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# Positive Youth Development through Grassroots Perspectives:

## *Exploring the Suitability of Positive Youth Development within Thailand*

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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# Abstract

This research project explores the suitability of Positive Youth Development (PYD) frameworks developed in the West for application to non-Western societies by exploring five different grassroots youth development organisations in Thailand. It draws on the insights of youth participants, staff members, and founders from these organisations gained through interviews and observational research. The study employs a qualitative methodology, adopting a strength-oriented approach within a constructivist paradigm. Twenty participants were interviewed, including eleven youth participants, five staff members and four organisational founders. The research identified challenges and opportunities in implementing PYD to benefit Thai youth.

One of the critical project findings is the community's significant role in shaping PYD in Thailand. Youth participants did not view their development in isolation but saw it as closely tied to their community. Community acceptance and involvement profoundly impacted the participant youths' self-esteem, abilities, overall well-being and capacity to become leaders.

The findings illuminate that negative community perceptions of education, economic constraints, and limited access to training and job opportunities significantly hinder youth opportunities. Additionally, social exclusion and cultural norms may limit youth potential. This suggests that the community within this collectivist society has a dual effect on youth development. Support and acceptance can enhance positive outcomes. Conversely, a lack of support or understanding due to harmful cultural and social norms, community perceptions of further education being subservient to the need to provide for one's family by working, and the place of youth in society can restrict youth development. This highlights the need for solid support systems in considering PYD implementation.

Leadership development and mentorship were crucial for fostering community engagement among youth participants. Mentors, in particular, play a key role in guiding and motivating young people. The study also emphasises Thailand's wide range of geographical and social environments and the importance of providing tailored support and opportunities for practical and emotional skill development. These findings suggest that successful youth development initiatives in Thailand must be carefully customised to address the unique needs of young people and their specific community contexts. The study advocates for a culturally sensitive adaptation of the PYD framework to the Thai context and, more broadly, for its application to other collectivist, non-Western cultures, emphasising the importance of understanding community dynamics and cultural nuances.

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## **Lists of Abbreviations**

PYD      Positive Youth Development

UNDP    United Nations Development Programme

GFC      Global Fund for Children

NSO      National Statistics Office (Thailand)

GMS      Greater Mekong Sub-region

SEP      Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (Thailand)

NEET    Not in employment, education or training

UNICEF    United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

LMIC    Low-Medium Income Country

# Chapter 1: *Introduction*

## 1.1. Justification for the Research

Youth are the foundation of any society's future, playing a pivotal role in shaping its social, economic, political and cultural landscapes (Undesa, 2020a and 2020b). The period of adolescence and young adulthood is marked by growth, learning, and the development of personal and social identities (Lerner et al., 2015). However, the environments in which young people live significantly influence their ability to thrive. In fact, the first of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set by the United Nations (UN) states, “Children and youth account for two-thirds of the world’s poor, yet they are often excluded from decision-making processes on poverty reduction and eradication” (Undesa, 2020a). In Thailand, youth face challenges such as unequal access to education, limited employment opportunities, and restricted participation in community life (Chiengkul, 2019; Jitsuchon, 2012), yet protest or complaint about their lived experiences can often be seen as disrespectful and injurious to communal harmony (Bolotta, 2023).

With its rapidly changing economic and social landscape, Thailand offers opportunities and challenges for youth development. With a youth population exceeding 16 million, Thai young people play a crucial role in their families and communities, often assuming responsibilities that exceed traditional Western expectations (Kislenko, 2004). Despite these contributions, meaningful engagement and personal development opportunities are often unevenly distributed, disadvantaging youth (UNICEF, 2023). The country’s socio-economic and political landscapes highlight such disparities, even in the personal expression of its people, with kinship terms denoting relative social status deeply embedded in the Thai language and psyche (Bolotta, 2023).

Sustainable development is a significant challenge facing all countries in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Undesa 2020a and b). Young people, when engaged as active citizens, have the potential to drive meaningful and lasting change (Catalano et al., 2022), which is essential as the success or failure of development policies and initiatives most directly impacts the lives of vulnerable youth (Undesa, 2020a; Chiengkul 2019; Jitsuchon, 2012).

Thailand’s development strategy aligns closely with the SDGs set by the UN, particularly in addressing key challenges such as education (SDG 4), decent work (SDG 8), and the Water Youth Network (SDG 6), connecting young people to the water and sanitation sectors to inform innovative solutions and build information sharing platforms (Mohd et al., 2021). Even before the espousal of the UN SDGs, the Thailand Voluntary National Review (2017) had initiated many positive programs targeting SDGs. For

example, the country's Sufficiency Economic Policy (SEP, emphasising modest, sustainable growth) was highlighted in "SEP for SGDs" essay writing and speech competitions to raise youth awareness. Youth forums and volunteering drives were organised, and grassroots initiatives such as the Cottage Industries Centre for Craftsmanship in Chiang Rai province were embraced (Mohd et al., 2021). However, despite substantial political and economic progress, Thailand continues to grapple with high levels of income inequality. In the early 2000s, the nation exhibited the highest income-based inequality in the East Asia and Pacific region, and as of 2021, it remains among the most unequal (World Bank, 2024).

According to the 2018 Credit Suisse Global Wealth report, Thailand ranks the most economically unequal country globally, with two-thirds of the nation's wealth concentrated in just 1% of the population (Credit Suisse, 2022). This economic disparity impacts youth from an early age, with children from low-income backgrounds receiving fewer opportunities than their more affluent peers (Bolotta, 2023). These inequities significantly influence youth development and often perpetuate cycles of socio-economic disadvantage across generations (Chiengkul, 2019; Undesa, 2020a).

Scholars such as Chiengkul (2019) and Jitsuchon (2012) have argued that insufficient development and inequality are two key obstacles to achieving a more balanced society in Thailand. They emphasise the importance of a bottom-up approach to policy implementation, one that prioritises collective well-being. Both scholars agree that policymakers must shift away from a development model driven solely by economic growth and instead focus on participatory development (Chiengkul, 2019; Jitsuchon, 2012). This shift is especially relevant to youth development in Thailand. Moving away from an economy-centred approach toward one that prioritises equitable opportunities could lead to more coherent and impactful outcomes for young people in the future (Catalano et al., 2022).

In recent decades, development theory has undergone a profound shift. The traditional view, which equated progress with economic growth (Charoenrat & Pholphirul, 2022), has been increasingly replaced with an understanding that a more comprehensive approach to development also requires investing in the well-being and potential of individuals (Wiiium et al., 2019). Regarding young people, this has led to the rise of frameworks such as Positive Youth Development (PYD), which emphasises the holistic development and empowerment of youth (Lerner et al., 2015). Rather than focusing solely on addressing problems or deficiencies, PYD is rooted in a strengths-based approach that views youth as assets to society rather than its most junior/inferior members (Bolotta, 2023). It recognises that, when given the proper support and opportunities, young people have the potential to contribute meaningfully to their communities (Lerner et al., 2015; Wiiium et al., 2005). There has been a move away from top-down economic-centred development, leading to a more people-centred, holistic understanding of development (Lerner et al., 2015). It is in this space that grassroots organisations have a major role to

play. This idea is reflected in the United Nations 17 SDGs framework. Goal 14 states, "Young people can provide local knowledge and innovative solutions for the conservation and protection of the world's marine ecosystems and coastal communities," indicating that grassroots provision of local expertise can drive change from local to national levels (Undesa 2020a).

PYD is founded on the belief that every young person possesses inherent strengths, which, when nurtured, can lead to positive outcomes in their personal development, social engagement, and community well-being (Lerner et al., 2015). This framework has gained traction internationally, with organisations like the United Nations and UNICEF integrating PYD principles into their youth initiatives (United Nations, 2015). Despite its widespread adoption in Western contexts, the applicability and impact of PYD in non-Western settings remain underexplored (Wiiium et al., 2019). This presents a compelling case for examining how PYD might be adapted to diverse cultural contexts, including Thailand.

The need for a more inclusive and supportive environment for youth in Thailand is clear. It is underpinned by the student protests of 2020 and 2021, in which students sought to redefine their roles as junior partners in their educational journey and develop an equal voice in policy creation (Bolotta, 2023). The PYD framework offers a promising pathway to address challenges such as these. Socio-economic disparities present in Thailand not only highlight the urgent need for effective youth development strategies but also point to the potential of PYD as a model that can be adapted to local contexts (Catalano et al., 2022).

Understanding how existing youth organisations in Thailand empower young people and foster their development is essential to this research. Within this framework, the potential adaptation of PYD to Thailand's unique cultural, social, and economic conditions can be explored.

By exploring how Thai youth organisations work to empower young people, this study seeks to understand how PYD principles can be effectively adapted to meet the specific needs of Thai youth. While challenges persist, there is considerable potential for Thai youth to contribute to the future prosperity of their communities, provided they are supported in ways that align with their cultural and societal context.

## **1.2. Rationale for Thailand as a Research Site**

The decision to select Thailand as the research site for this study was influenced by multiple factors. Youth protests in Thailand from 2020 to 2021 (Lertchoosakul, K, 2024) prompted me to reflect on my privilege as a young person from New Zealand. These protests highlighted the desire of Thai youth to shape societal change and the deeply embedded (often internally held) social mores that conflicted with that desire (Bolotta, 2023). This resonated with my growing interest in understanding the challenges faced by young people from different cultural backgrounds to my own, such as those from Thailand, where respect for elders is deeply embedded in both language and behavioural norms (Scroope, 2016). Additionally, a brief visit to Thailand at the age of 20 exposed me to profound socio-economic disparities that I had not previously encountered to such an extent. This experience sparked a desire to delve deeper into the realities of disadvantaged youth in Thailand and the factors that influence their development.

My motivation for this research also stems from the belief that youth are not only the future but a vital part of their present-day communities (Catalano et al., 2022). While young people have the potential to shape the world of tomorrow, they are already contributing to and influencing society in meaningful ways today (Undesa, 2020a). Youth are not merely recipients of knowledge and guidance; they are active members of society with unique perspectives, skills, and contributions that are valuable in the present (Catalano et al., 2022). This is reflected in goal 17 of the UN framework for youth engagement in SDGs, which states, "Partnerships for goals must be youth sensitive and inclusive, drawing on the knowledge and experience of young people to drive forward solutions for a greener, more prosperous and safer future" (Undesa, 2020a). This study seeks to explore existing organisations and how they nurture the potential for young people to drive positive change in Thailand, focusing on how PYD frameworks are currently working and can be adapted to better serve the needs of its youth in the future.

## **1.3. Overview of the Global Fund for Children**

The Global Fund for Children (GFC) was established in 1994 and is a dedicated philanthropic organisation with a mission to enhance the lives of vulnerable children and youth around the globe. By working closely with grassroots organisations, the GFC focuses on advancing children's rights, promoting their well-being, and supporting their development, particularly in marginalised communities (Global Fund for Children, 2024). Through its flexible funding, capacity-building efforts, and advocacy initiatives, the GFC empowers local groups to tackle pressing issues and implement solutions that resonate with the cultural contexts in which they operate in. This approach has led to tangible improvements in many children's education, health, and protection. The GFC's commitment to

strengthening community-based efforts and raising awareness about children's challenges underscores its belief in creating a world where every child has the opportunity to thrive. The Global Fund for Children supports a range of PYD projects and grassroots organisations in Thailand that align with the SDGs set by the UN. These projects typically focus on education, employment, environmental sustainability, and youth participation in governance.

**Notable initiatives and how they connect with SDGs include:**

1. **Education and Skill-Building Initiatives (SDG 4: Quality Education):** Many youth-led projects focus on improving access to quality education in rural and underserved communities, supporting efforts to provide vocational training and digital literacy programs. These initiatives also aim to address inequality in educational opportunities, particularly for marginalised groups, such as ethnic minorities and young women (Mohd et al., 2021).
2. **Youth Entrepreneurship Programs (SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth):** The Global Fund for Youth supports young people in creating their businesses, particularly in areas such as sustainable agriculture, digital enterprises, and social entrepreneurship, empowering youth to become self-sufficient while contributing to local economies.
3. **Environmental and Climate Action (SDG 13: Climate Action):** Grassroots PYD organisations often engage youth in environmental conservation efforts, including reforestation projects, community cleanups, and campaigns to raise awareness of climate change, fostering a sense of responsibility and leadership among young people, safeguarding their environment for future generations.
4. **Youth Civic Engagement and Advocacy (SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions):** Promoting youth participation in governance and decision-making processes through leadership training programs and civic engagement workshops. Youth are empowered to participate in local and national dialogues, advocating for policies that benefit young people and marginalised communities, thereby promoting inclusive societies and strong institutions.
5. **Health and Well-being Projects (SDG 3: Good Health and Well-Being):** The Fund also supports initiatives addressing youth mental health and well-being. Grassroots organisations run peer counselling programs and community health workshops that promote healthy lifestyles, emotional well-being, and access to healthcare services.

By aligning these grassroots efforts with the UN SDGs, the Global Fund for Youth ensures that Thailand's youth development initiatives contribute directly to global goals for sustainable development and that youth are actively involved in shaping their futures.

Under the auspices of this organisation, my interviews and observations were conducted exploring my research questions with a view to the following research aim and objectives.

## **1.4. Research Aim and Questions**

### **1.4.1. Research aim:**

To explore the suitability of the PYD framework within Thailand, drawing on the perspectives of youth participants, staff members, and founders from five grassroots youth development organisations. The study seeks to identify both the challenges and opportunities in implementing PYD in a manner that benefits Thai youth. It seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the adaptability of PYD in the Thai context and the potential for application to further Thai initiatives and broader non-Western contexts.

### **1.4.2. Objectives:**

**Objective 1:** To explore the following research questions in the context of the Thai grassroots organisations interviewed.

**Objective 2:** To explore the overall suitability of PYD frameworks for the Thai context.

**Objective 3:** To propose potential mechanisms for improving the future application of PYD principles and frameworks to Thai and other non-Western cultural environments.

### **1.4.3. Research questions:**

**Question 1:** How do Thai cultural and contextual factors intersect with PYD principles?

**Question 2:** What considerations and adaptations are required if PYD principles are to be effectively implemented when working with Thai youth?

**Question 3:** What are the key factors that facilitate effective engagement and empowerment of Thai youth, and how do these factors influence positive youth outcomes?

## **1.4.4. Layout of the Thesis**

### **Chapter 1: Introduction**

This chapter introduces the thesis, outlining PYD, its relevance to Thailand, and the role of youth, both within the country and in terms of development. It presents the research aim, objectives, and critical questions guiding the study, setting the stage for understanding how cultural and contextual factors shape the current situation of young people and of youth development in Thailand.

