

PREVENTIVE SYSTEM VS. POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF BOTH APPROACHES

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Introduction

An array of recent developmental psycho-pedagogical theories that promote youth's potentials indicate the topicality and validity of Don Bosco's Preventive System (PS) as their precursor from the 19th century. Their point of convergence is the promotion of youth's abilities through giving the voice to youth themselves in various forms of expression, maintaining the importance of adult examples at the same time. One of the world-renowned educational models nowadays belonging to the above-mentioned theories is the Positive Youth Development (PYD) philosophy, a theoretical and practical model which bears many similarities with PS and complements it in various aspects. The presentation and comparative analysis of both models will help us evaluate them also from an applicative and future points of view.

1. Origins of Positive Youth Development and Preventive System

Both theoretical systems originate from the praxis and are to be found all over the world, yet at a distance of approximately one hundred years.

Don Bosco had no intention of founding a PS institution or writing an essay on his method, considered pedagogy and spirituality at the same time. As Martelli et al. put it: “[The system] suggests an integrated experience that is complete in itself, a well coordinated collection of activities that constitute a dynamic pedagogy.”¹ Thus, John Bosco rather cultivated the idea of special educational settings based on positive relationships where a healthy relational community already implied a certain type of education.²

The importance of such developmental relationships in the Salesian spirit was seen in the first communities of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians or FMA sisters in Mornese likewise. Before its theoretical systematisation, the FMA sisters put the prevention into practice through the engagement of the whole educative community for the benefit of girls and female adolescents, especially the most underprivileged. This has given an impetus to subsequent FMA generations to establish educational relationships as the cornerstone of the present “spirit of education”³ among the FMA.

The positive youth development (PYD) theory originates from the United States of America in the 1960s, when PYD practitioners, researchers, and policy makers wanted to improve life conditions of various youth groups and their families. Their starting point was the belief that young persons possess plasticity because of which “all youth have the potential to change, albeit to varying degrees.”⁴ On such a grounding, a

¹ Alberto Martelli et al., “Activities and Works of Salesian Youth Ministry,” in *Salesian Youth Ministry. Frame of Reference*, (Roma: Salesian Youth Ministry Department, 2014), 88.

² Cf. Giacinto Aucello et al., *Animator v skupini mladih* (Maribor: Slomškova založba, 1997), 30.

³ Piera Ruffinatto, “La relazione educativa salesiana vissuta dalle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice. Snodi della storia,” *Orientamenti Pedagogici* 68, no. 4 (October-December 2021): p. 13.

⁴ Richard M. Lerner., Jacqueline V. Lerner, and Erin Phelps, *The Positive Development of Youth. Technical Report. The 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development: Report of the Findings From the First Four Waves of Data Collection: 2002-2003, 2003-2004, 2004-2005, and 2005-2006* (Massachusetts: Institute for Applied Research in Youth Development, Tufts University, n.d.), 9.

new connotation has been given to the concept of prevention in psychopedagogical and consequently methodological terms, i.e., from deficit to strength-based models spurred by Karen Pittman's claim in the 1990s that "problem-free is not fully prepared."⁵ Nowadays, PYD is known worldwide, embracing developmental processes as well as their outcomes.

Without using the concept of PYD promotion, Don Bosco already considered prevention in youth education as a path towards their empowerment and integral growth. This is the goal both approaches, PS and PYD, have in common: the development and enhancement of youth's positive characteristics as well as their surrounding contexts. In addition, they deal with the question "how to get adolescents' fires lit, how to have them develop the complex of dispositions and skills needed to take charge of their lives."⁶ The more young persons, especially adolescents, find their principal purpose in life based on positive values, the more their trajectories become a gift for others.

In the course of their development, PS and PYD have been subjected to scientific rigour and tested in practice as well as in many research studies. They have remained person-centred, with a special focus on adolescence, and attentive to the whole educational sphere. In this way, developmental educational theory and practice have become more interlinked, and the necessary co-existence of prevention and promotion more strengthened.

2. Theoretical framework of both models

In this chapter, theoretical frameworks are presented on the basis of their definitions and components. Then, the reader gets an insight into the three PS pillars, reason, religion and kindness as well as PYD's models of 4 Hs, 40 developmental assets and five Cs.

⁵ Karen Pittman et al., "Youth Development: Issues, Challenges and Directions," in *Youth Development: Issues, Challenges and Directions*, (Pennsylvania: Public/Private Ventures, 2000), 20.

⁶ Reed W. Larson, "Toward a Psychology of Positive Youth Development," *American Psychologist* 55, no. 1 (January 2000): 170, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.170>.

