutual expertise” are foundational components of this approach that may contribute to the long-term effectiveness of programs developed using this model (Keys, Bemak, & Lockhart, 1998).

Such a model not only draws on local support, but in fostering the creation of community partnerships, it also helps to strengthen the support infrastructure of the local community. For example, this model, which is intended to be widely applicable, has in fact proved to be particularly appropriate for CLP in helping to meet the needs of the culturally and economically diverse population of youth with multiple problems (e.g., mental health, academic, substance use/abuse) who attend the alternative high schools in Miami. The Miami YDP (and the partnership that has emerged) illustrates the effectiveness of the collaborative model and its capacity to draw on the strengths of local communities that extends well beyond cost effectiveness, however significant that may be.

## Expanding Horizons

The community partnerships that have emerged out of this effort not only illustrates the practical value of university-community collaborative models in addressing pressing community needs but also illustrates the conceptual utility of a learning collaboration between scholars and community members in participating in the knowledge-generation process (Eccles, 1996; Keys et al., 1998). In developing, implementing, and refining the Miami YDP, for example, we found that we had to address the challenge of expanding knowledge horizons at all levels: theoretical, methodological, and metatheoretical.

These knowledge development efforts illustrate a hidden “added” value of the outreach research model, one that extends well beyond the potential cost effectiveness of such an approach. They also address concerns about potentially significant limitations of such an approach, particularly with respect to the potential contribution of outreach research to knowledge development at the

broadest level. This concern has to do with the possibility that the cost effectiveness of outreach research might be offset by the degree to which the lack of external funds during the intervention development phase and concomitant limitation of research resources compromise the resulting knowledge development efforts. It might be argued, for example, that the limitations of research resources that tend to result from focusing on issues such as sustainability and affordability and limitations on research issues that tend to result from focusing on community needs that are local and particular have the potential to significantly compromise the generalizability of subsequent empirical findings and, consequently, limit the contribution of the resulting research to addressing research questions of local significance only (e.g., which type of program works for which problem in which particular community setting).

This is a credible claim, one that we had to face squarely from the beginning in our work. The absence of external public funding to support the project and/or its knowledge development efforts severely limited the resources available for program development throughout the evolution of the program of research. Not having access to the substantial levels of resources available to programs designed and funded externally (and the evaluation support of outside specialists) appeared to us, at first glance, a substantial disadvantage, confound, or constraint, one that might severely limit the knowledge development potential of outreach research.

The substantial level of direct financial support available to externally funded projects for research and evaluation activities does, in fact, have definite advantages. Such support, for example, makes it possible to collect (in a relatively short time) the amount (and type) of carefully controlled data (providing sufficient statistical power) ordinarily not feasible for projects and programs that draw on concepts such as “shared ownership that is local and particular” and “evaluation that draws on partner mutual expertise” (Keys et al., 1998). Instead, efforts to develop community-supported programs in principle lack large centrally administered funding sources, requiring instead creative “boot-strapping” of local piecemeal resources, usually from community partners and stakeholders (individual and institutional, public and private, etc.) and other sources that, although invested in the local community, are frequently limited in resources themselves. This process often makes it extremely time and labor intensive to accumulate the necessary discretionary financial support and personnel to design and conduct program evaluations and carry out knowledge development activities. Programs developed under an outreach research model, consequently, require a substantially longer start-up time in which to develop and refine not only intervention programs themselves but also data collection procedures/methods and identify local

institutional support infrastructures. Such programs are also pressed to identify methods for the gradual accumulation of data over longer periods of time as alternatives for methods for intense and massive data collection over relatively brief periods more characteristic of highly funded externally supported research. These types of constraints and restrictions, we noted, may appear to be a disadvantage or a constraint on the limits of the knowledge development potential of outreach research.

This has not been our experience, however. In fact, the opposite appears to be the case. Bottom-up programs—programs that emerge from local and particular community needs and that survive, grow, and evolve despite multiple challenges—appear to have unique potentials to contribute to knowledge development. Outreach research, for example, usually has to attend to external (ecological) validity as well as internal validity from the start. As our research illustrates, an outreach research approach does not preclude the eventual inclusion of design features that maximize internal validity (e.g., random assignment, standardization of implementation methods and procedures, narrow band measures). It does, however, also strongly encourage taking a long-term view in identifying evaluation criteria that are pertinent to understanding the actual ecology of human development as it takes place in contexts that are local and particular (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Hultsch & Hickey, 1978), if for no other reason more compelling than that of survival in a “real life” human ecology.

Such models also incorporate the values and needs of community collaborators within research activities (Spanier, 1999). Indeed, it has been our experience that it is essential for the survival of programs that they be linked to the values and needs of the community. The YDP (and CLP), for example, emerged, survived, and evolved by mapping itself onto a network of alternative high schools that had evolved during the 1980s (from an initial beginning as a single small experimental school) to serve the needs of the youth of Miami. In launching YDP in the early 1990s, again starting at a single high school, we used this existing institutional structure as a starting point. Our intentionally chosen goal was to build onto and outward from this naturally emergent institutional response within the community in an effort to enhance its efficacy and effectiveness in meeting the needs of this community’s youth. The goal was to develop programs that addressed the need for a context in which the multiproblem, multicultural troubled youth who came to these schools could work on “turning their troubled lives around.” Building on this already existing resource, we were able, in turn, to reach outward and draw on the already large and growing literatures in the areas of prevention, treatment, and positive youth development as

well as the broader advances that have taken place in the evolution of developmental methods, theory, and metatheory (Overton, 2004, 2006).

## New Directions

The development of multiple conceptual and operational frameworks for working within what, from our perspective, was an already complex institutional structure in the process of becoming increasingly more multifaceted (eventually to include the evolution of a multidimensional community partnership) as well as working within the increasingly complex set of methodological, theoretical, and metatheoretical challenges of evaluating qualitative changes in the life course experiences of the youth in our program involved moving beyond current levels of knowledge development, touching on and testing the limits of the current horizons of developmental understanding. This involved the need for identifying new ways for reconceptualizing the basic nature of developmental change—what to measure—as well as how to measure it and our efforts to draw on relational metatheory (Overton, 2004, 2006) in moving toward unifying the metatheoretical methodological split in an effort to push further ahead the leading edge of knowledge development in the field. This also involved embracing a long-term perspective that involved making the necessary efforts at expanding and intensifying the commitment of community partners and stakeholders (including the university) to insure continued community support for the realization of community-valued developmental goals for its youth for the long term. In this context, our program of outreach research illustrates the value of community-supported research in generating innovative knowledge of evidence-based intervention strategies that is also feasible, affordable, and sustainable in real-world settings (Jensen, Hoagwood, & Trickett, 1999; Lerner, Fisher, & Weinberg, 2000).

Because the community partnership at the heart of this youth intervention effort emerged locally in response to specific community needs (themselves reflective of broader social-historical trends), the intervention programs and the partnership that support them evolved as part of the evolving institutional infrastructure of the local community over the past two decades, enabling the programs and partnership, in turn, to survive two decades of meeting shared obstacles and challenges and to emerge poised for future development. The shared process of overcoming mutual obstacles and challenges over the long haul, in turn, was itself a process that resulted in considerable refinement of concepts such as “shared ownership that is local and particular” and “evaluation that draws on partner mutual expertise,” as we have used them in the Miami YDP, in ways that have shown great promise with respect to contributing to the long-term effectiveness of programs developed

using an outreach research model. Indeed, over the long run, in the Miami YDP many of what might appear to be “disadvantages,” “confounds,” or “limitations” to knowledge development proved to be strengths.

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