### **Chapter 2: Context of Thailand**

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of Thai values, philosophies, and their historical roots, alongside an examination of Thailand's socio-political and economic (i.e. development) context. It explores the barriers or challenges Thai youth face regarding education, employment, mental health, and cultural expectations. The chapter considers the potential impact of the PYD framework on addressing these issues by leveraging youth strengths and potential for empowerment.

### **Chapter 3: Conceptualizing Positive Youth Development in the Thai Context**

A review of PYD literature is presented, starting with an overview of the theoretical evolution of youth development. The chapter discusses global disparities, educational access, and economic challenges, emphasising the significance and critiques of PYD. It examines how PYD could be adapted to the Thai context, highlighting the need for culturally nuanced approaches in non-Western environments.

### **Chapter 4: Methodology and Fieldwork**

This chapter outlines the qualitative research methodology, including participant selection from youth, staff members, and grassroots organisation founders. It details the fieldwork and application of data collection methods, such as interviews, and describes the data analytical framework used. Ethics in the research is also discussed. The chapter emphasises a strength-oriented approach within a constructivist paradigm.

### **Chapter 5: Findings**

The chapter presents key findings from participant interviews, emphasising the role of community in shaping youth development. It highlights the importance of mentorship, leadership development, and tailored support in enhancing youth engagement and well-being.

## **Chapter 6: Discussion and Conclusion**

This chapter interprets the findings of the literature reviewed earlier, examining how the results align with or challenge existing PYD frameworks. It discusses the need for culturally informed approaches and community engagement, exploring implications for future PYD initiatives in Thailand and other non-Western cultures. The final chapter summarises key insights, offers recommendations for practitioners and policymakers, and highlights the research's contribution to the broader discourse on youth development in non-Western contexts.

# Chapter 2: *Context of Thailand*

## 2.1. Introduction

On a global scale, the youth development space has altered significantly over the last several decades (Ginwright & James, 2002). This paradigm shift has resulted in greater recognition of the critical role that investing in young people's development plays in achieving sustainable economic and social progress (Ginwright & James, 2002). Rather than adhering to the traditional deficit models that depict youth as problematic individuals requiring rectification, an increasing awareness has emerged that characterises youth as invaluable assets to society (Ginwright & James, 2002). Consequently, there has been a significant increase in collaboration among governments, non-profits, and the private sector within the youth development space to empower young people and equip them with the necessary skills and resources for success (UNDP, 2021). This has resulted in an upsurge in innovative programmes and initiatives that empower young people and equip them with the necessary skills and tools for success (UNDP, 2021). Such partnerships aim to leverage the unique strengths of each sector to tackle the intricate challenges that confront young people today, with numerous examples of such collaborations across the world (UNDP, 2021).

Positive youth development (PYD) is an empowering framework that prioritises equipping young people with the skills and competencies necessary to achieve their full potential (Arnold & Silliman, 2017). In investigating the suitability of PYD-based applications to Thai youth development projects, this chapter will provide a comprehensive overview of Thai values and philosophies, delving into their historical origins, core beliefs, and societal practices. Additionally, it will examine Thailand's socio-political and economic context, providing essential background information to understand the country's cultural landscape. Furthermore, the chapter will focus on the youth in Thailand, shedding light on the challenges and issues they commonly encounter. These challenges include aspects related to education, employment, mental health, societal expectations, and cultural influences.

The chapter will explore the potential impact of the PYD framework on Thai youth, forwarding the view that, by leveraging the strengths and empowering young individuals, the PYD approach can address and mitigate many of the problems faced by Thai youth today.

## 2.2. Thailand in Context

### 2.2.1. Statistical Overview

The kingdom of Thailand can be categorised into five broad age groups as follows:

- 0-14 years: 16.49% of the population (5,612,711 males and 5,302,116 females)
- 15-24 years: 12.73% of the population (4,311,507 males and 4,111,057 females)
- 25-54 years: 45.10% of the population (14,760,947 males and 15,079,981 females)
- 55-64 years: 13.12% of the population (4,042,250 males and 4,636,216 females)
- 65 years and over: 12.57% of the population (3,611,703 males and 4,702,951 females)

The median age of the Thai Population is 39 years, reflecting an even distribution across different age groups. The country has a modest population growth rate of 0.26%, suggesting a stable population trend.

The birth rate in Thailand is 10.25 births per 1,000 population, while the death rate is 7.66 deaths per 1,000, providing insights into reproductive health and mortality trends. The average life expectancy for Thai males is 74.39 years, while Thai females have a longer life expectancy of 80.60 years, indicating overall health and well-being trends (NSO, 2021).

### 2.2.2. Geography and Climate

Thailand, a country situated in the heart of the Indochinese peninsula in Southeast Asia, has been studied and analysed extensively due to its unique geographical and climatic features. Bordered by Myanmar to the north and west, Laos to the northeast, Cambodia to the southeast, and Malaysia to the south, Thailand covers a vast area of 513,115 square kilometres (Kislenko, 2004).

The country can be divided into four distinct natural regions: the north, the central plains, the northeast, and the south (Kislenko, 2004). Each region has distinct characteristics regarding topography, flora, and fauna (Kislenko, 2004).

Thailand experiences a tropical climate, characterised by warm temperatures and high humidity throughout the year (Kislenko, 2004). However, the climate is significantly influenced by the monsoon season, commonly known as the rainy season, which typically occurs from May to September. Monsoons play a vital role in shaping Thailand's weather patterns and profoundly impact various aspects of life in the country (Kislenko, 2004).

Understanding Thailand's geographic climate holds significant relevance for youth development studies, particularly when examining the country's socio-economic dynamics and opportunities for economic and social growth (Hussain et al., 2021). Thailand's geographic diversity encompasses distinct regions with opportunities and limitations. For instance, the northern region is characterised by mountainous terrain and a cooler climate, which can impact agricultural practices and economic activities (Hussain et al., 2021). In contrast, the central plains offer fertile agricultural land and are home to major urban centres, presenting different prospects for employment and education (Dani & Moser, 2008). By studying these regional variations, development practitioners gain insights into the unique contexts and needs of youth residing in different parts of the country.

The degradation of the environment has emerged as a pressing and urgent challenge confronting the global community (Dani & Moser, 2008). This accelerated depletion poses a significant risk to the environment. Against the backdrop of dwindling resources, climate change has emerged as a paramount concern for humanity in the modern era (Pemberton et al., 2021). The responsibility for the progressive deterioration of living conditions rests upon all individuals, irrespective of distinctions between developed and developing nations (Dani & Moser, 2008). The recognition that natural resources serve as valuable assets for every nation, enhancing their competitive advantage in trade, is widely acknowledged (Pemberton et al., 2021).

Consequently, the prevalence of natural resources and the associated environmental issues transcend geographical boundaries, representing a global challenge (Pemberton et al., 2021). From an economic standpoint, Arunrat et al. (2022) argue that natural resources constitute the fundamental elements of production derived from nature, encompassing elements such as soils, forests, grasslands, air, water, minerals, and fuels. In this context, the escalating depletion of natural resources severely threatens the pursuit of sustainable development.

### **2.2.3. Socio-Political and Economic Context**

Thailand's socio-political and economic landscape is complex and dynamic and has undergone significant transformations over time. The country is governed by a parliamentary system with a constitutional monarchy, with King Maha Vajiralongkorn serving as the Head of State and Prayut Chan-o-cha currently holding the position of Head of Government (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2022). The country's economic progress is closely linked to its integration into the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS), encompassing neighbouring countries such as Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Thailand (Charoenrat & Pholphirul, 2022). The GMS promotes cross-border economic activities, infrastructure development, trade facilitation, and private-sector investment, driving economic growth

in agriculture, manufacturing, and tourism (Charoenrat & Pholphirul, 2022). However, concerns have been raised about the impact of economic integration on local communities and the environment, highlighting the need for sustainable development practices (Charoenrat & Pholphirul, 2022).

In rural areas, localism and nationalism compete to shape the landscape, with localism emphasising community-based development and decentralisation, while nationalism prioritises national unity and economic growth (Buch-Hansen, 2003). The interplay between localism and nationalism creates a dynamic tension in rural areas, where different approaches to development and governance vie for influence (Fiala, 2019). Localism promotes grassroots initiatives, fostering a sense of ownership and autonomy among local communities (Buch-Hansen, 2003). It recognises the diverse needs and aspirations of different regions, allowing for a more tailored approach to development. In contrast, nationalism emphasises the need for a unified vision and economic growth that benefits the entire country (Fiala, 2019). The competition between these two socio-political tendencies shapes the rural landscape of Thailand, influencing decisions related to infrastructure development, resource allocation, and economic policies (Buch-Hansen, 2003). It highlights Thailand's complex and multifaceted socio-political context, where different perspectives and approaches coexist and interact.

Thailand's unique cultural identity is heavily influenced by Buddhism, its predominant religion, shaping the distinctive architectural, artistic, and culinary traditions widely celebrated and admired worldwide (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2022). However, the country has encountered many challenges in recent years, including political instability and recurring protests, with changes in governance frequently occurring (Jenmana & Gethin, 2019). Moreover, economic inequality, a longstanding issue in the country, has exacerbated the predicament of many people living in poverty while others attain great wealth (Jenmana & Gethin, 2019).

#### **2.2.4. Thailand's Sufficiency Economy**

Thailand's Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP) embodies a profound sustainability framework deeply rooted in Buddhist principles (Song, 2020). On December 4th, 1997, the esteemed King Bhumibol Adulyadej introduced this enlightening concept to the Thai people, advocating a balanced approach to life that extends beyond individuals to encompass communities and the nation as a whole (Mongsawad, 2010). Derived from Buddha's teachings, the term "Dharma" underscores the importance of sustainability (Sharma, 2007). Within the Dharma doctrine, following a middle path encourages a balanced approach, avoiding extremes of excessive growth or asceticism in individual and community activities (Sharma, 2007). These principles of moderation, reasonableness, and self-immunity form the core of the SEP framework, prioritising sufficiency over efficiency and the pursuit of maximisation (Mongsawad, 2010). Moderation encourages living on the middle path, avoiding extremes and

practising self-reliance without overindulgence (Mongsawad, 2010). Reasonableness involves accumulated knowledge, analytical capabilities, self-awareness, compassion, and understanding the consequences of actions for oneself and others (Mongsawad, 2010). Self-immunity entails protecting against external turbulence and coping with unpredictable events, relying on self-discipline and self-reliance (Mongsawad, 2010). Additionally, knowledge and morality are essential for the SEP to succeed, encompassing insight and prudence in using information, integrity, trustworthiness, ethical behaviour, honesty, perseverance, and a strong work ethic (Mongsawad, 2010).

The impact of implementing the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy has been far-reaching, influencing various facets of Thai society, including agriculture, industry, education, and public administration (Schaffar, 2018). Farmers are encouraged to adopt sustainable techniques, diversify income sources, and reduce reliance on external agricultural inputs.

The industry has embraced responsible and ethical practices, prioritising long-term sustainability over short-term gains (Schaffar, 2018). The education system nurtures students with self-reliance, critical thinking, and a strong sense of social responsibility (Mongsawad & Thongpakde, 2016). Guiding Thailand's development trajectory, the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy fosters resilience and addresses challenges arising from globalisation and rapid economic transformations (Mongsawad & Thongpakde, 2016). By incorporating social, environmental, and economic dimensions of sustainable development, this philosophy underscores the importance of holistic well-being and the delicate balance between progress and preserving natural resources.

## **2.3. Religion in Thailand**

Thailand has the second largest Buddhist population in the world, with approximately 95% of the population practising this religion (Ratanakul, 2003).

### **2.3.1. Buddhist Ethics**

Buddhism, founded by Prince Siddhartha Gautama in India around 500 BCE, encompasses ethical principles that guide its followers towards enlightenment (Harvey, 2012). These principles include the Five Precepts and the Noble Eightfold Path (Harvey, 2012). Rather than a separate divine entity to judge ethical actions, Buddhism focuses on promoting enlightenment and reducing suffering through specific behaviours.

The Five Precepts advise practitioners to abstain from harming living beings, taking what is not freely given, engaging in sexual misconduct, practising falsehoods, and consuming intoxicating substances.

These precepts form the foundational guidelines for ethical conduct in Buddhism (Mahathanadull, 2018).

The Noble Eightfold Path consists of cultivating the following virtues:

*Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration* (Payogo et al., 2017). These virtues are categorised into wisdom, ethical conduct, and mental development, encompassing various aspects of enlightened living (Payogo et al., 2017).

The teachings of Buddha highlight the importance of practising right speech, which includes refraining from lying, deceit, slander, and gossip (Mahathanadull, 2018). Instead, it encourages truthful and mindful communication rooted in compassion (Mahathanadull, 2018). Right action is consistent with the fundamental precepts, emphasising non-harm to all sentient beings (Mahathanadull, 2018). Right Livelihood encourages adopting peaceful occupations and avoiding livelihoods involving weapons dealing, dealing with living beings, meat production, and trading intoxicants and poisons (Eckel, 2002). Buddhism promotes the cultivation of an enlightened mind. It fosters the path to Nirvana, which entails realising one's true identity, the illusory nature of the world, and attaining perfect bliss and tranquillity (Eckel, 2002).

### **2.3.2. The Role of Buddhism in Thai Culture**

The cultural heritage of Thailand is profoundly shaped by the principles and teachings of Theravada Buddhism, which hold great significance in the lives of its people. One of the critical expressions of this influence is the adoption of the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP), which embodies the core principles of Thai culture, including moderation, prudence, and social resilience (Song, 2020). Deeply rooted in Theravada Buddhism, these principles extend beyond mere economic considerations and permeate all facets of Thai life, from education to social interactions and daily practices (Dubus, 2018). Central to the teachings of Theravada Buddhism is the emphasis on maintaining harmonious relationships with oneself, others, and the environment. This emphasis fosters a collectivistic society in Thailand, where group harmony and social connections are highly valued (Buriyameathagul, 2013). The teachings also instil a strong sense of hierarchy, social status, and traditional values, such as respect, humility, loyalty, and (Buriyameathagul, 2013). These values form the bedrock of social interactions in Thai society and can be broadly categorised into three groups: hierarchy and loyalty, harmony and respect, and national identity and freedom (Shek et al., 2019).

Thai culture draws extensively from its Buddhist heritage, as reflected in the principles discussed earlier, including the Noble Eightfold Path. These teachings not only shape the behaviour and mindset of individuals but also establish the norms and values that govern social interactions in Thai society (Terwiel, 1976). By embracing the teachings of Theravada Buddhism, Thailand has forged a unique cultural identity characterised by its emphasis on collective well-being, harmonious relationships, and the preservation of traditional values (Terwiel, 1976).