2.1. Definition

Definitions of both approaches or educational models indicate the interplay of prevention and promotion in the educational practices for youth. Consequently, they aim at active involvement of youth groups in their society in terms of youth leadership as well as social and civic engagement.

PS is founded on the comprehension of prevention which in western cultures traces back to the Renaissance, Enlightenment, modernity, industrial age and Christianity, emphasising high quality of life by avoiding evil deeds. The originality of Don Bosco's Preventive System, however, lies in the combination of the founder's educational approaches towards the poorest youth, especially boys, frequently living on the streets and formation as understood within the Catholic Church in the 19th century. Similarly, Mary Mazzarello embodied the preventive pedagogy among girls in a feminine way. The common goal of both educators was to prevent youngsters' lives from spiritual, moral and other disorders, particularly by means of active and constant adult presence among the weakest members of society. Such Salesian assistance gave an impetus to "the constructive, promotional function,"⁷ implying a realistic appreciation of youth's needs, talents and limitations on their path to integral personal growth. Therefore, the denomination "preventive" in PS may prove insufficient in psychological and related fields, bearing the whole developmental course towards positive adulthood in mind. Don Bosco, who coined the concept of PS, considered it as a pedagogical method and spirituality that protect and promote growth of developing adults. For that reason, Peter Gonsalves⁸ has advocated for the renaming of the system as Don Bosco's expressive education through which youngsters are capable of transcending their own interests and developing their talents for the good of others.

The comprehension of PS in contemporary society is also based on the combination of prevention and etiology for all youth. On the one hand, it avers the idea of accumulating protective factors in their various expressions, where their higher number predicts better behavioural and developmental outcomes. On the other, it seeks the roots of regression in different categories of youth development. Don Bosco's response to both phenomena is promotional in the form of systematic accompaniment of young persons at personal, group and community levels. Healthy relational

⁷ Rik Biesmans, "Assistance: The Essence of Don Bosco's Preventive System," *Journal of Salesian Studies* 16, no. 2 (July-December 2015): 147.

⁸ Peter Gonsalves, "Don Bosco's 'Expressive' System. An Alternative Perspective for a Communication Age," *Salesianum* 71 (2009).

systems can be established only on the basis of all mentioned types of educational presence, considering the influence of physical environment likewise.

The mutual interactions of young individuals and their settings are a convergent point between Salesian education and PYD. The PYD theory, which is at the cutting edge of interdisciplinary scientific theory, outlines not only the interactions of the dyad individual ↔ context, but it also specifies them within larger developmental systems. The latter are rooted in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which defines development of an individual as a permanent change in a temporal framework.⁹ Bronfenbrenner's conceptualization had a great impact on the developmental psychologist Richard Lerner and his developmental contextualism, which paved the way to the PYD theory.

Hamilton¹⁰ discusses PYD in at least three different ways, yet interrelated: as a developmental process; as a philosophy or approach to youth programming; as instances of youth organizations and programmes striving for PYD. One of the major lacunas or challenges regarding PYD remains the question of enhancing the fusion between individuals and their contexts through intentional change. Without it, youth development cannot be labelled as positive and does not provide the integration of prevention and promotion neither the interaction between intervention and developmental disciplines.

2.2. *PS Components*

The conceptual trinity on which the Preventive System is based encompasses reason, religion and kindness. All these components head towards all-round well-being of youth, as is the case also in PYD.

2.2.1. Reason

Don Bosco had a firm belief that young persons with their reason are educable to their own benefit and to that of society,¹¹ moving between

⁹ Urie Bronfenbrenner, *Ecologia dello sviluppo umano* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1986).

¹⁰ Stephen F. Hamilton, *A Three-Part Definition of Youth Development* (New York: Cornell University College of Human Ecology, 1999).

¹¹ Francesco Motto, "Il sistema preventivo di don Bosco. Le colonne portanti del metodo," *Note Di Pastorale Giovanile* (n.d.), https://www.notedipastoralegiovanile.it/index.php?option=com_content&view=a

rationalism on the one and sentimentality on the other hand. In fact, it implies the use of common sense, leading to realism and learning from everyday experience as a school of life. The component partially resembles the PYD asset Commitment to Learning, although the second remains limited mainly to school settings. This does not mean that Don Bosco, the great educator, did not place great emphasis on school education. On the contrary, he opened workshops for male educands and evening schools. He also penned many school textbooks and founded the publication *Salesian Bulletin*.

Similarly, Mary Domenica Mazzarello dealt with the education of girls in their convict, inviting female teachers to hold courses in various subjects, from music to languages and home economics. Mazzarello herself learned to write at an advanced age in the frame of her schools and became a seamstress to teach girls the trade. But she always connected pure intellectual education with holistic formation of female youth, which can be perceived in her letter,¹² inviting her sisters to learn not only the languages of this world but firstly how to speak with God as the path to inner happiness.

