

Photovoice Elicited Young Adults' Perspectives on Positive Youth Development Approaches in Workforce Training

Lessons From the Generation Work Initiative

Sam Beckwith, Hannah Lantos, and Kristin Anderson Moore

Introduction

In 2015, the Annie E. Casey Foundation started a new initiative, Generation Work, which aimed to braid three important approaches in young adult workforce training programs: positive youth development (PYD), demand-driven training, and racial equity. Within [Generation Work](#), five local partnerships work to align education, employment, and support services to promote more equitable employment opportunities for young adults (ages 18 to 29), link them to employers, and help them succeed in the workforce. Child Trends has worked with the five local Generation Work partnerships to support their implementation of PYD, and help build understanding of how programs integrated PYD into their practices.

Each partnership in the Generation Work initiative is committed to providing positive, developmentally appropriate supports for their participants. From 2016 to 2019, Child Trends conducted site visits to identify the practices that partnerships were using to implement the [PILOT framework](#) (see page 3) and developed [case studies](#) for each of the five local partnerships to focus on a narrower area in which these partnerships were applying a PYD approach. There was, however, one important voice missing from our work until now: the perspectives of the young adult participants themselves.

This brief focuses on the experiences and perspectives of Generation Work participants who took part in our study, shared across multiple mediums: interviews, focus groups, and a visual medium called photovoice. Specifically, the brief describes how participants identified alignments between their programs' activities and the principles of PYD, as well as areas in which the programs and principles differed.

Generation Work

Launched by the Annie E. Casey Foundation in 2015, Generation Work™ aims to connect more of America's young adults with meaningful employment by changing the way public and private systems prepare them for jobs. As part of the initiative, partners in five sites across the nation—Cleveland, Hartford, Indianapolis, Philadelphia, and Seattle—are working to align various education, employment, and support services to help young adults develop the skills required to succeed in the working world, link them with employers, and increase advancement and earning opportunities.

By combining employer-facing strategies that are aligned to labor market needs with positive youth development techniques—such as hands-on learning and mentoring—the initiative aims to blend services into more cohesive pathways that promote equitable employment opportunities for all young adults.

Key findings

Young adults who participated in the photovoice study reported that their experiences in Generation Work programs exemplified both safety and support. For example:

- **Each participant described developing positive relationships with staff in their programs.** Participants felt cared for and reported that they had received individualized attention.
- **Participants discussed how the environments in each of these programs were more supportive than in other educational settings.**
- **Participants also felt that each program was committed to helping them experience a sense of belonging.** This experience was different for different participants, but was collectively a major reason why participants felt able to persevere even when they faced challenges in the program or with difficult life circumstances. Several youth even referred to the programs as being “like family.”
- **Programs helped place participants in positions where they could feel empowered to give back** to the community and to those in need. Several participants talked about seeking jobs where they could help others much like they themselves had felt supported.
- **Participants reported having few conversations about race equity.** While each program focused on incorporating racial equity approaches into their work, most participants did not recall explicit conversations about racism.

Additionally, the **importance of self-care** was one theme that arose in conversations with every participant, but which we had not planned to discuss before participants themselves mentioned it. Each participant shared the ways in which they engage in self-care and emphasized the importance of self-care in helping them succeed in their endeavors.

About the PYD approach

PYD approaches encourage providers to focus on their clients’ [unique attributes](#). By adopting a PYD approach, programs commit to responding to young adults’ goals and current circumstances, and to tailoring programming to individual needs and the appropriate developmental stage of each participant, to the extent possible. Repeatedly, practitioners refer to this participant-centered approach as “meeting young people where they are.” Nearly two decades of research have led experts to suggest that PYD offers a more well-rounded and contextually flexible method of intervention,^{1,2} and these approaches have been found to improve social and emotional learning (SEL) skills for both children and adolescents.³

While the PYD approach may seem difficult or resource-intensive to implement in professional development programs, we have observed programs—including those in Generation Work—that successfully focus on young adults’ individual needs, goals, and strengths as they help participants successfully complete a program, training, or other initiative. Program staff can better meet the needs of individuals by developing positive relationships with young adults; ensuring physically and emotionally safe environments; strengthening linkages between organizations, families, and communities; and improving young adults’ developmentally appropriate skills (that is, both their soft skills and their academic and technical competencies).