### **2.3.3. Hierarchy and Loyalty**

Thai culture emphasises the hierarchical order and loyalty deeply ingrained in various social interactions and relationships (Scroope, 2016). The concept of "faai," which denotes one's social status or position in society, is pervasive and plays a vital role in determining one's place in the social hierarchy (Anderson, 2012). Respect for elders, authority figures, and individuals with higher social status constitutes an indispensable element of Thai culture. (The value placed on the hierarchy is also reflected in the language and communication styles in Thailand, where employing different pronouns and vocabulary to address individuals of varying social status is a prevalent practice (Kislenko, 2004). For instance, younger individuals are expected to demonstrate deference to their elders by utilising specific pronouns and vocabulary when communicating with them (Scroope, 2016). Deviating from these social norms can result in social ostracism and is considered disrespectful in Thai society (Scroope, 2016). Additionally, the use of gender-specific pronouns such as "kha" for women and "khrap" for men is another prominent manifestation of the hierarchical system in Thailand, serving as a way to exhibit respect towards individuals of higher social status (Scroope, 2016).

Loyalty is another fundamental value in Thai culture that extends beyond familial relationships to loyalty to friends and one's community (Keyes, 2019). The concept of "kreng jai" is closely linked to the value of loyalty in Thai culture, referring to a sense of thoughtfulness or consideration for others that play a significant role in interpersonal relationships (Khirikoekkong et al., 2020). Individuals are expected to be mindful of others' feelings and needs and to show respect and consideration towards them; this is also referred to as 'showing face' (Khirikoekkong et al., 2020). The principle is demonstrated in Thai communication styles that aim to show respect and avoid offending (McCargo, 2004).

Loyalty in Thai culture may encompass different forms, such as loyalty to one's superiors, loyalty to one's family or loved ones and, most importantly, loyalty to one's community or nation (McCargo, 2004). These forms of loyalty reflect the different levels of social identity and interconnectedness valued in Thai culture (Keyes, 2019). The teachings of Buddhism emphasise the importance of respecting one's

elders, upholding social harmony, and being mindful of others' feelings and needs (McDaniel, 2010). The influence of these teachings on Thai culture reinforces the importance of hierarchy and loyalty in daily life, deeply embedding these values in the country's traditions (McDaniel, 2010).

#### **2.3.4. National Identity and Freedom**

In 1939, the country formerly known as 'Siam' underwent a significant transformation and adopted the name Thailand, which connotes "the land of the free" (Scroope, 2016). This rhetorical association with freedom has played a pivotal role in shaping Thailand's national identity (Noobanjong, 2011). Moreover, the country's historical ability to avoid European colonisation has instilled a sense of pride and value in freedom and autonomy (Scroope, 2016).

Thai people deeply cherish their freedom of personal expression, speech, and religion. However, it is essential to recognise that despite the cultural appreciation for freedom of expression, legal restrictions limit criticism or insults directed towards Thai society's foundational institutions: the Royal Family and Buddhism (Techasrivichien et al., 2014). Renaming the country as Thailand also symbolised "the land of the Thai" (Juntanamalaga, 1988).

In the late 1950s, the government actively promoted a 'Thai identity' as part of a national discourse to solidify a unified Thai culture primarily associated with Thailand's dominant "Central Thai" group (Scroope, 2016). Embedded within this cultural identity is the concept of "khwam pen Thai" or Thainess, which prescribes acceptable behaviours and values considered genuinely Thai (Loos, 2006). For instance, loyalty and respect towards the nation, the religion (primarily Buddhism), and the monarchy are expected from all Thais (Loos, 2006). While diversity is acknowledged officially and often cited as a pillar of social justice, it is not always embraced in Thailand, especially when it challenges traditional beliefs surrounding these three pillars (Loos, 2006).

The notion of freedom in Thai culture is intrinsically linked to "kreng jai", or consideration and thoughtfulness towards others (Mills et al., 2017). While individuals are encouraged to pursue their interests and aspirations, a profound emphasis is placed on understanding the impact of one's actions on others and society (Techasrivichien et al., 2014). This cultural emphasis fosters the belief that freedom should be exercised responsibly, with due consideration for the well-being of others and the community, thus promoting a sense of collective responsibility (Techasrivichien et al., 2014).

### **2.3.5. Harmony and Respect**

Harmony and respect are significant in Thai culture, shaping various societal interactions. In Thai society, harmony is closely linked to making meritorious actions and expressing gratitude (Balthip et al., 2013). This concept of harmony extends beyond individual behaviour and finds expression in interpersonal relationships, where individuals endeavour to uphold a sense of respect, harmony, and dignity (Siagian & Tike, 2019). Consequently, open questioning or criticism of others is generally discouraged, as it is deemed inappropriate to display anger, impatience, or rudeness (Siagian & Tike, 2019). These values and emphasis on harmony and respect are deeply rooted in Thai cultural traditions, values and customs.

Harmony is recognised as a vital component of happiness and psychological well-being within Thai society; the cultivation of peaceful and joyous interactions among family members, friends, and neighbours is highly valued and contributes significantly to the overall well-being of Thai individuals (Shiraz et al., 2020).

Respect is equally crucial in Thai culture. Thai people revere elders, authority figures, and those occupying higher positions. This display of respect is deeply rooted in the collectivist nature of Thai society, where an emphasis is placed on conforming to social norms and maintaining social harmony (Swierczek & Onishi, 2003).

The importance of harmony and respect extends beyond interpersonal relationships to societal cohesion. These values contribute to the collective well-being, fostering a sense of unity and shared identity among the Thai people. They promote social stability and cooperation, enabling individuals to navigate social hierarchies and maintain social order (Balthip et al., 2013).

## **2.4. Youth in Thailand**

In contrast to Western countries, which typically define the transition to adulthood as reaching the age of 18 or 21, Thailand has a more fluid approach marked by important milestones such as completing education, finding stable employment, and starting a family (Juárez & Gayet, 2014). The cultural norms and values that influence Thai youth make it essential to understand their development within the country's multifaceted and dynamic social, cultural, economic, and political spheres (Juárez & Gayet, 2014).

The diverse geographic climate of Thailand affects resource distribution and, therefore, socio-economic activities, resulting in socio-economic disparities, regional imbalances in development, and a complex

socio-political landscape (NSO, 2022). While urban areas offer more favourable prospects, communities grapple with inadequate infrastructure and economic opportunities, leading to disparities in access to education and employment prospects. According to the National Statistical Office, the number of youths in the labour force has declined. At the same time, the unemployment rate among those aged 15-24 has increased, indicating the challenges young individuals face in finding employment opportunities (NSO, 2022).

A study by UNICEF and Chulalongkorn University reveals that around 1.4 million youth in Thailand, accounting for 15 per cent of the population, fall into the “not in employment, education or training” (NEET) category. The study highlights that most individuals need more motivation to develop skills or seek employment due to a perceived scarcity of opportunities (UNICEF et al., 2023). This issue presents significant social and economic challenges for Thailand, particularly as the nation faces an ageing population and declining youth demographics (UNICEF et al., 2020). The impact of poverty on youth in Thailand goes beyond employment challenges; it can affect overall well-being and prospects for development and hinder opportunities and success (UNICEF et al., 2020). It also manifests in limited access to quality education and healthcare and can lead to further problems such as drug usage and crime (UNICEF et al., 2020).

Thailand is grappling with an ongoing drug issue that profoundly impacts its youth population (Kongjareon et al., 2022). According to the most recent World Drug Report (2018), Southeast Asian countries, including Thailand, are facing a significant drug crisis due to their proximity to the Golden Triangle, a region known for drug production and trafficking. The country experiences a surplus of drug supply compared to the demand, making drugs easily accessible and affordable for young individuals (Kongjareon et al., 2022). Alarmingly, approximately 39% of Thai youths aged 15 to 24 have engaged in illicit substance use, including amphetamines, crystal methamphetamine, marijuana, heroin, and ketamine (World Drug Report, 2018). The prevalence of drug use among Thai youths is estimated to be around 2.7 million, with approximately 300,000 individuals in the 15 to 19 age group requiring drug treatment.

In a recent study conducted by Calderon et al. (2021), the well-being of Thai undergraduates was assessed, focusing on happiness, psychological well-being, perceived stress, and health behaviours. A health and well-being survey was distributed to 478 students, revealing that Thai undergraduates reported lower levels of happiness and higher perceived stress compared to samples from the U.S. and the U.K. The study underscores the urgent need for positive psychology interventions in the Thai educational curriculum to address the increasing mental health concerns among university students. Furthermore, it highlights the significance of developing localised psychometrics to better understand well-being within the Thai and broader Asian context. Given these challenges, the Positive Youth

Development (PYD) framework presents a valuable approach to tackling the issues confronting Thai youth.

## **2.5. Positive Youth Development in Thailand**

Implementing Thailand's Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework necessitates a comprehensive understanding of its cultural values and context to enhance its effectiveness (Shek et al., 2019). Cultural factors such as beliefs, customs, and norms may influence how youth interpret and respond to PYD programmes. This underscores the importance of aligning interventions with traditional Thai values for increased relatability and acceptance (Shek et al., 2019).

### **2.5.1. Considering Cultural Values for Effective Implementation of PYD**

Cultural sensitivity and awareness are paramount in designing and implementing PYD initiatives in Thailand, as they significantly impact the success of promoting the well-being of Thai youth (Shek et al., 2019). In this regard, because Thailand is a collectivist society, programmes that emphasise individual achievement might be less effective than those focusing on community involvement and social connectedness (Geldhof et al., 2013). Programmes that prioritise competition or individual success may be seen as disruptive to group harmony, potentially resulting in avoidance or resistance from young participants (Geldhof et al., 2013).

The hierarchical nature of Thai society may influence the implementation of PYD programmes, as Thai culture places a high value on respecting authority figures such as parents, teachers, and elders, demonstrated through deference and obedience (Scroope, 2016). Consequently, the emphasis on hierarchy and authority may lead to resistance from leadership figures when programmes emphasise youth empowerment and participation.

In addition to cultural factors, it is crucial to consider the socio-economic context of Thailand, including the structural barriers that could impede the effectiveness of programs in promoting positive outcomes for youth. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding and integration of these structural challenges into the programme design become essential.

As highlighted earlier, the PYD framework holds great potential in addressing Thai youth's structural challenges. By promoting their strengths and cultivating leadership, the PYD framework empowers Thai youth to develop the necessary skills and competencies for success in life (Catalano et al., 2022). Moreover, it enables them to become agents of change within their communities, tackling the root

causes of poverty and creating opportunities for themselves and others (Catalano et al., 2022). Fostering partnerships between youth and adults can cultivate strong relationships supporting young individuals. These relationships have the potential to positively impact youth in various aspects of life, including their education. By establishing solid connections, youth can feel a sense of support, which can inspire and motivate them to excel academically and in other areas of their lives (Catalano et al., 2002; Prayukvong et al., 2018).

Additionally, the framework can address limited access to health and mental healthcare by promoting youth's strengths and cultivating leadership, empowering them to advocate for their well-being and their communities (Catalano et al., 2002).

To ensure the long-term sustainability of PYD programmes, it is crucial to focus on capacity-building among local organisations and institutions, reducing reliance on external funding (Catalano et al., 2002). By integrating culturally appropriate, evidence-based, and sustainable PYD initiatives, Thailand can foster the well-being and development of its youth, contributing to the country's overall social and economic progress.

## **2.6. Summary**

Thailand has experienced a significant shift in its approach to youth development, recognising the importance of young people in driving sustainable economic and social progress. The PYD framework has emerged as a promising strategy to address Thai youth's diverse challenges.

To effectively implement PYD programmes in Thailand, initiatives that resonate with young people and communities must require consideration of cultural values and contextual, structural barriers. Considering these factors, PYD programmes can be tailored to meet Thai youth's needs and aspirations. Investing in the potential of Thai youth and promoting their well-being is essential for the country's future development. By doing so, Thailand can significantly contribute to its overall social and economic advancement. However, achieving this requires collaborative efforts among various stakeholders, including governments, non-profit organisations, private sectors, and local communities. Only through this collective commitment can the power of Positive Youth Development be fully harnessed, empowering Thai youth to flourish and lead their communities towards prosperity. Ultimately, this will result in a more inclusive and prosperous society.

# **Chapter 3: *Conceptualising PYD in the Thai Context***

## **3.1. Introduction**

The multifaceted concept of "youth" defies a singular definition due to its diverse theoretical underpinnings across various disciplines. (Heaven & Tubridy, 2002). Similarly, when defining "youth development", it is essential to acknowledge its diverse conceptual understandings within these diverse disciplinary landscapes (Heaven & Tubridy, 2002). Such viewpoints offer valuable insights into youth's perceptions, understandings, and development (Spence, 2005; White, 2017). Therefore, by acknowledging the diversity of perspectives, we can avoid simplistic interpretations and place youth within a more affluent social context. (Spence, 2005; White, 2017).

This chapter explores the concept of youth development, specifically focusing on the Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework. It begins by tracing the historical roots of youth development theory, examining how early, psychoanalytic, cognitive development and socio-ecological perspectives have shaped our understanding of young people and their development. Following this overview, the chapter delves into the contemporary significance of youth development. The discussion then shifts to a PYD-centred exploration of youth development. The chapter emphasises the importance of a positive outlook when considering youth development. Subsequently, the PYD framework is explored, examining its origins, theoretical underpinnings, and underlying rationale. A comprehensive analysis of its core principles, outcomes, and critiques will be conducted. Finally, the chapter explores how the PYD framework can be applied to the context of Thailand's youth. This section will discuss the potential of PYD to address the specific challenges faced by Thai youth while highlighting how it can strengthen existing youth assets and foster positive development.

## **3.2. The Modernisation of Youth Development**

Youth development theory, rooted in psychoanalytic, cognitive, and socio-ecological frameworks, has historically shaped our understanding of young people's personal growth and development. Early 20th-century models often viewed youth through a deficit-based lens, focusing on rectifying perceived deficiencies. Mid-century theories shifted towards socialisation models, emphasising the role of social processes in shaping adolescent behaviour. Later, developmental models recognised adolescents as active agents in their own development.

Early developmental theories, including Hall's "storm and stress," Erikson's concept of identity versus role confusion, and the cognitive and moral development theories of Piaget and Kohlberg, laid foundational ideas about adolescence, depicting it as a turbulent period marked by emotional upheaval, identity struggles, and cognitive development. Hall's notion of "storm and stress" emphasised the challenges of adolescence due to rapid changes (Arnett, 2006), while Erikson's theory focused on identity formation amidst complex social roles (Dunkel & Harbke, 2017). Piaget's and Kohlberg's theories provided structured cognitive and moral development stages, though they have been critiqued for their Western-centric views (Huitt & Hummel, 2003).