Furthermore, in both cases, for Mary Mazzarello and John Bosco, reason is also related to responsibility and personal freedom, on the basis of which major and minor decisions are made. The PYD developmental assets link it to the asset of Positive Values, explained in the subsequent paragraphs.¹³ They indicate a confluence of youngsters' external and internal sources of development, whereby adults offer explanations and food for thought and youth respond by pondering life issues and integrating them into their (value) system. Intellectual activity is thus linked to moral reasoning, with the scope of reaching post-conventional stage of moral development in adolescents. It also contributes to the formation of adolescent personal faith through concrete initiatives and examples.

article&id=15175:il-sistema-preventivo-di-don-bosco-3-le-colonne-portanti-del-metodo&catid=351&Itemid=1111.

¹² Maria Domenica Mazzarello, *I Will Never Forget You. Letters of Mary Domenica Mazzarello*, trans. FMA English-language Translation Group (Rome: FMA Institute, 2004), 105.

¹³ The common point of PS and PYD here is virtue-based education, related also to positive psychology. It aims at character development, whereby every person is believed to have potential for positive development as there is a point of goodness accessible in every youngster, even the most delinquent, according to John Bosco.

2.2.2. Religion

As already mentioned, the Preventive System is a value-based system, which supersedes a mere intention of moral development and is oriented towards religion or rather personal faith. In fact, Don Bosco considers religion more than a set of beliefs, values, rituals and rules related to the Triune Christian God. The centrality of religious experience is composed of personal relations with God the Creator and Father, the Saviour and Son, Giver of Life and Holy Spirit. Being created in the image of God means for Don Bosco following also the divine mission given to every young person. In this way, the core message of youngsters' personal spiritual quest is not to ascribe the meaning of life solely by believers themselves, but to find it in God, who has a special plan for every person he created.¹⁴ Such Christian humanism accompanies young generations through their past, present and future towards the ultimate truths, i.e., communion with God. His image chosen by Don Bosco that serves as a model to emulate first by educators and then by youngsters themselves is the Good Shepherd or Jesus described in Pauline terms as benign and patient, protective and trustful, perseverant and hopeful.¹⁵ In this context and through such attributes of divine love, religion functions as an end and a means to maintain social and moral order as well as to seek the ultimate life goal.

Here, religion is connected with the concept of Character and its values in the PYD model as well as with the asset of Positive Identity-Positive View of Personal Future and Sense of Purpose, explained subsequently. However, in PYD models there is no specific mention of transcendence or a supernatural being like God as a part of personal ontological issues.

If religion or rather spirituality understood as full communion with God is the main goal of youth thriving in PS, there are many other sub-objectives according to Giraudo:¹⁶ to promote processes of the appropriation of spiritual and human values, signposts to life; to personify and advocate for respect, social justice, school and labour, joy for life, music and theatre, friendships, sacrifice for others and God. Thus, the way of transcending individualism is being paved, which still leaves enough

¹⁴ Cf. Aldo Giraudo, "La centralità della 'religione' nel sistema preventivo di don Bosco per l'accompagnamento educativo e spirituale dei giovani," *Salesianum* 79, (2017): 334.

¹⁵ Giovanni Bosco, *Il sistema preventivo nella educazione della gioventù. Introduzione e testi critici a cura di Pietro Braido* (Roma: LAS, 1985).

¹⁶ Giraudo, "La centralità della 'religione' nel sistema preventivo di don Bosco per l'accompagnamento educativo e spirituale dei giovani."

room for individual growth in this regard and acknowledges the role of the caring community of believers within the personal spiritual journey. Indeed, the concept of religion “does not deny a growing person the right to one of the most profound interior needs of the human being: the quest for complete happiness.”¹⁷

Finally, Don Bosco and Mary Mazzarello propose in religion an educational tool which guarantees the fact still neglected in developmental science and education, i.e., all-round development of youth. Religion indeed represents the so-called “sparks” and means of igniting them with reference to the most intrinsic motivation of human existence - l(L)ove. As Mother Mazzarello puts it: “Love everyone [...] in the Lord [...]”¹⁸ In the spiritual evaluation of the most profound human longing, human’s needs are met, as for instance the desire to be happy and loved; the need for confidence and self-esteem; the need to answer the questions of suffering and death.¹⁹ This becomes possible with the help of sacraments (Penance and Communion), maintaining young hearts pure and radiant with joy. Mazzarello asserts that “cheerfulness [...] is the sign of a heart that really loves the Lord very much.”²⁰

Another educational tool in the Salesian pedagogical tradition is offering the concrete example of Mary, Mother of God, and Marian devotions, connected with her figure. Her spiritual-religious daughters, viz., the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, were inspired by this woman, who lived her mission to the full, and proposed her model to their female educands. In parallel, PYD models pay attention to adult role models too and as assets promote Support as well as Empowerment of young persons.