In 2020, Child Trends embarked on a sub-study within our Generation Work portfolio to better understand how young adult participants themselves experienced programs’ professional development supports. We wanted to better understand whether the young adult participants felt supported, safe, engaged, and able to reach their goals and, if so, which staff practices had helped them feel these ways. Drawing from the PILOT tool, this study collected data from participants—through interviews, photos (as part of a photovoice exercise), and focus groups—to better understand their experiences in two Generation Work local partnerships: Hartford, CT and Indianapolis, IN.

Study objectives and methodology

Our most recent data collection activity for this study, conducted in late 2020 and early 2021, utilized a qualitative research method called photovoice to deeply engage young adults currently or recently participating in the Indianapolis, IN and Hartford, CT Generation Work programs. This round of data collection aimed to accomplish the following:

- Explore common themes, across data sources, in how young adult participants speak about their Generation Work experiences.
- Identify instances in which the principles of PYD are clearly present or absent in Generation Work programs.
- Highlight both program strengths and opportunities for growth, according to young adult participants' perspectives.

Our data collection efforts were largely grounded in the [PILOT tool](#) developed for integrating PYD principles into youth workforce development settings (see box at right). This tool served as a conceptual model for our data collection efforts and informed the development of our data collection materials (interview and focus group protocols, photovoice prompts).

To recruit young adults, program staff identified potential study participants. Child Trends staff then reached out to schedule a one-on-one interview that was loosely structured around the PILOT tool to better understand each person's experiences in their program. Following that initial interview, young adults were asked whether they were interested in participating in the photovoice portion of the study. Once participants were finished taking their photos—the primary physical data collection medium for photovoice—we held virtual focus groups to discuss the photos, to prompt participants to describe those pictures, and to make connections between participants' photographs and their experiences in their Generation Work program.⁴ Six young adults participated in a one-time training for photovoice and five responded to photovoice prompts. More details on the specific photovoice methods used for this study can be found in [another brief](#) that identifies lessons learned from photovoice implementation. Study participants were also invited to participate in virtual focus groups to discuss their photovoice responses.

This brief draws on data from the initial interviews, photovoice activities, focus groups, and post-photovoice interviews for five participants who took part in all three activities, as well as from the initial interview data provided by another five participants. Child Trends researchers with experience in qualitative data analysis reviewed the data and identified themes that emerged across data sources. The initial identification of themes did not build from a pre-existing framework or hypothesis; however, we subsequently examined alignment between primary themes and the principles of PYD as described in the PILOT tool.

Common Themes

Most participants valued developing positive relationships with program staff.

In their photovoice prompt responses, interviews, and focus groups, the vast majority of participants described positive relationships that they developed with staff and leadership at their programs. Some participants drew explicit contrasts between the ways that Generation Work staff and teachers engaged

PILOT

Based on the findings from a series of in-depth site visits with Generation Work local partnerships, Child Trends developed the PILOT guide for integrating PYD into workforce training settings. PILOT identifies five specific strategies for this work:

- Positive Relationships
- Improved Skills
- Linkages across Schools, Work, Families, and Communities
- Opportunities to Contribute and Belong
- Trustworthy and Safe Settings

3 Photovoice Elicited Young Adults' Perspectives on Positive Youth Development Approaches in Workforce Training
Lessons From the Generation Work Initiative

them and previous negative experiences they'd had in public schools. In general, these young adults saw Generation Work staff as supportive and committed in a way that they had not experienced prior to the program. Participants described these positive relationships with phrases like “really consistent with me” and “relaxed, but super professional.” Others described how staff would refuse to give up on them; one participant simply stated that knowing program staff are there for them makes a big difference. Generally, participants saw staff and leadership as reliable and consistent presences in the program.