Often shaped by Western-centric perspectives, dominant theoretical frameworks in youth development tend to neglect global cultural values and diverse ways of being. This limitation has led to criticisms of cultural insensitivity and the assumption of universality, making these theories less relevant in non-Western contexts. Positive Youth Development (PYD) represents a significant shift. PYD offers the potential for a more holistic and culturally responsive approach, emphasising strengths and incorporating cultural and communal values. My thesis will critically examine how contemporary PYD practices can be adapted to offer a more inclusive perspective on youth development that better accommodates diverse societal priorities and cultural contexts.

### **3.3. Understanding of Youth Development and its Challenges**

As the preceding section has illustrated, youth development has undergone a profound transformation (Lerner et al., 2005). As such, the contemporary perspective acknowledges the multifaceted nature of influences on young people's trajectories, encompassing biological, psychological, social, and cultural factors (Lerner et al., 2005). This approach emphasises the dynamism and relationality of youth development, highlighting the reciprocal interactions between individuals, their environments, and the broader social context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Current ideology perceives adolescents as competent entities capable of cultivating skills, accruing knowledge, and fostering autonomy, thereby succeeding and making significant societal contributions. The discipline underscores the necessity of aiding youths' transition into adulthood, acknowledging the substantial influence the phase of adolescence imposes on individual trajectories and societal dynamics.

### 3.3.1. Global Socio-Economic Disparities

Global socio-economic disparities often pose significant barriers for many young people, impacting their development (Backes & Bonnie, 2019). Such barriers may limit their sense of autonomy across various aspects of life, including educational and employment opportunities, familial and social relationships, and an individual's broader role within the community. Recognising how these factors interact and the intricate relationship between environmental influences and youth development is critical for creating equitable policies and programmes that nurture youth potential. Arneson (2015) writes, "When equality of opportunity prevails, the assignment of individuals to places in the social hierarchy is determined by some form of competitive process, and all members of society are eligible to compete on equal terms."

To provide such equal standing, we must ensure our approach to youth development involves poverty reduction, equitable access to quality education and healthcare, and social inclusivity (United Nations, 2018). Poverty endures when individuals and communities lack the financial means to attain a sufficient standard of living and cannot fulfil their basic needs (United Nations, n.d.) This perpetuates a cycle of educational deprivation and limited economic prospects, exacerbating global socio-economic inequities. The global discourse on poverty reduction emphasises education as pivotal in economic growth (Shi & Qamruzzaman, 2022). With its complex landscape of physical environments and socio-economic disparities, Thai youth experience many living and educational conditions. Development frameworks that address this disparity and empower young people from all strata of society could prove most effective.

### 3.3.2. Education

Historically, education has occurred within formal classroom environments. However, this landscape is shifting significantly as vocational training gains traction (Leander, 2010). Vocational education provides specialised skills training for distinct career paths, presenting an alternative for individuals who may need to excel in traditional academic settings (Leander, 2011).

Education plays a critical role in shaping the developmental trajectories of young people, making it essential to provide both vocational and conventional academic pathways to foster positive youth development (Lerner, 2005). It is a crucial instrument in reducing poverty and enhancing well-being. However, despite its importance, access to equitable education remains limited for many young people (Lerner, 2005). According to the latest United Nations World Youth Report, 142 million upper secondary-aged youth are out of school, with enrolment rates averaging only 14% in low-income countries (United Nations, 2020). Nearly 30% of the poorest 12 to 14-year-olds have never attended

school, and many lack access to adequate primary education (United Nations, 2020). Socio-economic barriers impede fair access to education in both Western and developing countries.

Education is widely available in both Eastern and Western societies, yet economic barriers often obscure access, favouring those who can afford it. Consequently, affordability, the lack of financial support, and the accumulation of substantial student debt deter many from pursuing higher education. Students from minority backgrounds are often disproportionately affected (Smeeding, 2016). These barriers can manifest in various forms, from biased disciplinary practices to curricular deficiencies that fail to reflect diverse cultural backgrounds (Smeeding, 2016). Disparities in educational opportunities raise critical questions about the accessibility of education across different socio-economic groups, as socio-economic status (SES) continues to be a significant determinant of educational outcomes (Vadivel et al., 2023).

In Australia, significant regional disparities exist, with students in rural and remote areas needing help to achieve the same level of secondary education as their urban counterparts (Jenkins, 2020). Similarly, in Thailand, those in remote rural areas also need help to rise to educational levels beyond year nine. This disparity is exacerbated by cultural and economic pressure on young people to leave school and earn a living. Many Thai agricultural careers provide a meagre return on investment; hence, money is not readily available for education and needs to be prioritised, creating generational poverty. Parents with lower levels of education may not prioritise their children's education due to their lack of knowledge and underestimation of its significance. Alternatively, being unable to provide support (Reeves, 2012). Such disparities underscore the broader issue of how inadequate education perpetuates socio-economic inequalities, leaving individuals deprived of essential opportunities in a modern economy (Jenkins, 2020)

Studies have consistently shown that individuals with higher levels of education tend to have higher incomes, underscoring the importance of education for increasing income potential (Piao & Managi, 2023). Globally, the deprivation of quality education remains a significant issue, particularly in low and middle-income countries (LMICs). This deprivation can severely constrain individuals' potential for personal and professional advancement based on knowledge-based skills (Wagner, 2017, Piao & Managi, 2023). Currently, 759 million adults worldwide are illiterate, and 72 million children of primary school age do not attend school (Vagpeyi, 2021). Socioeconomically disadvantaged regions frequently need more resources, resulting in subpar educational institutions and a deterrent effect on student enrolment. In fragmented labour markets, the returns on education in remote, impoverished areas may not be sufficient to incentivise investments in education (Berryman, 2000).

Consequently, the potential benefits of education may not outweigh immediate economic demands, further disincentivising educational investment (Berryman, 2000). Gender disparities exacerbate global

literacy rates, disproportionately affecting females in less developed countries (Leah et al., 2024). This is primarily due to entrenched norms restricting their education access (Leah et al., 2024). Nearly two-thirds of the approximately 781 million illiterate adults worldwide are female, with the Arab States, Central Asia, Southern Asia, and Western Asia facing particularly acute challenges (United Nations, 2019; United Nations, 2020). In Yemen, over 80% of girls may never attend school, while more than 12 million girls in sub-Saharan Africa are at risk of lifelong educational deprivation (Charbit & Ormane, 2023). In Thailand, the expectation that young girls marry by the age of fifteen is seen as usual, depriving many young girls of the benefits of education.

In addition, child labour persists as a pervasive issue that impedes the development of young people. The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines child labour as work that deprives children of their childhood, potential, and dignity, jeopardises their health and well-being, and obstructs their personal growth. This often includes work that prevents children from attending school and inflicts mental, social, and physical harm. Approximately 250 million children in developing countries are engaged in labour, with Africa and Asia collectively accounting for over 90% of global child employment (Naem, 2011).

The absence of compulsory education in many countries prioritises immediate economic survival over long-term development, perpetuating cycles of poverty (Naem, 2011). Brown (2011) highlights a reciprocal relationship between educational shortcomings and child labour, where impoverished families often push children to work due to the perceived irrelevance, high cost, or inaccessibility of education. Thus, addressing educational policy inadequacies is essential to curbing child labour, requiring more vigorous legal enforcement, poverty reduction incentives, and enhanced educational accessibility and relevance (Brown, 2011). Khan et al. (2019) reaffirmed the relationship between poverty and education with their binary logistic regression test, indicating a negative correlation between education levels and poverty.

Lupeja and Gubo (2017) conducted research in Tanzania that emphasised the connection between secondary education and poverty alleviation. Their study underscored how secondary school education enables individuals to secure improved employment opportunities and achieve higher living standards. Similarly, a study by Arsani et al. (2020) found that government initiatives for primary and secondary education prove instrumental in poverty alleviation (Arsani et al., 2020). Enhanced education breaks the cycle of poverty and fosters better economic prospects, highlighting its critical role in addressing global socio-economic inequalities (Piao & Managi, 2023; Leah et al., 2024; Naem, 2011). Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive strategies tailored to specific regional contexts to improve educational access, enforce legal protections, and reduce poverty (Brown, 2011; Khan et al., 2019).

### 3.3.3. Employment and Financial Constraints

Economic prospects, such as employment and financial stability, profoundly influence young people's development by enabling economic independence, access to quality education, and cultivating their skills (Smeeding, 2016). However, systemic inequalities and economic barriers often obstruct this access, exacerbating the risk of poverty (Smeeding, 2016). *Empirical* data consistently demonstrates that *human capital* is the paramount asset of all *economies*, regardless of their *development* status (Minhaj & Ahmed, 2023). In LMICs, human capital accumulation through education and skill acquisition is critical for development and poverty eradication (Shi & Qamruzzaman, 2022). However, financial constraints stemming from limited access to resources often hinder educational engagement and limit job prospects, perpetuating the cycle of poverty in young people (Khan et al., 2019).

Khan et al., (2019) underscore the profound impact of educational and financial constraints on young people, particularly in relation to social participation. They argue that poverty restricts access to extracurricular activities and informal learning opportunities, limiting social participation and potentially leading to social withdrawal.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these challenges, disproportionately affecting the mental health and well-being of young people. Increased unemployment rates during the pandemic have heightened psychological distress, particularly among those with fewer financial resources (Achdut & Refaeli, 2021). Addressing these issues requires comprehensive strategies to enhance educational access, strengthen legal protections, and alleviate poverty. Investing in education and youth development is crucial for breaking the cycle of poverty and fostering improved economic prospects globally (Piao & Managi, 2023).

## 3.4. Conceptualisation of Positive Youth Development

As explored earlier, early conceptualisations of adolescence often emphasised a period of significant turmoil and stress (Hall, 1904; Lerner, 2009). This framing positioned young people as vulnerable to engaging in risky behaviours, leading to a deficit-based perspective that viewed youth as troubled individuals requiring intervention both medically and behaviorally. Positive development during this period was often defined solely by the absence of negative behaviours (Benson et al., 2006; Hall, 1904; Lerner, 2005, 2009). The 1980s marked a paradigm shift in developmental thought, moving from a pathological to a positive growth orientation in adolescent development, with Positive Youth Development (PYD) emerging as a key approach. This recognition of the intricate interconnectedness between various developmental influences has laid the groundwork for PYD theory (Lerner & Overton, 2008; Lerner, 2005).

In contemporary discourse on youth development, PYD holds considerable significance due to its emphasis on young people as active agents in their developmental processes. It offers valuable perspectives on the specific needs and pathways to success of young people, positioning them not merely as recipients of support but as essential contributors to positive societal change. Positive Youth Development (PYD) represents a comprehensive approach to youth development that acknowledges and capitalises on the capabilities and assets inherent in young people (Lerner et al., 2005). Central to this framework is the optimisation of youths' developmental trajectories, aiming to equip them with essential skills and cultivate experiences that facilitate a successful transition into adulthood (Lerner et al., 2005). Thus, contemporary youth development emphasises preparing young individuals to achieve their full potential and contribute positively to society (Wium et al., 2005). From a PYD perspective, it is essential to construct a framework that highlights young people's strengths and demonstrates how youth can be transformative agents within society (Lerner et al., 2015).

## **3.5. Theories Underpinning Positive Youth Development**

As previously discussed, Positive Youth Development (PYD) did not emerge in isolation. It evolved from critiques of earlier scientific approaches to youth development, leading to our current understanding. Three fundamental theories that have been primarily incorporated into PYD are Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, Developmental Systems Theory, and Resilience Theory. Below, we will explore the relevance of these theories to PYD.

### **3.5.1. Ecological Systems Theory**

Ecological Systems Theory (EST) emphasises the dynamic interaction and mutual dependence between individuals and their surrounding systems, encouraging a holistic view of youth development. Individuals have an impact on and are shaped by multiple ecological systems, ranging from immediate contexts like family and peers (microsystem) to broader societal and historical factors (macrosystem and chronosystem). EST originated from integrating ecological systems and Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory, synthesising these frameworks to highlight the interconnectedness of environmental influences on development. The theory underscores the necessity of evaluating systems not in isolation but concerning their reciprocal impacts on each other.

This holistic approach focuses on individual growth and considers the broader contexts contributing to a young person's well-being, a vital aspect of any model to be applied to complex Thai youth development frameworks. Bronfenbrenner's theory informs PYD policy and practice by advocating

for environments that promote positive youth development in the context of supportive communities, schools, and societal structures.

### **3.5.2. Resilience Theory**

Resilience theory emerged in the latter half of the 20th century, and researchers noted that some individuals, despite facing significant adversity, managed to become well-adjusted adults (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). The theory focuses attention on positive contextual, social, and individual variables that interfere with or disrupt developmental trajectories from risky, problem behaviours, mental distress, and poor health outcomes. These positive contextual, social, and individual variables, termed *promotive factors* (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005) oppose risk factors and help youth overcome the adverse effects of risk exposure. Positive factors in individuals, such as self-efficacy and self-esteem, are defined as assets (Zimmerman, 2013). Resources refer to factors outside individuals, such as parental support, mentors and youth programs that provide young people with opportunities to learn and practice skills (Zimmerman, 2013). Assets and resources provide the individual and contextual attributes necessary for healthy development (Zimmerman, 2013).

Resilience theory offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how adolescents can cultivate the capacity to overcome adversity and achieve positive outcomes (Lee et al., 2012). It posits that resilience is not merely an inherent trait but a dynamic process shaped by supportive relationships with adults and peers, self-efficacy, and adaptive coping strategies (Lee et al., 2012). This theory underscores the importance of empowering youth to navigate challenges effectively by emphasising the development of resilience (Lee et al., 2012; Zimmerman, 2013).

### **3.5.3. Developmental Systems Theory**

Developmental Systems Theory (DST), similar to EST, posits that human development is shaped by interactions across multiple levels of organisation, including biological, psychological, social, and cultural influences (Ford & Lerner, 1992). It emphasises the contextual embeddedness of development, asserting that individuals must be studied within the environments and systems in which they live (Ford & Lerner, 1992).. DST highlights the plasticity and flexibility of developmental outcomes, suggesting that individuals can adapt and change in response to these environments (Laszlo & Krippner, 1998). Developmental systems theorists reject the traditional view that nature and nurture act independently in development, emphasising the interconnectedness of genetic and environmental influences (Laszlo & Krippner, 1998). The theory views development as a continuous and dynamic process, unfolding over time rather than occurring in discrete stages. It underscores the reciprocal

interactions between individuals and their environments, where changes in one aspect can impact the entire developmental trajectory (Laszlo & Krippner, 1998).