2.2.3. Kindness

Loving kindness denotes a type of love and an approach of how to love by showing the affection to every young person. That is to say, in Don Bosco’s opinion youth must feel and know that they are loved. Kindness

¹⁷ Gonsalves, “Don Bosco’s ‘Expressive’ System. An Alternative Perspective for a Communication Age,” 663.

¹⁸ Mazzarello, *I Will Never Forget You. Letters of Mary Domenica Mazzarello*, 214.

¹⁹ Girardo, “La centralità della ‘religione’ nel sistema preventivo di don Bosco per l’accompagnamento educativo e spirituale dei giovani.”

²⁰ Mazzarello, *I Will Never Forget You. Letters of Mary Domenica Mazzarello*, 206.

accompanied by reason and religion is the most efficacious manner to win youth's hearts. Additionally, Motto²¹ defines kindness as authentic human love, benevolent, attentive and patient affection, which is also demanding, firm and "uncompromising with evil." This is firstly expected by adult educators, although educational love and its impact should be bidirectional. The more adults are supportive, the more positive outcome can be expected of younger generations. With such kind of awareness, Don Bosco indirectly started developing the concept of the ecological and lifespan perspective in his educational humanism. Due to his *zeitgeist*, the great educator focused more on the impact of adult figures on young people, but was becoming more conscious of mutual influences in individual ↔ context interrelationships as well. With this motivation, he named adults "friends, fathers and brothers"²² in order to win boys' hearts for good. Notwithstanding that, he also counted on his young collaborators (some still adolescents) whom he called "guardian angels" in establishing supportive and healthy environments for the young. These "angels" had easier access to their peers, which paved the way to subsequent educational interventions and was mirrored in overall positive atmosphere of Salesian institutions.

With regard to the climate, important also in PYD, Don Bosco prioritized an intergenerational family spirit, realized by educators towards parentless children and youth in the first place. The pertinent characteristic could be recapitulated in the PYD asset of Family Support, Positive Family Communication, Other Adult Relationships and even Family Boundaries. Despite being a preventive and not a repressive system, it insists on certain boundaries and rules, however in the absence of chastisement and violence.

The same holds true for the family spirit cultivated in the first FMA communities, where girls formed their identity in the presence of the sisters and female teachers. Their *friends, mothers and sisters* analogously to Don Bosco's concept of adults accompanying youth, tried to ensure girls a feeling of safety through positive bonds, or through Connection, Caring and Compassion in PYD terminology. At the same time, the sisters knew that girls would accept certain educational incentives and guidelines from their young peers. These were the opportunities for them to gain interpersonal competence, e.g., resolving conflicts.

To conclude, a common denominator of all the educational relationships, be it at Don Bosco's Valdocco or in Mornese, was assistance,

²¹ Motto, "Il sistema preventivo di don Bosco. Le colonne portanti del metodo."

²² Cf. Bosco, *Il sistema preventivo nella educazione della gioventù. Introduzione e testi critici a cura di Pietro Braido*, 90.

a “constant presence that averts transgressions, and precludes the necessity of punishments”.²³ Moreover, the assistance enabled finding latent potentials in youth as the fruit of educational love, which has not changed over time. In fact, the more supportive stimulations the young receive in their contexts, the more they are prepared for self-giving and creating in positive adulthood. Loving kindness is one of the conditions to successfully reach the adult stage in every young person. That is why PS is present in all the continents, in religious and non-religious settings, and can change the trajectories of every young individual, as indicated in Don Bosco’s and Mazzarello’s visions. In the first case, little John understood his educational-pastoral mission by means of beasts that in his dreams at nine years turned into meek lambs or diligent, humble boys under the guidance of the kind Lady. Similarly, Mother Mazzarello witnessed the calling of God’s Mother related to her care of girls playing in front of the future FMA convent. Both saints gradually decoded the visionary messages and successfully passed on their educational as well as spiritual values to next generations.

2.3. PYD components

PYD is a vast theoretical field and in consequence has many models justifying the theoretical ground. However, all are based on the idea of developmental contextualism whereby individuals holistically develop through their intentional regulation, influenced by their settings, and at the same time impact the environment in which they live; the influence is bidirectional. This implies the rejection of a Cartesian dualism in youth development where nature (heredity and genes) and nurture (environmental stimuli like culture and education) are complementary leading to significant qualitative changes.

Different PYD models indicate different thriving indicators of youth development and predict their role in society in adulthood. Some of the most salient models or rather guidelines (because in constant evolution) are: the 4-H model, the developmental assets framework and the five Cs model.