One participant talked about how challenging circumstances in her life meant that building such strong, positive bonds was not natural or common for her. She stated, “I have had trouble building, like, positive relationships, but ... the supportive environment that I experience at [the program] really helped me.” For another participant, the program director became a person he felt comfortable reaching out to during tough times. During a day on which he was struggling, he felt comfortable sending her a text message letting her know about his mindset. About their relationship, he said, “I trust her with my life, honestly. She’s the only person I trust at this current moment.” Other participants also brought up the ability to trust program staff. Importantly, some noted that this feeling of trust was not one-sided: Not only were these participants able to trust staff, but they also felt that staff trusted them.

A few participants described the factors that went into building these positive relationships. A commonly reported experience was having program staff disclose personal stories, which they found helpful in establishing a closer connection. One program participant talked about how one staff member shared their past struggle with addiction, while another discussed having experienced poverty while growing up. One participant described a member of program leadership by saying “[the leader] put all his cards on the table.”

The supportive environment in Generation Work programs helped participants stay on track.

Another theme repeatedly vocalized by participants was the supportive nature of the program environments. Much of this support came from staff-participant interactions; staff worked proactively to connect participants with concrete supports and provided consistent encouragement and motivation. Multiple participants described program staff checking in on them, and one talked about how a staff member would send encouraging text messages. This felt “empowering” to her and kept her on track toward graduation. Participants also felt encouraged to ask questions. Rather than let issues “sit and simmer,” as one participant described, they were encouraged to let program staff know if they needed anything—and these needs were consistently met once staff were made aware. One participant emphasized that such supports were offered in a respectful way: Staff treat participants as adults, but also work proactively to connect them to supports. Participants mentioned receiving numerous specific supports, including the following:

- Help creating resumes
- Assistance with immigration
- Financial support, including help obtaining grants for school or training
- Stable housing, including setting up long-term hotel stays
- Mental health supports
- English language learning assistance

By and large, participants spoke highly of these supports. However, one participant stated that there had been growing pains in the level of support provided by his program. Specifically, he reported getting the impression that some decisions were being made for him, without his input. With time, though, this problem declined and the participant made clear that staff at the program were receptive to feedback.

Most participants felt a sense of belonging in their programs.

Most participants explicitly described feelings of safety, respect, and belonging in their programs. The photovoice responses of a few participants indicated that this sense of belonging was very important to them. One said:

It's common to sometimes feel like an outsider, or like we don't belong, and feeling that way can be very detrimental to our well-being. So, it's crucial to find something or someone that makes us feel like we belong.

Another participant referenced the fact that he has a multicultural heritage, remarking that it can be hard to feel like he belongs in any one place when his roots are in multiple cultures. Several participants discussed the ways in which their programs (or program extensions, such as job placements) built a sense of belonging. In one photovoice response, a participant shared a photo of branded apparel provided by his current job. He saw this as an example of how the job had shown appreciation in multiple ways—not only with verbal statements of gratitude, but also by giving him merchandise:

My job has ways of showing appreciation for their team members by providing everyday articles of clothing with their twist on it ... it hits different when gratitude is shown in more ways than one.

Across both programs, participants remarked that they felt their programs really wanted them to succeed. One photovoice response from a participant showed a framed sign of her last name, with letters in various fonts and styles. When asked to connect this photo back to the Generation Work program, she described how being in the program made her feel a sense of belonging—just like the last name she shares with her stepfather and half brothers. All participants were trying to accomplish the same goal of graduating from high school. Recognizing this shared goal fostered a sense of belonging in the program. Multiple other participants more explicitly stated that they had found a new family in the program, with one saying, “I’ve never felt that much love in my life before.” Another said that staff at his program “let me be me,” to the extent that he felt comfortable dancing down the hallway when he was in a good mood. Overall, participants described feeling respected and safe. This allowed some participants to succeed and dream in ways they had not had the opportunity to do when they felt more constrained.

Programs empowered their participants and created a desire to give back.

Several participants talked about wanting to do things—work or volunteering—to give back to their community or to others in need of help. When talking about their current jobs, or their longer-term job aspirations, participants largely reinforced this theme. One participant had an internship at a homeless shelter serving veterans, which she described as “very rewarding,” and spoke about wanting to be a therapist. Another participant planned to go into social work and a third hoped to do work related to housing. One participant did not share specific plans for work, but described wanting to do something that helps others out: “When we help others, we feel some kind of success inside.”