DST has influenced the Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework by offering a comprehensive perspective on how youth development unfolds, emphasising the dynamic interplay between individuals and their environments (Hancock, 2020). The theory advocates a holistic view that considers interactions among individual traits, family dynamics, community influences, and broader societal contexts over time (Hancock, 2020). Within PYD, DST underscores the importance of understanding developmental outcomes within specific social, cultural, and environmental contexts, highlighting the variability and adaptability of youth in response to their surroundings (Hancock, 2020). By recognising development as non-linear and influenced by diverse factors, DST has impacted PYD's flexible approaches to supporting youth, promoting resilience, well-being, and growth through tailored interventions and supportive environments (Hancock, 2020).

## **3.6. Core Principles of Positive Youth Development**

### **3.6.1. Youth Development as an Intentional Process**

One of the chief aims of the Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework is to promote protective factors in young people proactively. This approach recognises that all youth have the potential for growth and positive development, seeking to build upon their existing strengths and assets (Lerner, 2009). PYD involves actively creating opportunities for youth to develop skills, competencies, and connections to help them navigate their environment and positively contribute to their communities (Catalano et al., 2002). This can include fostering positive relationships with adults, providing opportunities for skills development, and promoting involvement in prosocial activities (Lerner, 2009).

PYD recognises that all youth have the capacity for growth and development. As a key component of PYD, youth assets refer to the qualities, skills, and resources that young people possess (Benson et al., 2007). PYD acknowledges these assets and works to enhance and strengthen them. This includes enhancing emotional and social skills and fostering resilience to assist youth in developing constructive emotional regulation amidst adversity, as highlighted in Resilience Theory. PYD recognises these elements as protective factors against risky behaviours, thereby promoting positive outcomes. (Scales & Leffert, 2004).

### **3.6.2. Youth Engagement**

One fundamental tenet of Positive Youth Development (PYD) frameworks is the active engagement of youth as agents rather than mere recipients of services. This paradigm entails their involvement in program design, delivery, and evaluation phases, harnessing their unique perspectives and insights (Zeldin & Petrokubi, 2006), underscoring the equitable partnership between adults and youth.

Young people's voices are acknowledged and integrated into decision-making processes, facilitated by supportive adult guidance (Zeldin & Petrokubi, 2006). This collaborative approach enhances program relevance and effectiveness and empowers youth, fostering their skills and confidence (Lerner, 2009). Furthermore, PYD emphasises leadership development among youth, offering opportunities for them to assume leadership roles based on their interests and capacities (Lerner, 2009).

A key aspect of PYD is the creation of environments that provide young people with the resources, support, and opportunities they need to thrive, nurturing a sense of belonging, safety, and security (Lerner, 2009). In PYD programmes, supportive environments may introduce avenues for young people to cultivate positive relationships with both adults and peers and acquire new skills and experiences, encouraging youth to contribute to their broader communities (Lerner, 2009). The promotion of prosocial behaviours is vital in countries like Thailand, where community belonging is prioritised over individual development. Enhancing individual capacity is seen as beneficial for the person and the community as a whole. By engaging in civic activities, young people develop a sense of responsibility, build relationships with community members, and gain a better understanding of the issues facing their communities (Lerner, 2009)

## **3.7. Positive Youth Development Models**

These PYD core principles have been incorporated into models that provide structured approaches to promoting positive development in youth. Some models are more relevant in different contexts and environments, reflecting various cultural beliefs, social norms, and perspectives. Consequently, the effectiveness of these models may vary depending on the setting in which they are studied and applied.

Below, five key models of PYD are presented, including their key constructs and approaches.

### **3.7.1. The Five & Six Cs Framework**

Lerner et al. (2005) outlines crucial dimensions for positive youth outcomes: Competence spans emotional, social, behavioural, vocational, cognitive, and academic skills, enabling effective goal achievement. Confidence includes self-worth, self-efficacy, and a positive identity, fostering optimism. Connection emphasises supportive relationships with family, peers, mentors, and community, guiding growth. Character development instils moral principles, integrity, and ethical decision-making. Caring involves empathy, compassion, and responsibility, fostering positive interactions and community well-being. The framework also promotes a Sixth C, 'Contribution', through community service and engagement, integrating these dimensions into action.

### **3.7.2. Developmental Assets Framework**

Proposed by Benson et al. (2011), this model delineates external and internal assets critical for youth development. External assets encompass supportive relationships with family, peers, and community members and opportunities for constructive engagement and participation in community life. Internal assets consist of personal qualities such as positive values, social competencies, resilience, and a commitment to learning, which guide positive decision-making and behaviours.

### **3.7.3. Catalano's 15 PYD Constructs**

An inductive framework derived from PYD programmes by Catalano et al. (2004) identifies specific PYD constructs associated with positive outcomes. These include resilience, cognitive and emotional competence, moral judgment, self-determination, self-efficacy, spirituality, and prosocial behaviour. Catalano et al. (2004) highlights the diverse pathways through which youth can develop strengths and navigate challenges, contributing positively to their communities and society.

### **3.7.4. Social and Emotional Learning**

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is another pivotal approach focusing on developing essential psychosocial competencies (Greenberg, 2017). Theoretically, SEL is consistent with Benson's developmental assets, Lerner's notion of competence and Catalano's concept of psychosocial competence. SEL emphasises self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, social awareness, and relationship skills. These competencies enhance emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills crucial for academic success, positive peer relationships, and overall well-being.

### **3.7.5. The “Being” Approach**

Alternative perspectives within Positive Youth Development (PYD), often called the “being” approach, emphasise the importance of character and spirituality in fostering optimal youth development (Shek et al., 2019). Character, integral to models like Benson's developmental assets, Lerner's 5Cs, and Catalano's framework, is operationalised through this model, highlighting strengths such as wisdom and courage (Shek et al., 2019). This approach significantly enhances adolescent well-being, resilience, and community engagement. Similarly, spirituality, involving the search for meaning and transcendence, serves as a contextual asset in PYD, influencing moral development and buffering against psychosocial challenges (King et al., 2011).

### **3.7.6. Overlaps in Positive Youth Development Models**

Despite their distinct focuses and approaches, the various PYD theories share several common elements. These overlaps highlight the core principles of PYD that are universally recognised as essential for fostering positive development in youth. Key overlaps between Benson's 40 Developmental Assets, Lerner's 5Cs and 6Cs, Catalano's 15 PYD Constructs, Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), and the "Being" Approach include a focus on competence, positive relationships, promotion of prosocial behaviours and holistic development. All are fitting matches for Thai cultural views on spirituality and behaviour.

Positive identity development in youth is a central focus within PYD, operating at both individual and social levels. Catalano (2004) conceptualised positive youth identity as "the internal organisation of a coherent sense of self," stressing that PYD initiatives should foster strengths, nurture relationships, and provide growth opportunities to enhance youths' self-efficacy and competence, thereby reinforcing positive identity. Similarly, in Lerner's 5Cs and 6Cs, confidence relates to a positive self-view and capacities, encompassing self-worth and efficacy (Lerner et al., 2005). Additionally, within

the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) framework, self-awareness is foundational in identity development by fostering unbiased recognition of one's emotions, strengths, and limitations. Finally, the "Being" Approach underscores the importance of character and spirituality in shaping a robust sense of self and identity.

As in Thai culture, character and moral development are central themes across several models of PYD, contributing to a positive identity rooted in values, responsibility, and integrity. Research shows that character strengths buffer against adolescent psychosocial problems, such as depression and suicidality, and are positively associated with life satisfaction, well-being, happiness, and academic achievements. Additionally, character emphasises the commitment to contribute to one's community.

Spirituality, as highlighted by Benson and Catalano, is essential to PYD. It involves views that transcend self-interest and materialism, with a genuine concern for others, and is considered a critical contextual asset promoting adolescents' positive development. The "Being" Approach uniquely integrates character and spirituality, emphasising inner strengths and moral values as fundamental to holistic youth development.

Shek and Yu (2011) highlight that in Asian cultures, the character perspective aligns with Confucian values, effectively integrating character development with PYD. They emphasise Confucian virtues such as benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and fidelity, which correlate well with character traits prized in Thai society (Shek & Yu, 2011). This approach underscores the importance of respect for elders and communal harmony, highlighting the significance of cultural context in youth development programs to ensure alignment with community values and beliefs.

### **3.8. Critiques of Positive Youth Development**

The PYD movement has received recognition for its positive stance towards youth. However, it is not without its critics. Sukarieh and Tannock (2011) argue that PYD represents a significant shift in dominant conceptualisations of youth, driven by neoliberal ideology and human capital theory. They contend that understanding this movement requires recognising the dual nature of youth as a social category, encompassing both positive and negative stereotypes that necessitate critical interrogation. Benson and Saito (2001) highlight the distinction between traditional deficit models and the new positive perspective of PYD. At the same time, deficit models focus on identifying and addressing barriers to positive development, such as poverty and family violence. PYD shifts towards recognising and advocating for essential positive developmental processes, opportunities, and experiences but can do this at the expense of addressing barriers. However, this shift may inadvertently obscure persistent

social issues affecting youth, as Ehrenreich (2010) noted in her critique of the emphasis on “positive thinking” in the United States.

The current narrative encourages individuals and communities to adopt a positive outlook and assume responsibility for their progress and success, potentially neglecting the structural factors that impede youth development. Benson (2003) cautions that traditional discussions about youth have been influenced by a culture prioritising deficit and risk thinking, leading to a skewed perspective on youth development. The historical view of youth has often been negative, portraying them as a problem, pathology, threat or deficit. Therefore, progressive, critical, and radical youth practitioners, researchers, and policymakers have sought to promote a more accurate and just positive view of youth (Benson, 2003). The positive youth perspective emphasises recognising, celebrating, and supporting the young's agency, contributions, and capabilities (Benson, 2003). However, this analytic frame can become limited when both mainstream and critical approaches to youth are marked by overt positivity.

Sukarieh and Tannock (2011) argue that PYD highlights and exploits a blind spot in the social science of youth: a failure to recognise the broader nature of youth stereotyping in society adequately. Youth as a social category has always been double-sided, encompassing both negative and positive characteristics and stereotypes. For instance, Comaroff and Comaroff (2006) describe youth as complex signifiers, simultaneously idealised and demonised, representing societal decay and hope for the future.

The mobilisation of positive and negative images of youth is always linked to particular political projects and visions in the context of changing social and economic structures (Sukarieh & Tannock, 2014). Promoting youth as inherently positive is not necessarily more progressive or accurate than focusing on their shortcomings (Sukarieh & Tannock, 2011). The challenge for critical analysis is understanding how and why different groups mobilise particular positive and negative stereotypes of youth in changing social and economic contexts (Sukarieh & Tannock, 2011). In their editorial commentary, Spencer and Spencer emphasise the progress made in understanding PYD while recognising ongoing challenges related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. They highlight the need for continued efforts to address these challenges and ensure all young people, regardless of background, have access to resources and support that promote their well-being and development.

Significant conceptual and methodological gaps in PYD need addressing to maximise its authentic application. For example, defining adolescent strengths without considering diverse social structures and contexts may underestimate important strength markers for youth from marginalised backgrounds (Chowa, 2021). The role of proactive and defensive strategies is often missing from PYD models. Understanding genuine supports and resources that ameliorate the impact of excessive challenges is critical for promoting PYD equally for all youth. The PYD movement is also criticised for its saturation

with the language of human capital, where youth are referred to as 'assets' and 'resources' rather than problems to be managed (Roth and Brooks-Gunn, 2003). This 'youth-as-asset' frame contrasts with traditional deficit models but also reflects unresolved theoretical issues.

Benson et al. (2006) highlight the challenge of promoting intentional change in youth-context interactions as a significant gap in PYD theory and its application. Without addressing this, PYD risks remaining a theory of adolescent development rather than becoming a distinct approach. While PYD offers a valuable framework for recognising and fostering the potential of youth, it must also critically address the broader social and economic contexts that shape youth development. Understanding the complex interplay of positive and negative stereotypes and diverse youth populations' genuine challenges is essential for developing effective and equitable youth policies and interventions.

### **3.9. Application of Positive Youth Development Models in Thailand**

Despite criticisms and limitations, the PYD framework holds substantial potential for application in Thailand. One of the main concerns regarding PYD's application outside the West is its Western-centric roots and, therefore, its lack of consideration for cultural nuances. However, this framework provides a valuable lens for examining youth development in Thailand, as evidenced by many organisations and practitioners already employing principles aligned with PYD, even if they are not explicitly named as such. For instance, grassroots initiatives often emphasise youth leadership, community involvement, and emotional support—core tenets of the PYD framework. These practices demonstrate the implicit relevance and applicability of PYD principles to the Thai physical and cultural environment.

Thailand's diverse geographic and socio-economic landscapes present unique challenges for young people and their development. High levels of income inequality and socio-economic disparities limit many young people's access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities (World Bank, 2024; Leurcharusmee & Buddhawongsa, 2023). These conditions create environments of social exclusion and discrimination, particularly for marginalised and disadvantaged groups, reflecting distinct challenges and priorities within different populations.

Critically examining and contextualising the PYD framework is essential for its practical application in Thailand. Youth development is complex and non-linear, and young people do not fit neatly into predefined categories. Therefore, PYD programs must be adapted to address Thai youth's specific socio-economic and cultural realities.

Understanding the socio-economic factors that shape youth development in Thailand is crucial. For instance, the high prevalence of NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) youth underscores the need for targeted PYD initiatives that provide support and opportunities for skills development and employment (Leurcharumee & Buddhawongsa, 2023). Tailoring PYD programs to address these specific challenges can enhance their effectiveness and relevance in the Thai context. By recognising and framing these efforts within the PYD framework, practitioners can better align their strategies with proven methodologies while adapting them to local needs and contexts. This approach ensures that youth are empowered to contribute to their development and the broader community actively, ultimately fostering positive outcomes and enhancing their overall well-being. Thus, the PYD framework, when applied thoughtfully and contextually, holds significant promise for youth development in Thailand.