²³ Biesmans, “Assistance: The Essence of Don Bosco’s Preventive System,” 146.

2.3.1. 4-H model

The 4-H model began evolving much earlier than the PYD concept itself; yet, these two are closely interrelated, as proven by the fact that the 4-H is one of the most comprehensive tests of the five Cs model.²⁴ The 4-H thriving model is spread all over the world and has lately been dealing with the effects of its programmes on PYD.

The 4-H initials indicate the four principal dimensions of personality and competences: head, heart, hand and health.

Head stands for the cognitive or intellectual part referring to knowledge, thinking, reasoning, reflexivity, decision-making. The field bears many similarities with reason in PS.

Heart denotes affection, kindness, caring and other personal as well as social competencies. It is juxtaposed to head and linked to kindness in PS.

Hand is more of practical nature implying skills, competences in the field of vocation, profession, active citizenships and civil society.

Health is connected with physical competences in the first place, which leads to certain behavioural patterns and the pursuit of sense. It could be associated with religion in PS.

In order to achieve all-round youth development, it is necessary to take all four Hs into account. Pope Francis affirms it: “In order to educate, one has to be able to combine the language of the head with the language of the heart and the language of the hands”.²⁵ An educator has to be “multilingual” and has to accompany youth in their wholeness.

2.3.2. The framework of 40 developmental assets

Don Bosco foresaw the seeds of good in every young person, which are defined in PYD terminology as internal. They are “dispositions that

²⁴ G. John Geldhof et al., “Relational Developmental Systems Theories of Positive Youth Development: Methodological Issues and Implications,” in *Handbook of Developmental Systems Theory and Methodology*, ed. Peter C. M. Molenaar, Richard M. Lerner, Karl M. Newell (New York: Guilford, 2013).

²⁵ “Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants at the Seminar Education: The Global Compact,” Francis, last modified February 7, 2020, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2020/february/documents/papa-francesco_20200207_education-globalcompact.html

develop across time and enhance the probability of engagement in positive actions.²⁶ On the other hand, external assets or ecological variables or inputs, supports, opportunities and actual developmental outcomes encourage young people to grow towards positive adulthood. The 40 assets of the framework, which has become one of the most powerful tools for comprehending PYD since 1990, are further categorized as follows.

External developmental assets contain: Support, Empowerment, Boundaries and Expectations, Constructive Use of Time.

Internal developmental assets are composed of: Commitment to Learning, Positive Values, Social Competencies, Positive Identity.

External assets should be provided by adult educators and parents in the first place, which is aligned with Don Bosco's educational philosophy in all asset fields. Establishing supportive climate and relationships, empowering youth by treating them as great resources, setting boundaries and expectations not only through adult role models, but also through positive peer influence and creating many possibilities for the constructive use of time (in sports, arts, youth programmes and at home) prepare the terrain for the development of internal assets likewise.

As already mentioned, Don Bosco spurred intellectual formation with a clear objective, resembling Commitment to Learning. Furthermore, PYD Positive Values of Caring, Equality and Social Justice, Integrity, Honesty, Responsibility and Restraint (especially in drug and alcohol consumption) are very much correlated to the value system of PS. Also, Don Bosco's educands were encouraged to grow in their social competencies when faced with various interpersonal situations: Peaceful Conflict Resolution, Resistance Skills, Interpersonal and Cultural Competence as well as Planning and Decision-Making. These all make part of PYD Social Competencies too. Finally, Don Bosco put a great emphasis on identity formation called in PYD the asset of Positive Identity. He was striving for youth's enhanced Self-Esteem, Sense of Purpose and consequently for a Positive View of Personal Future (PYD components of internal assets), which he imagined only in God. That notwithstanding, PS remains valid for different, even non-religious contexts, as is the case with PYD assets. These are interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, meant for all youth, regardless of their sex, age, culture, education and religion.

²⁶ Peter C. Scales, Peter L. Benson, Nancy Leffert, and Dale A. Blyth, "Contribution of Developmental Assets to the Prediction of Thriving Among Adolescents," *Applied Developmental Science* 4, no. 1 (January 2000): 27-46. https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532480XADS0401_3.

Although it is better to possess more assets at the same time (girls are usually equipped with a higher number of assets than boys), not all of them are needed to the same degree at once. Despite this fact, it is surely better to have more external and internal opportunities for the young, especially the poorest, than too few. This, however, remains a challenge for educators within the PS and PYD systems due to a frequent gap between adult belief and action in the education of youth. That is to say, their belief in young people is often stronger than their attitudes and deeds towards the young.

2.3.3. The five Cs model

The elements of the Cs model are based on the 40 developmental assets and represent an array of thriving indicators: Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character and Caring.