Beyond their professional aspirations, a few participants also talked about wanting to do something positive for the communities they came from. One had the idea of organizing a community cleanup to recycle or limit plastic bottles that could be found on the street. Beyond this, he discussed an effort that would help people limit their carbon footprint.

Another participant discussed feeling troubled by harmful negative stereotypes facing his community:

... there's always a lot of negative language and ideas and beliefs around the people: who we are, what we do, and there's not a lot of people trying to kind of battle that narrative and kind of trying to fight back and kind of create something that the community can be happy for, proud of."

Beyond participation in the Generation Work program, this participant also worked with a local nonprofit and served on a community advisory board. He talked about his desire to see tangible change in his community, with greater access to resources and the ability for “young people and adults [to] live happier lives.” Being involved in these initiatives was his way “of just being part of that change, and being able to help.”

Unprompted, many participants emphasized the importance of self-care.

Multiple participants raised the idea of self-care and several used their photovoice responses to show ways they did something to care for themselves—to relax, to calm anxious thoughts, or to refocus. In particular, a few participants noted that they had other people to care for in their lives, and that taking care of themselves in such a situation can be challenging. One focus group participant said, “Something difficult to balance in my life is taking care of myself, rather than taking care of other people.” A participant in a separate focus group linked her self-care back to the Generation Work program. According to her, the program “helped me realize I need to take more time out of my busy schedule to do stuff that I love doing.” Her preferred hobby, drawing, also had the benefit of improving her mental health.

In their photovoice responses, participants shared a varied set of self-care activities focused on relaxation or being creative. These included the following:

- Enjoying tea and a snack
- Drawing or coloring
- Producing music
- Lighting candles
- Taking a bath

Although this focus on self-care was parallel to participants’ experiences in the programs—only one participant drew an explicit connection between the two—it was clear that these self-care activities were important aspects of participants’ lives.

Discussions of racial equity in the workplace were not prominent in Generation Work programs.

Racial equity and inclusion is a core component of the Generation Work initiative. Notably, prior research with staff and leadership at Generation Work programs found that many thought it important that staff could discuss racism and discrimination with program participants.⁵ However, most participants described a lack of thorough conversations on this topic in their programs. Generally, participants did not bring up racial equity on their own during their interviews. When asked about it, they generally had little to say about the presence or absence of racial equity discussions in the programs. When prompted, several participants did say, in general terms, that they found their programs to be overall equitable and nondiscriminatory. However, they did not have concrete examples of learning to navigate or prepare for experiences of bias, discrimination, or conflict.

A few participants did report that program staff raised the topic of racism. For example, staff occasionally mentioned how participants may work with people outside of the programs who do or say racist things. This was helpful for one participant, who is Black, because it made him think in advance about how he would handle such a situation. In contrast, another Black participant saw little value in having such conversations in his program. Because racism had always been part of his life experience, he did not feel that these would be surprising or unexpected future experiences. This participant went on to discuss past experiences of

6 Photovoice Elicited Young Adults’ Perspectives on Positive Youth Development Approaches in Workforce Training
Lessons From the Generation Work Initiative

teachers or counselors making assumptions about the kinds of careers he would like to pursue—for example, assuming that he would want a career in sports. However, he appreciated that staff at the Generation Work program did not make such assumptions.

Discussion of Findings

One goal of this photovoice research was to hear how participants spoke about their experiences in Generation Work. A primary theme that emerged was the alignment between participants' perceived positive treatment in the programs and the principles of PYD; this relationship is described in more detail below. Participants also spoke of other important aspects of their lives that were somewhat removed from the programs themselves: self-care and being able to give back.

Participants' words and photovoice responses made clear that self-care was something they greatly valued. In addition to participants' hard work in Generation Work programs, they also found it important to take time for themselves. However, participants rarely connected self-care with their experiences in their programs. Program staff should encourage and validate self-care practices for their participants. This could represent another way for Generation Work programs to provide a supportive environment—by not only encouraging participants to remain in the programs, but also to prioritize their own well-being.