### **3.10. Summary**

This chapter provided a comprehensive examination of the concept of youth development through the Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework. It recognized the complexity of defining "youth" and "youth development," embracing the rich variety of perspectives across different disciplines. The historical evolution of youth development theories was traced, highlighting the influence of psychoanalytic, cognitive, and socio-ecological perspectives. Then transitioned to a detailed analysis of the PYD framework, underscoring its positive approach to youth development and dissecting its foundational theories, principles, and the critiques it faced. In its concluding section, the chapter contemplated the application of the PYD framework in Thailand, considering its potential to enhance the lives of Thai youth by leveraging their existing strengths and promoting positive outcomes. This comprehensive exploration emphasized the necessity of embracing diverse viewpoints to foster a nuanced understanding of youth within a broader social fabric.

# Chapter 4: *Methodology and Fieldwork*

## 4.1. Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the research's guiding principles, detailing the methodologies utilised for data collection and the procedures employed for data analysis. Additionally, it encompasses a discussion of the fieldwork conducted, the ethical considerations upheld, and the encountered research limitations. The chapter begins with an overview of the research theory and approach and then analyses the study's significance in Thai youth development. It then offers a justification for the chosen methodologies and approaches. This study utilises qualitative research methods and adopts a strength-oriented approach within a constructivist paradigm. Its primary objective is to thoroughly examine the possible influence of the Positive Youth Development (PYD) model on the development and welfare of Thai youth. The data will be analysed using thematic analysis, a valuable qualitative research tool to identify central themes and patterns. This facilitates systematically exploring participants' perspectives and experiences, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the subject.

Furthermore, the chapter will expand on the data collection and analysis methods utilised throughout the study. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and protecting participants' rights, are paramount and will be meticulously addressed. The limitations of this study will subsequently be examined. This will fortify the interpretation of the research findings, thereby ensuring a credible research process. Overall, this research offers valuable insights into positive youth development and grassroots partnerships in Thailand. By adopting a strengths-based approach and applying thematic analysis, the study aims to contribute significantly to the existing literature, benefitting youth development programmes in Thailand.

## 4.2. Research Paradigm and Approach

This study integrated qualitative research, a strength-based approach, and a constructivist philosophy to comprehensively explore the stated research aim and objectives using the questions shown below:

### **Research aim:**

The study seeks to explore the suitability of the PYD framework within Thailand, drawing on the perspectives of youth participants, staff members, and founders from five grassroots youth development organisations. It seeks to identify both the challenges and opportunities in implementing PYD in a

manner that is beneficial for Thai youth. It seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the adaptability of PYD in the Thai context and the potential for application to further Thai initiatives and broader non-Western contexts.

### **Objectives:**

**Objective 1:** To explore the following research questions in the context of the Thai grassroots organisations interviewed.

**Objective 2:** To explore the overall suitability of PYD frameworks for the Thai context.

**Objective 3:** To propose potential mechanisms for improving the future application of PYD principles and frameworks to Thai and other non-Western cultural environments.

### **Research questions:**

**Question 1:** How do Thai cultural and contextual factors intersect with PYD principles?

**Question 2:** What considerations and adaptations are required if PYD principles are to be effectively implemented when working with Thai youth?

**Question 3:** What are the key factors that facilitate effective engagement and empowerment of Thai youth, and how do these factors influence positive youth outcomes?

## **4.2.2. Qualitative Research Methodology**

Qualitative research serves as the cornerstone of this study. This method delves into the intricacies of human behaviour and experience, shedding light on the underlying meanings, motivations, and processes that shape a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2002). This approach extends beyond superficial accounts of "what," "where," and "when," diving deep into the complex dynamics that influence the situation (Creswell, 2002). The approach recognises the significance of context in understanding people's beliefs and behaviours, as meaning is situated within the specific context in which individuals live (Creswell, 2002).

Adopting a qualitative research lens allows a more comprehensive and holistic analysis of social phenomena, considering those directly involved in subjective realities and diverse perspectives (Tenny et al., 2022). Tenny et al. (2022) emphasise the importance of focusing on individuals' lived experiences and narratives, as it enables researchers to uncover the unique challenges, strengths, and aspirations that

shape their lives. Qualitative research methods have been recognised as having transformative potential in illuminating the intricacies of social phenomena and guiding policy and practice (Tenny et al., 2022). The qualitative lens is particularly relevant for exploring the nuances of youth development in Thailand, as the methodology ensures a deep and nuanced exploration of the varying perspectives of research participants, which is vital in a cultural context where outsider perspectives may fall short.

### **4.2.3. Strengths-Based Approach**

The strengths-based approach adds to this research framework as it recognises that young people have inherent strengths and resilience that can be harnessed to promote their well-being and development (Catalano et al., 2004). This approach aligns with the Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework's emphasis on fostering positive relationships, social and emotional competence, and skill development (Catalano et al., 2004; Lind et al., 2018). Catalano et al. (2004) highlight the significance of embracing a strengths-based approach to research, especially when engaging with youth in marginalised communities. This approach is instrumental in creating conducive environments for their growth by emphasising their strengths and capabilities (Catalano et al., 2004). By focusing on their assets, such as skills, talents, interests, and positive relationships, a strengths-based approach empowers young individuals to seize control of their lives and make positive decisions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

When employing a strengths-based approach in research, a qualitative methodology is integral as it emphasises understanding the intricacies of human experiences, perspectives, and interactions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Researchers can delve deeply into the narratives and contexts of individuals or communities, concentrating on their strengths, assets, and resources rather than solely focusing on their problems or deficits (Patton, 2015). This approach enables a more comprehensive understanding of the individuals or communities under investigation, ultimately leading to more effective interventions and outcomes (Patton, 2015).

### **4.2.4. Constructivism**

The research is further grounded in a constructivist philosophy, which underscores the dynamic nature of reality and the recognition of multiple realities (Mohajan & Mohajan, 2022). This philosophical stance acknowledges the profound influence of perception and interpretation on our understanding of the world, highlighting the absence of a singular, objective reality (Mohajan & Mohajan, 2022). Embracing a constructivist approach, the research acknowledges the co-construction of meaning between the researcher and participants, emphasising that knowledge is not static but emerges from ongoing dialogue, negotiation, and shared experiences (Mohajan & Mohajan, 2022). This approach

facilitates a collaborative exploration of experiences, fostering a deeper understanding of diverse viewpoints and lived complexities (Amineh & Asl, 2015).

The constructivist philosophy emphasises the importance of valuing participants' perspectives and acknowledges the role of context in shaping individual realities (Creswell, 2000). This encourages a reflective approach and openness to alternative interpretations, recognising knowledge production's fluid and evolving nature (Amineh & Asl, 2015). In qualitative research, the constructivist philosophy aligns with principles prioritising understanding subjective experiences within social and cultural contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This is particularly relevant in development research, where lived experiences and perspectives are central to understanding social change. Therefore, adopting a constructivist philosophy enriches the methodological approach of this project, addressing ethical and epistemological considerations and contributing to a nuanced understanding of positive youth development in Thailand (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

### **4.3. Fieldwork**

Several factors played a role in the decision to use Thailand as the research site for this study. Witnessing a series of youth protests in the country from 2020 to 2021 led to the reflection of my privilege as a young person from New Zealand. Furthermore, during a brief visit to Thailand at the age of 20, I was exposed to notable socioeconomic gaps I had not experienced before. These experiences sparked a strong interest in understanding the challenges disadvantaged youth face in Thailand, motivating me to delve deeper into this issue. Youth are not only the future but also essential contributors to the present. They represent the next generation and have the potential to shape the world, but they also actively engage in and influence the current societal landscape. Young people are not just recipients of knowledge and guidance for the future; they are valued members of society with unique perspectives, abilities, and contributions that are relevant and meaningful in the present moment.

#### **4.3.1. Internship Opportunity**

To conduct fieldwork in Thailand, I reached out to several Thai youth organisations, explaining the objectives of my study and requesting a collaboration with them. Consequently, in April 2023, an opportunity arose to present the research concept to Kulsoom Khan, the Senior Programme Director for Asia at the Global Fund. Kulsoom subsequently recommended Warawin (Nina) Yensuk, the Thailand Partnership Catalyst, to me. After reviewing my research proposal, I was extended an internship opportunity to collaborate with the Global Fund for Children (GFC) in Thailand. The main focus of my internship was to support my research project by collecting data directly from participants in Positive

Youth Development (PYD) initiatives. Concerning the Global Fund for Children, my research aimed to shed light on their work in Thailand, providing valuable information and resources for potential donors considering supporting additional youth organisations in the country. Upon completing my internship, I was tasked with composing a blog post that encapsulated my research journey in Thailand.

### **4.3.2. Fieldwork Experience**

Between July 18th and September 16th, 2023, I resided in Thailand, collecting data from five youth organisations. The fieldwork itself occurred from July 22nd to August 17th. Although I was primarily based in Bangkok, I also conducted fieldwork in Chiang Mai for ten days.

The data was gathered from three distinct research sites: one online interview and one meeting in a café. Due to the anonymity of the participants in this research and the confidentiality clause, I cannot disclose the specific locations of these research sites. However, they represented a diverse cross-section of two urban and three rural areas. My affiliation with the Global Fund for Children (GFC) facilitated my interactions with various organisations in Thailand, which likely contributed to my acceptance and welcome.

### **4.3.3. Participant Access**

Before the commencement of data collection in Thailand, discussions were held with Warawin (Nina) to define the scope and objectives of the research. Nina extended invitations to all relevant organisations in Thailand, outlining the research goals and emphasising how their participation would contribute to the completion of my Master's thesis. Five organisations from varying urban and rural communities throughout Thailand expressed interest in participating, and subsequently, Nina provided them with further details about the research and coordinated interview schedules. Access to participants was facilitated by the Global Fund for Children (GFC).

### **4.3.4. Use of a Purpose Sampling Approach to Participant Selection**

A purposive sampling approach proved instrumental in selecting participants for this study. This non-probability sampling technique is characterised by intentionally selecting participants with specific attributes aligning with the research objectives (Etikan et al., 2016). The researcher's expertise plays a crucial role in identifying individuals whose characteristics are pivotal for effectively addressing the research question(s) (Etikan et al., 2016). The ability of this method to include people with various

perspectives or experiences relevant to the research objectives highlights its significance in the study (Campbell et al., 2020).

Purposive sampling facilitates the acquisition of in-depth and nuanced data, as it is tailored to include participants embodying desired characteristics or experiences (Campbell et al., 2020). In this context, purposeful selection was integral to delving into the impact of the PYD framework on Thai society. It enabled key stakeholders' insights at varying levels, enhancing a thorough understanding of their distinctive viewpoints. The study's participants included young people involved in a current programme aged between 16 and 25, staff members affiliated with the respective organisation and each organisation's founder (where possible). Ultimately, the study collected 11 youth participant interviews, five staff interviews, and four founder interviews. There were 20 interviewees in total.

#### **4.3.5. Youth Participants**

The participation of young people in my research varied across the five organisations. Neither Global Fund for Children nor I selected the specific interviewees; this responsibility rested with the organisations and young people. The purposive sampling was primarily used to select three categories of interviewees, youth participants, staff members, or founders, based on the unique perspectives each could provide. Other factors considered included participants' availability and willingness to participate in interviews. The use of purposive sampling provided a flexible approach to the selection criteria. The only prerequisites for youth participants were that they were aged between 16 and 25 years old and actively involved in the youth programme. This adaptability streamlined the selection process, allowing participants to be selected either directly on-site or through a pre-established selection process. Moreover, it allowed for interviews to be conducted in various locations, ensuring participant confidentiality rather than restricting interviewees to on-site locations.

The availability of participants and the locations for interviews varied. This is illustrated in the table below:

*Table 4.3.5. (A) Organisation Locations & Involvement*

<b>Organisations</b>	<b>Youth participant involvement</b>	<b>Interview Location</b>
A, C, E	Participants finalised during a site visit	On-site
B, D	Participants predetermined by the organisations	Off-site/Virtual

Moreover, there were variations in the number of young people interviewed among the organisations and differences in their ages and genders. This is illustrated in the table below:

*Table 4.3.5. (B) Youth Participant Overview*

<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Number of young people interviewed</b>	<b>Age group</b>	<b>Gender</b>
A	1	25	Male
B	4	21, 22, 19, 19	Female and Male
C	2	20-23	Female and Male
D	2	18-23	Female and Male
E	2	15-16	Male

#### **4.3.6. Staff Participants and Founders**

The staff selection strategy paralleled youth selection in organisations B and D, where participants were predetermined, and interviews were conducted off-site. Compared to the youths, my observations suggested a degree of predetermination in staff selection for organisations A, C, and E, even when selections were made on-site. This could be attributed to smaller staff-to-youth ratios.

One staff member from each organisation was interviewed, in addition to the founders of four of the five participating organisations.

The selection procedure was likely influenced by earlier discussions between the founder and the staff members about the organisation's potential interest in participating in this research. Given the agreement to participate, most staff were open to being interviewed. However, participation invitations were

extended to specific staff members who expressed a particular interest. Given that the founders were the sole initiators of their respective organisations, their participation in the interview process was predetermined, contingent on their consent to be involved in the research.

The primary factor of their age guided the selection of youth participants. This ensured a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and perspectives of youth across a wide age range. The aim was to avoid bias towards specific age groups and capture the diverse voices of all youth participants. However, it was deemed less critical to consider age ranges among the founder and staff interviewees; more attention was paid to their degree of engagement and length of tenure in the organisation.

This approach aimed to comprehensively understand the topic by including individuals with different backgrounds and expertise. By involving youth with diverse backgrounds, the study aimed to assess the impact and significance of the current youth development initiatives within these organisations. Interviewing staff and founders with long-term involvement in the organisation was beneficial, as they had deep insights into its operations. This level of understanding was essential for evaluating the current effects and potential for the Positive Youth Development (PYD) Framework in Thailand, where including diverse experiences and perspectives enhanced the validity and practical relevance of the study findings (Hennik et al., 2016).

## **4.4. Data Collection, Management and Analysis**

### **4.4.1. Data Collection: In-Depth Interviews**

The primary approach to data collection involved in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, including one to four youth participants, one staff member per organisation, and the founders of four of the five participating organisations. In research conducted in diverse cultural settings, interviews are a pivotal method (Au, 2019). They offer researchers direct engagement with individuals from the studied culture, allowing participants to articulate their perspectives, experiences, and cultural values (Au, 2019). Consequently, these interviews served as a means to thoroughly explore participants' perspectives, experiences, and attitudes toward Positive Youth Development (PYD) by exploring cultural competence and contextual factors.

In addition, the selection of interviewees from three levels of each organisation allowed for comparison and contrast of varying perspectives, providing a holistic picture of how each organisation's founding aims played out in the lived experiences of its beneficiaries.