Competence: Being competent means having various competence typologies, from academic, vocational to personal competences. These are the tools to successfully navigate youth's trajectories in the 21st century, but were of great importance also in Don Bosco's and Mazzarello's times. Therefore, girls in Mornese were taught not only reading and writing skills, but also music, sports, art, etc.

Confidence: The category embraces the concept of self-worth, self-efficacy and protagonism. The more one has competences developed and believes in them, the more their locus of control is consolidated. Yet, this does not suffice; a young person primarily needs to feel unconditional love by others in order to be able to develop other personality areas.

Connection: The creation of social networks in youth's settings requires also the creation of safety and belonging, significant elements in PS and PYD. In this way, young persons are stimulated to transcend themselves and their phenomenon of adolescent egocentrism.

Character: Many a word has been said about character and moral development in both systems, PS and PYD, and both aim at the internalization of values (moral standards included). At this point, moral and spiritual development are intertwined, especially in connection with the development of spiritual values.

Caring/Compassion: At the inception, both terms did not make part of the Cs scheme but are gaining its importance as humane values and “the moral emotions of empathy and sympathy”.²⁷

Contribution: As the last C was added Contribution by its inventor Richard Lerner. According to his stand, when all other Cs are developed, Contribution as the point of arrival on the path to idealized personhood comes into play. It bears other names as well: participation, and prosocial behaviour, community service and youth voice, youth engagement and positive citizenship.²⁸

As a matter of fact, Contribution can emerge prior to the onset of the other Cs, functioning as an input or a result.

One of the main advantages of the five Cs model is its conciseness and clarity since each of the Cs is clear and practical to use. It is applicable worldwide and still under development, especially when studying the impact of individual cultures on PYD.

3. Strategies and means of application

Since PS as well as PYD strive for integral growth of youth in order “to become autonomous and responsible persons, and who are able to choose what is good for them,”²⁹ they avail of similar strategies and means of application. Their principles are commonly applied in four types of settings:

- In carefully designed programmes that have clear objectives on youth education;
- in organizations with well-defined educational plans;
- in socializing systems which promote developmental processes and outcomes;
- in communities³⁰ intersected with social norms and relational networks.

²⁷ Barbara Poredoš, “Positive Youth Development: Between Theory and Practice,” *Orientamenti Pedagogici* (in press).

²⁸ Edmond P. Bowers, G. John Geldhof, Sara K. Johnson, Jacqueline V. Lerner, and Richard M. Lerner, “Special Issue Introduction: Thriving Across the Adolescent Years: A View of the Issues,” *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 43, no. 6 (2014): 859–868, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-014-0117-8>.

²⁹ Biesmans, “Assistance: The Essence of Don Bosco’s Preventive System,” 142.

³⁰ The concept of community should be understood in a broad sense of the word-

In Don Bosco's terminology, these settings could be presented by virtue of four pillars of education, i.e., home, playground, school, and parish. Each of these contains formal or informal educational strategies or programmes and is linked to larger community systems (e.g., parish related to the universal Church). Their common ground is the oratorian heart (deriving from Don Bosco's Oratory), described in the following way:

The practice of this [Salesian educational] method creates a family atmosphere and determines the initiatives that are necessary for each young person to grow in a warm and welcoming atmosphere (home) marked by happiness (playground), where he or she can develop all their potential, acquiring new skills (school) and embark on an explicit faith journey (parish).³¹

A welcoming atmosphere provides with the necessary conditions for the progress made in personal growth, of which Mary Mazzarello and the community of Mornese were equally convinced. Therefore, the integration of different development areas is also visible in the interplay of educational strategies in the Salesian environment. For Don Bosco and Mazzarello, school offered only a certain (intellectual) input to youngsters; the parish settings had to contribute to youth's spiritual development, whereas the playground to physical and moral formation (games had the rules to follow).

The most typical educational strategies and means of PS are oriented towards youth's holistic growth and their mature adulthood via developmental transitions. The latter include the requirement of heading towards physiological, cognitive, psychosocial, moral and spiritual maturation, which is carried out by Salesian educators with the help of the "goodnight talks,"³² leading to "success in education."³³ They serve to create supportive climate, to strengthen community relationships and to learn how to read the signs of the times through moral-religious lens. The latter aspect is achieved through the "word in the ear" whispering relevant educational incentives in youngsters' ears to enhance their self-esteem, identity formation as well as positive (Christian) values.

As for PYD, means of youth involvement in their growth processes are similar, following the criteria of educational inculturation. Educators and parents are invited to instil confidence in youth by offering them the

as a unit within society, not strictly a religious community.

³¹ Martelli et al., "Activities and Works of Salesian Youth Ministry," 135.