Additionally, participants often described a desire to give back or to make a difference in others' lives. Several talked about their professional aspirations—such as becoming a social worker—that would let them help others on a daily basis. Clearly, participants felt comfortable expressing these visions and thought they were achievable. At the same time, they did not generally draw connections between their experiences in Generation Work and their desire to give back. The desire to help others is a powerful asset, and programs should consider how to support and build it. This could be accomplished in multiple ways—for example, by helping organize community service or outreach events, building networks for participants with specific interests (such as social work or advocacy), or bringing in leaders from local community-based organizations doing such work.

Another goal of this research was to identify instances in which the principles of PYD are clearly present or, alternately, absent. The *PILOT* tool identifies five strategies for advancing PYD in workforce training settings:

- Positive relationships
- Improved skills
- Linkages across school, work, families, and communities
- Opportunities to contribute and belong
- Trustworthy and safe settings

The qualitative data from participants indicates strong—but not perfect—alignment between participants' experiences in Generation Work programs and the elements of PYD described by *PILOT*. The four components of *PILOT* with the strongest resonance were positive relationships, linkages, opportunities to contribute and belong, and trustworthy and safe settings. Although a few participants mentioned having improved skills—particularly “soft” skills (such as talking with others, being professional, and setting goals)—this was not a major theme that emerged from the data. It is possible that skill-building is such a clearly stated goal of the Generation Work programs that participants did not feel the need to bring it up.

Table 1: Presence of PILOT components in participants' perceptions of Generation Work programs

PILOT component	Definition	Presence in participant data
Positive relationships	Foster positive, respectful, and supportive relationships with and among participants that provide guidance, effective communication, and social support.	Positive relationships with program staff and leadership were emphasized broadly across participants and programs. Positive relationships among participants were not brought up to this extent.
Improved skills	Provide opportunities for participants to learn technical, intellectual, emotional, and social skills and prepare for jobs and further education.	A few participants mentioned building skills—particularly soft skills like speaking with others, being professional, or setting goals. However, this was not a major theme emerging in the data.
Linkages across school, work, families, and communities	Recognize and support positive linkages among participants, schools, workplaces, families, and communities.	Several participants mentioned helpful and concrete supports that the program provided or connected them to. Additionally, some participants had internships or work placements facilitated by their program.
Opportunities to contribute and belong	Provide opportunities for meaningful inclusion of all participants and encourage them to give back by making meaningful contributions to their workplaces and communities.	Making a contribution and giving back was a central theme. However, it is unclear if this was related to, or incidental to, participation in a Generation Work program. Participants did feel as if they belonged in the programs.
Trustworthy and safe settings	Provide settings that guarantee physical and emotional safety for all.	Multiple participants mentioned feelings of trust and safety. They felt encouraged to ask questions, and did not describe discrimination or feelings of disrespect.

Participants shared many positive aspects of their Generation Work experiences, which included—but were not limited to—several components of PYD as described in PILOT. Because numerous frameworks and models for PYD exist, it is likely that any single conceptualization of the approach will have both gaps and strengths in reflecting participants' experiences.^{6,7} Moreover, it is possible that many programs focus exclusively on skill-building. While skill development was a major goal of the Generation Work programs, it was also not the only aspect prioritized in programming. For example, an important theme shared by participants was the importance of their self-care activities. While this indicates that it could be important for Generation Work programs (or PYD programs, more broadly) to encourage participants to engage in relaxing or reenergizing activities outside of the program space, this aspect is not well represented in the PILOT tool.

Study Limitations

The findings in this brief are based off of data collected through multiple modalities, and build from prior research related to Generation Work. However, the data should be considered in the context of three limitations. First, the sample for this study was small. While 10 participants provided at least one data source, only five took part in multiple interviews and in the photovoice exercise. There was likely selection bias in our recruitment and retention, and respondents' perspectives may not be generalizable to those of program participants as a whole. Second, only two Generation Work sites (Hartford, CT and Indianapolis, IN) participated in this data collection. Finally, there was only one photovoice focus group per respondent. It

is likely that more regular discussions, going into more depth about participants' responses, would have provided richer data. However, this approach was not logistically feasible for this study.