#### 4.4.2. Observational Research

Angrosino (2007) posits that our intrinsic capacity for observation is fundamental to our understanding of the world. Consequently, observational research methodologies are critical as they enable the direct observation and documentation of behaviours, interactions, and cultural practices within their natural settings (Angrosino, 2007). In light of my limited knowledge of Thai culture, such observational research proved invaluable in obtaining a deeper understanding of Thai society, customs, and the many aspects that define it. Immersing myself in the local environment cultivated a rapport with the participants, facilitating a more profound comprehension of their perspectives.

#### 4.4.3. Data Recording and Translation

To ensure the research's integrity and efficiency, in-depth interviews were conducted utilising an audio recording device, with participants providing informed consent. The recorded interviews underwent translation and analysis.

The assistance of a translator was sought, especially in multilingual settings or when participants preferred expressing themselves in their native language. This approach ensured that the nuances of the participants' responses were accurately captured and interpreted. This comprehensive data collection strategy ensured a rich, in-depth understanding of the subject matter, contributing to the robustness and validity of the research findings.

#### 4.4.4. Data Management

In qualitative research, the management and organisation of data include creating a systematic approach for labelling, storing, and analysing data derived from interviews, focus groups, or document reviews (Naeem et al., 2023). A prevalent strategy for managing qualitative data involves systematically categorising and storing various data types, such as audio recordings of interviews or transcribed field notes (Naeem et al., 2023). This method guarantees the **secure storage** and **systematic organisation** of data. It involves detailed classification and incorporates strategies for safekeeping and easy accessibility, ensuring the data's preservation and orderly retrieval (Naeem et al., 2023).

Data from interviews with youths, staff, and founders were initially stored in separate folders by the organisation. As the study progressed, the data was reorganised into new folders based on group categories, maintaining a focus on the security and accessibility of the information. The audio recordings and corresponding transcriptions were securely archived on my laptop and backed up on cloud services like Google Drive and OneDrive, which are only accessible by Passkey. This ensured

that access was restricted solely to myself. This strategy enhanced data management efficiency and reinforced the protection and privacy of the information gathered.

#### **4.4.5. Open Coding and Triangulation in Data Analysis**

In qualitative research, open coding is essential to data organisation (Saldaña, 2016). It involves assigning categories or tags to data segments that embody specific themes or concepts (Saldaña, 2016). In this study, open coding was employed to analyse the data. This process entailed systematically reviewing each interview, extracting responses from youth, staff, and the founder, and identifying commonalities and differences to reveal recurring themes and concepts.

Data triangulation was also used in the data analysis phase. This technique utilises various sources to enhance the reliability and credibility of the findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Triangulation was employed by incorporating relevant data from interviews, documents, and observations. Although an in-depth document analysis was not explicitly conducted, the findings were substantiated by incorporating insights from other relevant studies. This strategy facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the research topic and enabled the comparison and contrast of responses, thereby enhancing the strength of the findings.

### **4.5. Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations in research encompass principles and guidelines that protect participants' rights, privacy, integrity, and well-being throughout the research process. These considerations involve various aspects such as informed consent, confidentiality, data management, management of potential conflicts of interest, and the overall ethical treatment of participants. Researchers must adhere to ethical standards to uphold the credibility and validity of their research findings while safeguarding the dignity and rights of those involved in the study.

The decision to select Thailand as the research site for this study necessitated a thorough investigation of Thai political and legal processes and cooperation with the appropriate organisations and authorities. Ensuring that my personal and research conduct reflected exemplary standards of behaviour was tantamount. It was vital to evince respect for the culture in which I conducted my research and mindfulness of the privilege I had been afforded.

### **4.5.1. Ethics Approval**

The research underwent the ethics review process within the Development Studies Department prior to the commencement of fieldwork. This ensured the alignment of the research with the ethical standards mandated by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee. This review process confirmed that no conflicts of interest could compromise the research's objectivity or the well-being of the participants. Given the support of the Global Fund for Children (GFC) for this study, Operations Onboarding Training was carried out. This was done to guarantee strict adherence to GFC's ethical guidelines, especially considering the research involved young individuals. Training sessions and contractual agreements outlined confidentiality protocols, and my responsibilities in partnership with these entities were conveyed and endorsed.

### **4.5.2. Informed consent and confidentiality**

While interviewees were selected based on their involvement with the youth organisation, their participation in the interviews was entirely voluntary. Before each interview, there were verbal explanations of what the research intends to explore and their rights as participants, including voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality.

Measures were put in place to protect the privacy and confidentiality of all participants. This was done by eliminating personally identifiable information and substituting it with non-identifying variables in the write-up process. This ensured the confidentiality and anonymity of participants, enabling data analysis without disclosing sensitive personal details, including those of the organisations that participated in this study. Throughout data collection, efforts were made to minimise potential harm or discomfort to the participants. This was done by ensuring the questions posed to the participants avoided any sensitive subjects that might elicit discomfort. Instead, the questions were solely centred on exploring the applicability of the Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework in Thailand. (For copies of the questionnaires, see appendices 1, 2, and 3.)

### **4.5.3. Positionality**

Positionality refers to an individual's perspective on the world and their stance regarding a research endeavour and its social and political context (Holmes, 2020). It is recognised that researchers are not detached observers but are actively intertwined with the social phenomena they investigate. Therefore, it emphasises that researchers' viewpoints and predispositions can shape the research procedures and results. (Holmes, 2020). Reflecting on one's positionality is particularly important when engaging with

research participants, as it shapes the researcher's orientation and influences their understanding of the research context (Wilson et al., 2022). By being aware of their positionality, researchers can reflect on their influence on the research and its potential consequences on knowledge production (Wilson et al., 2022).

As a researcher possessing limited first-hand experience in youth work, I acknowledge the potential constraints this might impose on the efficacy of my research. My privilege as an educated New Zealand-Pakeha woman could create a disconnection between my scholarly comprehension of youth development and the pragmatic realities of young individuals in Thailand. However, through collaboration with local youth organisations, which possess direct experience in engaging with the youth of Thailand, I was able to procure invaluable insights into the perspectives of these young individuals, staff members, and founders.

One strategy to mitigate bias was an extensive study of various facets of Thai culture before initiating fieldwork. Although literature does not offer experiential knowledge, it serves as a valuable source for gaining understanding, thus providing insights into cultural beliefs and contextual factors that may impact the everyday experiences of these youth. Throughout the research process, I was critically aware of how my cultural background, personal beliefs, and experiences could influence my interpretations and interactions. To mitigate the risk of bias, I adopted a critical and open-minded approach, continually examining my assumptions and reflecting on their impact. This involved engaging with research participants to cultivate a nuanced understanding of their lived experiences.

By immersing myself in the day-to-day operations of the youth program and actively reflecting on my interpretations of their perspectives, I fostered trust and rapport, enriching the research findings. This personalised approach facilitated meaningful dialogues, providing insights into the participants' unique backgrounds and challenges. Prioritising interpersonal connections enhanced the data quality and contributed to a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the subject matter. By acknowledging my positionality and being transparent about my background, I strived to conduct this research with integrity, fairness, and sensitivity to the voices and experiences of the participants.

## **4.6. Limitations**

This research has several limitations that need to be acknowledged to ensure the transparency and credibility of the findings. The first limitation of this study pertains to the uneven distribution of participants. The number of interviewees from each organisation varied due to their availability, which could limit the diversity and representation of participants. For example, I was unable to interview one of the founders of an organisation. Additionally, I interviewed four youth participants in one

organisation but just one youth participant in another. Consequently, this may impact the comprehensiveness of the results.

Another potential limitation is the existing partnership between the Global Fund for Children and the organisations involved in the study. This relationship might have introduced a certain level of bias, as some interviewees may have felt obligated to speak positively about their organisation due to their funding relationship with Global Fund for Children. However, based on the responses received, this does not appear pervasive, but it could have influenced some responses.

The limitations in time have influenced this study, restricting its depth and scope. Consequently, some facets of youth development and grassroots partnerships may still need to be fully explored. Given that this research is centred on the potential influence of PYD in Thailand, ongoing observation and evaluation are needed beyond the scope of this research. Furthermore, the inability to conduct on-site visits across all organisations may affect the validity of the results. For example, one interview with an organisation was facilitated through Zoom, whereas another was visited for three days. As a result, this led to imbalances in the relationships I could foster with some of the organisations as I got to know some better than others. Consequently, some organisations might have felt less comfortable with me. The lack of developed trust could influence study results.

Finally, while the participants represented various groups, access to specific youth groups and grassroots organisations representing other youth groups was impacted. This could result in an underrepresentation of specific subgroups, reducing the study's diversity of opinions.

My positionality and background might have inadvertently influenced the interpretation and analysis of the data despite efforts to mitigate biases. Given the cross-cultural nature of the research, there may be limitations in fully understanding and interpreting the nuances of local customs, beliefs, and traditions, which could influence the research process and findings. By recognising these limitations, researchers and readers can interpret the results with a thorough understanding of the potential constraints that may have influenced the study's outcomes. Efforts will be made to address these limitations and maintain the integrity of the research process.

## **4.7. Summary**

To summarise, this chapter provides an in-depth examination of the research paradigm and approach, the methodologies employed for data collection, and the procedures used for data analysis. It also delves into the fieldwork conducted, the ethical considerations upheld, and the research limitations encountered.

All these components contribute to exploring the impact of the Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework on Thai youth. By adopting a qualitative research approach, the study has garnered profound insights from key stakeholders involved in youth development programmes across Thailand. The research, underpinned by a strengths-based framework and constructivist philosophy, illuminates the positive aspects of youth growth within the PYD context. This approach enables a more nuanced understanding of youth development, focusing on challenges, deficits, potentials, and assets. With a strong emphasis on ethical considerations and limitations, this study aims to contribute valuable insights into youth development and grassroots partnerships, considering areas for improvement in future research.

The potential impact of the research findings extends to evidence-based decision-making and the enhancement of youth development programmes in Thailand, ultimately fostering a lasting positive influence on the lives of Thai youth. In conclusion, this chapter sets the foundation for a comprehensive and ethically sound investigation into the impact of the PYD framework on Thai youth. Its strength-based approach and commitment to ethical research practices pave the way for an academically rigorous, socially relevant, and impactful study.

# Chapter 5: *Findings*

## 5.1. Introduction

This research explored the adaptability of the Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework within Thailand's distinct cultural and social context. This research draws on qualitative data from twenty interviews with key stakeholders, including founders, staff members, and then youth participants across five youth development organisations. This chapter presents the findings, organised around three main themes (See Table 5.1.1. below): program alignment with PYD principles, cultural and contextual factors, and the effectiveness of targeted interventions. In examining the first theme of program alignment, the focus is on youth participation and empowerment and recognising youth as active agents in their development. The reporting of findings then turns to the second theme, cultural and contextual influences, and consideration is given to the role of community support and the impact of cultural differences on youth development. Finally, in presenting the third theme, the impact of the programs and the targeted interventions they employ are described, with particular attention paid to mentorship, collaboration strategies, and ongoing evaluation and improvement processes. Each section provides insights into how these programs are designed to support the holistic development of youth in Thailand. The chapter underscores the collaborative nature of the study and the variability in responses among youth, staff, and founders, highlighting the diverse perspectives of these key stakeholders.

### 5.1.1. Categories of Findings

Table 5.1.1. Three Categories of Findings as Themes and Sub-Themes

Three categories of findings	Themes
<i>5.3. PYD Alignment</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5.3.1. Youth Participation</li> <li>• 5.3.2. Youth Empowerment</li> <li>• 5.3.3. Looking at Youth as Actors</li> </ul>
<i>5.4. Cultural and Contextual Factors</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5.4.1. The Role of community in supporting youth</li> <li>• 5.4.2. Cultural Differences influencing youth development</li> </ul>
<i>5.5. Impact and Targeted Interventions</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5.5. Role of mentorship</li> <li>• 5.6. Collaboration and Addressing Diverse Needs</li> <li>• 5.7. Evaluation and Improvement</li> </ul>

## 5.2. Programme Alignment with Positive Youth Development Principles

### 5.2.1. Youth Participation

The interviews with five youth organisations' staff members, youths, and founders consistently emphasised the importance of involving young people in program planning. All twenty participants implicitly recognised active youth participation as a crucial aspect of their programs.

Staff member C emphasised that promoting PYD involves encouraging youth to have a voice. She explained that workshops focus on youth issues, such as gender equality, child protection, documentation, and rights. After participating in these workshops, the youth apply their knowledge in their communities by writing and submitting proposals to the program.

*"These programs involve youth from the planning stages, enabling them to directly address the issues they encounter and actively participate in problem-solving." (Staff Member C)*

Youth participant C.1. (F, 20) highlighted this impact, stating that their engagement in youth-led initiatives has led to a greater sense of belonging.

*"Since becoming involved in these initiatives, I have more of a place within my community. Our community is now more aware of the potential of youth, and they listen to us more." (Youth participant C.1. F, 20)*

In discussing youth participation, founder A highlighted that encouraging youth to have freedom and choice involves inviting them to:

*"Participate, speak up, and have their opinions heard." (Founder A)*

She contends that such inclusivity is essential for empowering youth to voice their perspectives confidently.

Youth participant A (M, 25) illustrates this idea of inclusivity, sharing that his workshop participation has allowed him to develop strong connections with other organisations. This enables him to effectively promote the program's impact and share his experience with his peers.

These findings highlight key differences and notable similarities among the accounts of founders, staff members, and youth participants. Founders and staff members stress the importance of youth participation in the structure and process of their programs, viewing it as essential for meeting goals and addressing community challenges. They focus on creating opportunities for meaningful engagement, like workshops and proposal submissions, which reflects their belief that youth involvement is crucial for the success of the programs and for tackling broader issues within the community.

In contrast, youth participants offer a personalised perspective on their engagement, sharing how these experiences have helped them develop personally by enhancing their sense of belonging in the community and gaining acknowledgment from others. They emphasise the changes brought about by their involvement, such as increased confidence and stronger connections with the community.

All interviewees recognise the inherent value of youth engagement. They unanimously agree on its empowering impact and the extensive, beneficial effects on enhancing community well-being. This shared recognition forms a strong consensus on the benefits of youth involvement, emphasising empowerment, communal advantage, and the potential for sustained engagement. This is the case even though each group perceives the results through unique perspectives.

### **5.2.2. Personal Empowerment and Engagement**

The youth empowerment and engagement themes were prominent throughout the interviews, reflecting the key principles of PYD, specifically Connection, Confidence, Competence and Contribution. The findings highlighted the importance of empowering young people and encouraging active involvement in their development. Participants reported increased confidence and a stronger sense of agency. At the same time, staff and founders emphasised the Role of youth empowerment and engagement in fostering positive personal development and self-confidence among the youth.