³² Bosco, *Il sistema preventivo nella educazione della gioventù. Introduzione e testi critici a cura di Pietro Braido*.

³³ Biesmans, "Assistance: The Essence of Don Bosco's Preventive System," 154.

possibility of conversations, encouragement, opportunities to serve and to stand up for themselves and their values. Above all, consistency in words and deeds of adults is required with the scope of being a genuine example for young people.

Educational action of PYD educators can systematically be explained by means of the so-called developmental relationships³⁴ which are to be found in asset-building communities. They always refer to both sides, youth and adults, and take place in four stages:

1. Attachment: Young and adult persons get emotionally attached, stimulating positive outcomes.
2. Reciprocity: Youngsters and educators participate in joint activities where boundaries are clearly set as guidelines towards independent critical thinkers-sources of their own development.
3. Progressive complexity: With the evolvement of reciprocal relationships, youth's behavioural patterns become more complex as well.
4. The last passage proposes the shift from the balance of power to the balance between adult- and youth-driven actions.

All the stages are to be found in PS alike, especially the last one with the roles of "guardian angels." Don Bosco and Mary Mazzarello evolved it in a masculine or feminine manner, with regard to anthropology, ontology and methodology. As a matter of fact, women are more inclined to cherish such relationships through caring and compassion, whereas men through the provision of material and spiritual support. However, every educational institution realizes relational processes differently, but each of them is called to accompany young persons in order to:³⁵ get to know oneself better and to plan one's own life; reinforce personal faith in the search for vocation; contribute to society and reduce all forms of injustice. In such kind of accompaniment, resilience is augmented and protective factors

³⁴ Edmond P. Bowers, G. John Geldhof, Sara K. Johnson, Lacey J. Hilliard, Rachel M. Hershberg, Jacqueline V. Lerner, Richard M. Lerner, "Youth-Adult relationships and positive youth development," in *Promoting Positive Youth Development. Lessons From the 4-H Study*, ed. Edmond P. Bowers, G. John Geldhof, Sara K. Johnson, Lacey J. Hilliard, Rachel M. Hershberg, Jacqueline V. Lerner, and Richard M. Lerner (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2015), 97-120.

³⁵ Cf. Aucello et al., *Animator v skupini mladih*, 144.

(positive values and peer influence, work habits, etc.) implemented. All this occurs in a linear temporal framework, embracing non-linear youth development.

4. Paradigm shift: From prevention to promotion

In the trajectory of every young person, both prevention and promotion approaches are needed if understood in pure psychological terms. However, Don Bosco's comprehension of prevention already contained the promotional note, which was seen in his methodology with youth. In contrast to traditional services which are according to PYD problem-focused, PS and PYD highlight the importance of positive developmental outcomes. In case of PS, the aim of thriving exceeds the one of PYD since it reaches for eternity in a lasting relationship with God, the deepest source of every thriving person according to Christian belief.

Although the following scheme presenting the passage from traditional to current youth services refers to the PYD philosophy, it has many elements applicable to the PS field too.³⁶

1. from problem-focused issues to focus on positive developmental outcomes;
2. from reactive to proactive approaches;
3. from targeted public-youth to all youth categories;
4. from youth as recipients to youth as active participants;
5. from programmes to community involvement and systemic change;
6. from professionals to all community members.

In light of the above passages, youth are not seen as problems but rather as potentials that should respond not only to negative challenges in their trajectories, but first of all to their vision and construction of good living conditions.

In addition, PS and PYD advocate for the inclusion of all types of youth in their educational processes, particularly PS that promotes the poorest young who are least likely to succeed in life.

³⁶ Jutta Dotterweich, *Positive Youth Development Resource Manual* (New York: ACT for Youth Center of Excellence, n.d.).

As for the youngsters' role, they are expected to be more than just passive recipients of the services at their disposal. Indeed, they expect to assume active roles in society at large taking the appropriate responsibility.

Neither PS nor PYD began their mission with organized programmes but gradually developed on the basis of everyday educational experience, involving whole communities, regardless of professional education and age. Notwithstanding that, PS has built its foundations on the Salesian religious community as the promoter of Salesian formation. Thus, Don Bosco designated more mature educands in their late adolescence or early adulthood as his close collaborators in youth's formation. Such bottom-up approach has ensured the path towards systemic change, still in evolution in PYD literature. The long-term systemic change may bring more long-term results in the field of education, be it in contents or methods, whereby gender and cultural differences have to be considered as well. Yet, both perspectives tend to see youth as individuals, starting from their own desires and needs. As Villanueva³⁷ confirms and should hold true for all educators, a Salesian person knows their inspirations, challenges and problems from existential and theoretical points of view. The more so, since youth can be led astray despite many positive incentives they receive from their environment. The complementarity of prevention-promotion should never be self-evident but always revitalized in the mindset of practitioners, researchers and policy makers. To recap in Vecchi's words: "The good educator is the one who is always able to give and create a new opportunity. He is the one who never says: enough!"³⁸