Conclusions and Next Steps

These data from young adult participants in the Generation Work programs in Indianapolis and Hartford clearly show that the young adults themselves recognized and experienced the PYD approaches that staff were implementing. It is also clear that participants saw Generation Work programs as places where they felt safe, respected, and able to set and reach ambitious goals for themselves. Furthermore, for these participants, the programs were supportive environments in which success was possible. Participants often drew contrasts between the Generation Work programs and their prior education or training settings, indicating that the incorporation of PYD into Generation Work is a major part of the value these programs add for participants.

We have identified four next steps in this research:

1. More systematically catalogue PYD and other supportive practices put in place by Generation Work programs. Additionally, identify the program structures and policies that lead to these practices.
2. Study the extent to which these practices are associated with better outcomes for a larger, more representative sample of young adult participants.
3. Explore how to train staff to provide these kinds of supports. Previous work has identified a need to hire staff who already have a PYD-oriented mindset, but ongoing training is also likely needed. It will be essential to develop a better understanding of the components of strong, impactful trainings.
4. Provide more opportunities to highlight young adult voices and encourage a broader set of program participants to share concrete stories and examples of how they felt supported in programs. Research should also explore how participants' feelings of being supported related to their successes.

More research in these four areas could go a long way in supporting youth and young adults by informing youth-serving programs and organizations of the ways in which their hiring, training, and programming practices can lead to improved outcomes for their participants.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to each of the young people who participated in the photovoice study during this COVID-19 pandemic year. Thank you for learning with us.

Thank you also to Muhsin Orsini and Bob Strack who designed www.photovoicekit.org and took their time to teach us how to use it.

Thank you to the Generation Work team at the Annie E. Casey Foundation for supporting this work.

Suggested citation

Beckwith, S., Lantos, H., & Moore, K. A. (2021). *Photovoice Elicited Young Adults' Perspectives on Positive Youth Development Approaches in Workforce Training: Lessons From the Generation Work Initiative*. Bethesda, MD: Child Trends.

References

1. Eichas, K., Ferrer-Wreder, L., & Olsson, T. M. (2019). Contributions of positive youth development to intervention science. *Child & Youth Care Forum, 48*, 279-287.
2. Moore, K. A. (2017). Positive youth development goes mainstream. *Child Development, 88*(4), 1175-1177.
3. Taylor, R. D., Oberle, E., Durlak, J. A., & Weissberg, R. P. (2017). Promoting positive youth development through school-based social and emotional learning interventions: A meta-analysis of follow-up effects. *Child Development, 88*(4), 1156-1171.
4. Wang, C. C. (1999). Photovoice: A participatory action research strategy applied to women's health. *Journal of Women's Health, 8*(2), 185-192.
5. Redd, Z., Moore, K., & Andrews, K. (2020). *Embedding a Racial Equity Perspective in the Positive Youth Development Approach*. Bethesda, MD: Child Trends.
6. Arnold, M. E., & Silliman, B. (2017). From theory to practice: A critical review of positive youth development program frameworks. *Journal of Youth Development, 12*(2).
7. Shek, D. T. L., Dou, D., Zhu, X., & Chai, W. (2019). Positive youth development: Current perspectives. *Adolescent Health, Medicine, and Therapeutics, 10*, 131-141.

Appendix A. Photovoice Prompts Sent to Participants

1. Take a picture of the best part of your day today.
2. Take a picture of something that makes it easy OR difficult to find and keep a job or to succeed in the training program.
3. Take a picture of something you want staff at your program to know about you.
4. Take a picture of something that makes you feel like you belong.
5. Take a picture of where you feel most yourself or feel most comfortable about who you are.
6. Take a picture of something that reminds you of what trust looks like to you.
7. Take a picture of something that reminds you of being supported by someone.
8. Take a picture of what safety looks like in your program or workplace (or what you would want it to look like).
9. Take a picture of something that reminds you of a really good relationship.
10. Take a picture of something that you do well.
11. Take a picture of something that would make workforce trainings better.
12. Take a picture of how you learn best or the environment that helps you learn (or what you would want it to look like).