5. Future perspectives

PS with its three tenets of reason, religion and kindness as well as PYD still (or more and more) prove to be adequate in responding to the needs of today's youth and the whole society in which they live. With its supportive climate (family spirit) and empowerment of young generations in various arenas, both perspectives in question, PS and PYD, are placed between authoritarianism and permissiveness, a parenting style that can be of great help to practitioners and educators. Although historical

³⁷ Pascual Cháavez Villanueva, "Le sfide della continuità e dell'adattamento nella pedagogia salesiana," *Orientamenti Pedagogici* 68, no. 4 (October-December 2021): 59-72.

³⁸ "Il buon educatore è quello capace di dare e creare sempre una nuova opportunità. È quello che mai dice: basta!"; Juan E. Vecchi, *Spiritualità salesiana* (Torino: Elledici, 2001), 114.

circumstances, educational disciplines and youth themselves have changed, core tenets of the educational models have remained the same, in particular ethical and moral values as landmarks of sense in youth's lives.

Furthermore, in view of theoreticians, PS and PYD should treat young persons on the basis of content and methodological interdisciplinarity from related areas, such as psychology, pedagogy, sociology, theology, philosophy, politics, etc. Circumstances in which youth's upbringing take place have lately changed to such a great extent³⁹ that it is impossible to understand contemporary youth without scientific interdisciplinarity and a profound, sincere attitude towards young persons. These are the sprouts of new humanism and universal solidarity present in youth education closely connected with Salesian realistic optimism and positive psycho-pedagogical tendencies in the last years.

For that reason, kindness as one of the PS tenets remains topical even today. It is an expression of love and respect towards every human being, irrespective of socio-economic background. In this way, social injustice is being reduced and marginalized youth is given the voice they deserve. Therefore, PS refers not only to families and educators, but also to (youth) policy makers and wider social circles.

The same goes for reason applied at school and in out-of-school programmes as common sense. Using intellect for learning by heart (usually within school settings) does not suffice. Youth's brain and mind are characterized by the plasticity that allows for personal agency in different life contexts, which is highlighted by the asset of Constructive Use of Time or Commitment to Learning with Reading for Pleasure, for instance.

The other side of the coin considering reason is spirituality, complementary to the rational part and an indispensable element of PS as well as of PYD. Although still underestimated in PYD literature, relation with a transcendent being or Christian God essentially influences youth's trajectories. Going beyond one's own needs is already a great leap, as defined by Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Yet, establishing an intense relationship with a being greater than a human person denotes much greater progress in personal growth. The second one is based on the discovery that humans are made in the image of God, loving heavenly Father who protects and guides people through their life course and with whose help resilience as well as life purpose are significantly boosted.

³⁹ Pope Francis speaks of a change of the epoch.

In view of kindness, reason and religion, these are to be found in PYD models likewise, rendering them complementary to PS; however, the asset framework is more detailed and the demarcation line between internal and external assets or inputs clearer. If Support, Empowerment and Social Competencies for example refer more to kindness and social relationships, Boundaries and Expectations as well as Commitment to Learning are bound to reason. Again, Positive Values and Positive Identity are associated with spirituality and personal faith, although less directly than PS.⁴⁰

With regard to the five Cs model, its structure resembles the PS scheme, but is less explicit on religious issues, Character with its moral values being the closest to the pertinent PS category. Other components are aligned with reason, like Competence, whereas Caring/Compassion, Confidence and Connection with kindness.

An overview and a comparative analysis of PS and PYD show that they resemble each other in theory and practice, despite different terminology. Moreover, they prove to still meet the needs of contemporary youth worldwide. Some educational methodology and contents have changed, but the key concepts and values in both types of education have remained, preferring healthy, active youth in society over disadvantaged and passive young receivers.

This poses a challenge to educators and requires from them lifelong formation, for being able and humble enough to “be present with the young wherever [they] meet.”⁴¹ Their presence should always be that of accompaniment and encouragement, as opposed to sheer adult leadership.

Finally, with the basic assumption of PS and PYD, i.e., love for the young, there is no need to literally replicate both educational systems in our educational settings, but to revitalize them anew - for love is creative in its prevention and promotion of youth.

⁴⁰ PYD does not propose any specific religious denomination to follow in a personal spiritual quest. It rather leaves the choice of finding the telos to every individual.

⁴¹ Martelli et al., “Activities and Works of Salesian Youth Ministry,” 139.

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