For many youth participants, empowerment was closely tied to an increase in self-confidence and a shift in their perception of their capabilities. Youth participants D.2 (F, 23) and D.1 (M, 18) reported significant improvements in practical and emotional skills, attributing this growth to the programme. Youth participant D.2 (F, 23) states:

*"Before joining this programme, I didn't know how to cook, but now I can prepare meals. I have also become more capable of helping care for my younger siblings and family and looking after the younger children in the foundation." (Youth participant D.2. F, 23)*

This empowerment demonstrates how targeted interventions can improve participants' abilities and self-esteem, fostering a greater sense of agency and competence in their personal and social roles. Similarly, youth participant D.1 (M, 18) highlights his improved English language skills, agricultural skills, and emotional regulation, reporting increased community involvement. He states:

*"I have improved in many ways. I am much better at handling my emotions and am much happier now. I also have a place within my community. I contribute by participating in agricultural activities such as collecting and washing eggs and feeding fish." (Youth participant D.1., F, 23)*

These roles and responsibilities have strengthened his sense of purpose and community connection.

The staff members and founders stress the importance of youth participation in accomplishing program objectives and tackling broader community issues. Specifically, staff member D and founder D explicitly employ the PYD framework and underscore their strategy for empowering youth, encompassing academics, life skills, health, and emotional development. They emphasised how the PYD framework facilitates substantial personal growth and provides young people with crucial life skills. Similarly, founder C underscored the need to create opportunities for youth to engage actively within their communities. He explained:

*"This includes participation in local events and discussions with community members, which has enabled youth to voice their concerns on national platforms".*

Youth participant C.1 (F, 20) affirmed this approach, noting how increased community involvement has led to greater recognition and a strengthened sense of purpose. The findings also reveal a broader sense of social responsibility among youth participants. For instance, youth participant B.2 (F, 21) spoke about the impact of her involvement on community perceptions of education. She emphasised that her Role modelling the importance of and advocacy for education has inspired others to prioritise their studies.

Similarly, youth participant A (M, 25) desired to suggest introducing exercise programs and community clean-up activities, indicating an appetite for greater community engagement. He believes this will improve the public perception of youth in the community.

Staff member A emphasises this broader sense of social responsibility, highlighting that prioritising youth leadership in planning activities aims to instil a sense of social responsibility through empowerment. Founder B echoes this sentiment, asserting that by empowering youth to co-create

solutions, the program seeks to break generational poverty and exploitation cycles. She further asserts that the program aims to *"support youth's existing passion for community change."* (Founder B)

The findings demonstrate how offering young people an active role in their development can have meaningful and long-lasting impacts. For youth participants, there was a strong relationship between skill development and its Role in fostering youth autonomy and independence. This implies that tailored skill development plays a significant role in personal development. Community acceptance was associated with a stronger sense of belonging and purpose among youth participants. From the findings of the founders and staff members, it was clear that community involvement and leadership development were viewed in tandem with the empowerment and engagement of young people. The emphasis on youth participation as a means for both personal and communal development underscores the importance of promoting positive youth development considering the communal nature of Thai society, its values and, in turn, its impact on youth development. The findings confirm a shared commitment to approaches to youth development where empowerment and active participation are regarded as both advantageous and fundamental components.

### **5.2.3. Looking at youth as actors (tailored support/perceptions of youth)**

This section explores how youth development programs in Thailand foster youth agency by providing tailored support to address youth needs and aspirations. Interestingly, while tailored support within the PYD framework is primarily an individualised approach, the findings revealed that youth did not focus solely on their own needs when receiving such support—they also considered the needs of their community. This suggests that individualised and collective support can coexist and complement each other, underlining how tailored support can enhance positive youth development at both the personal and collective levels.

The findings revealed that providing support enables youth participants to actively participate in their development. This is reflected by founder E, who highlights that recognising diverse needs allows youth to shape their paths, enhancing their involvement and development. Similarly, founder A emphasises the importance of tailoring programs to meet the diverse needs of youth, stating:

*"To effectively address the diverse challenges faced by youth and tailor programs accordingly, it is important to view individuals and families as unique and strive to provide services based on their specific needs."* (Founder A)

The findings also suggest the limitations of generalised programme approaches. Staff member E expands:

*"If 60% of youth enjoy a program, the remaining 40% might participate only due to peer influence, necessitating adjustments to cater to different preferences." (Staff Member E)*

This idea is reflected by youth participant E.1 (M, 16), who initially expressed no interest in pursuing education after dropping out of school. However, by receiving tailored support from the organisation, he discovered that although he did not enjoy learning in the conventional classroom setting, he thrived in a vocational training environment. He expressed a notable shift in his mindset towards future planning and goal setting. Similarly, youth participant D.2 (F, 23), who did not enjoy school, has shifted her mindset towards education and is now pursuing vocational training and home-schooling. This suggests how adaptable program design can reinforce their Role as active participants in their development.

Another crucial aspect is empowering youth to take leadership roles within programs. Founder B notes,

*"Empowering youth to take leadership roles within programs enhances their confidence and self-esteem." (Founder B)*

Youth participant C.2's (M, 23) experience reflects this empowerment, as increased engagement and support from the organisation led to developing public speaking skills and critical thinking abilities. Youth C.2's (M, 23) growing recognition within the community illustrates how fostering youth leadership reinforces their Role as active contributors to their development and community.

## **5.3. Cultural and Contextual Factors**

### **5.3.1. The Role of the Community in Supporting Youth**

Throughout the analysis, it became evident that community support plays a significant role in shaping the development of young people. The youth participants express a longing to find their place in their communities. Cultural and social norms can provide significant barriers to this support, making it essential to consider the impact of community on young people. Youth participants highlight the importance of community support in their lives, including the benefits and obstacles of communal efforts, and emphasise strong communication and community ties for addressing their challenges.

Founders and staff underline the necessity of fostering connections among young people, their families, and communities to tackle their challenges effectively. They acknowledge the impacts of economic and socio-cultural shifts on community support systems and advocate for communities to offer stable,

supportive environments for youth. This underscores the potential for positive change through collective understanding and action.

Youth participant B.1 (F, 21) and youth participant B.4 (M, 21) shared that they receive no assistance from their communities, and both youth participants expressed their desire for greater community acceptance and support.

Youth participant C.1 (F, 20) attributes the lack of Community support to the community not being aware of their challenges due to a gap between generations, stating:

*“The older generation in the community may not fully understand the challenges we face”.*  
(Youth participant C.1, F, 20)

She explained that this makes it harder for young people to receive community support. This suggests the need for communication between young people and their communities so that they can express their needs. She pointed out that this hinders young people from getting the required assistance, underscoring the significance of improved communication between youth and their communities in articulating their needs.

Likewise, youth participant C.2 (M, 23) stressed the importance of the community being more receptive to young people’s concerns. He proposed that enhanced communication could foster greater collaboration between young people and their communities.

In contrast, Youth participants B.2 (F, 21) and B.3 (M, 22) expressed positive instances of community support. Youth participant B.2 (F, 21) stated that getting to school previously posed a significant challenge due to the poor condition of the roads. However, this changed for the better when the village leader took the initiative to improve them, making it easier for children to attend school.

Similarly, Youth participant B.3 (M,22) highlighted the struggle of dealing with unreliable internet access in his village upon returning from university, which interfered with his ability to submit assignments on time. To address this, the community came together to provide him with a stable internet connection, enabling him to continue his education. Youth participant C.2 (M, 23) also observed heightened support from local leaders through their active participation in organising activities and enthusiasm for showcasing the benefits of these initiatives.

Founder B stresses the need for strong relationships among young people, their families, and their communities. He explains that community collaboration with village leaders and educators is crucial in

changing community perceptions of education in small rural communities, where family responsibilities overshadow formal education. Similarly, youth participant E.1 (M, 16) detailed how the intricate power dynamics of his community often prevent young people from getting the opportunities assistance they require. This sentiment reflects founder B's stance regarding how culture shapes young people's support systems.

Founder B argues that addressing young people's issues in communities with strong family and community support systems is more effective. However, in areas where these networks are weaker, the cultural context plays a significant role in determining the type and extent of support available.

In discussing community support, founder C has observed changes to the extent of support from the community. In a community predominantly made up of farmers, she explains that fluctuating agricultural prices and restrictive regulations have introduced a level of precariousness. She highlights that economic insecurity and limited opportunities may hinder the development and prospects of young people.

Staff member E emphasised the importance of family dynamics in promoting community support. She addressed a specific family-related challenge in which the organisation worked with the family of a youth participant, showing them that their child did not have to resort to selling illegal substances. Instead, they explained that the organisation would assist their child by providing opportunities for education or employment. This demonstrates the organisation's significance in helping both young people and their families. Staff perspectives highlight the value of community involvement in overcoming obstacles and creating a supportive environment for youth development.

### **5.3.2. Cultural Differences Influencing Youth Development.**

The interviews with youth participants, staff members and founders indicate that cultural differences significantly impact youth development in Thailand. Diverse practices and beliefs present challenges in uniformly addressing young people's needs. This sentiment was echoed by founder E and staff member D, who highlighted the necessity of acknowledging regional cultural norms to ensure the success of youth development initiatives. Staff member C highlighted the significant benefits of incorporating community resources and traditional practices into program planning, such as local farming techniques. By respecting cultural nuances, she explains that communities are more likely to become more receptive to young people and recognise their value within their community.

Founder E specifically drew attention to how cultural customs can influence social interactions and potentially hinder youth engagement in specific communities, stating:

*“This is particularly common in areas where formal education is undervalued, leading to limitations in the aspirations and developmental pathways available to the young people.”*

(Founder E)

Founder B highlighted the challenges in communities where family obligations outweigh formal schooling, leading to limited educational access for children involved in household duties.

Young participants echoed this observation, discussing how cultural traditions influence their lives and aspirations. For example, Youth Participant B.3 (M, 22) shared that education is not a top priority in his area, with most young discontinuing their studies after completing the 9th grade to enter the workforce.

Similarly, Youth Participant B.4 (M, 21) highlighted the gender expectations in his community, where young girls are expected to marry by the age of 15. In contrast, boys are expected to start working immediately, and pursuing further education is discouraged. The research findings indicate that the community's approach to education presents a significant barrier for young people. It underscores the influence of cultural norms on youth access to education and emphasises the importance of designing youth development programs that align with cultural backgrounds.

Economic constraints constitute a significant barrier to youth participants' development. Specifically, Youth participants B.1 (F, 21) and B.4 (M, 21) spoke of how financial difficulties in rural communities hinder their ability to pursue further education. As youth participant B.3 (M, 22) noted, the agricultural sector's insufficient financial returns exacerbate these challenges, leaving families unable to support higher education pursuits. The compounded effect of these economic obstacles and the inadequacy of government scholarships were significant hurdles for rural youth seeking advancement opportunities.

These findings indicate no single approach to youth development; youth development programs must integrate culturally relevant practices. Founders and staff members highlight the importance of customising programs to local traditions, engaging community leaders, and integrating culturally relevant practices to effectively tackle the specific challenges young people face. By prioritising youth development within diverse cultural contexts, the findings demonstrate the potential for positive impacts on both program effectiveness and youth outcomes.

Youth participants provide a more personalised account of the impact of cultural norms on their lives concerning gender roles, educational expectations, and community values. These young people

highlight how deeply embedded cultural norms, such as the devaluation of formal education in specific communities or the expectation of early marriage, may limit opportunities for personal development.

Their accounts emphasise the frequently limiting nature of these cultural expectations, which can hinder their ability to explore alternative paths aligned with their aspiration. Despite variances in focus, there is a consensus on the importance of culturally informed approaches that respect and integrate local traditions while enabling young people to navigate and overcome cultural obstacles. This concept emphasises the significance of culturally responsive practices in promoting effective youth development in Thailand.

## **5.4. Impact and Targeted Interventions**

### **5.4.1. Role of Mentorship**

The Role of mentorship emerged as a pivotal theme across the perspectives of youth, staff, and founders. The value of mentorship was consistently highlighted, with youth participants acknowledging the guidance and support they received. Staff members and founders emphasised the broader implications of mentorship within their organisations. Youth participants consistently highlighted the importance of mentorship in fostering skill development, providing guidance and direction, and being a source of inspiration.

When considering the impact of mentorship on young people, founder C emphasised the role mentors play in directing young people towards positive behaviours. He emphasises that by encouraging youth to learn new skills and become more involved in their community, the organisation illustrates how mentorship can foster positive youth development.

Reflecting this sentiment, youth participants C.1 (F, 20) and C.2 (M,23) illustrated the significance of mentorship in skill development. Youth participant C.1 (F, 20) highlights the importance of mentorship in developing leadership and facilitator skills, noting that mentors provide guidance and serve as positive role models. She asserts:

*"Having a mentor or role model is essential because they guide you in the right direction and show you what is possible."* (Youth Participant C.1, F, 20)

Similarly, youth participant C.2 (M, 23) emphasises the Role of mentorship in helping young people navigate new situations. He shared that he often felt unprepared for new activities, such as forums or conferences, due to a lack of inexperience. However, this changed with a mentor, he asserts:

*“With my mentor's training and guidance, I learned what to expect from these conferences, who would be involved, and how to engage effectively.”* (Youth Participant C.2, M, 23)

This example highlights the Role of mentorship in fostering confidence and competence among young people. Similarly, Youth Participant E.1 (M, 16) maintains that specific skill sets necessitate a mentor's assistance despite his preference for self-directed learning. He acknowledged that while the internet can be a valuable resource, specific skills—such as selecting appropriate programs or organising written content—are better learned through direct guidance from a mentor.

Another theme that surfaced emphasised the importance of mentors and role models as trusted figures in the lives of young people. Founder B highlighted the Role of mentorship as a critical support system for young people, stating:

*“Many youth participants see their mentors as close friends, which is especially important for those who face challenges at home and might not have strong parental support.”* (Founder B)

Similarly, staff member A emphasised the importance of mentorship in their program, noting that many young people come from families without strong support systems. As a result, these young people often regard their mentors as close family members who can provide support and guidance.

However, staff member A expressed concern regarding this dynamic, noting:

*“While mentors can provide a sense of security and belonging for young people, it can also lead to an unhealthy dependence on mentors”*

She suggests that this overreliance might inhibit the youths' ability to develop independence, highlighting the importance of maintaining a balance in these relationships to support growth without fostering dependency.

For youth participants D.1 (M,18) and D.2 (F, 23), the Role of mentorship aligned with the concept of providing guidance and inspiration. Youth participant D.1 (M,18) notes that mentorship helps young people find a path in which they are offered the necessary guidance to stay on track.

Likewise, youth participant D.2 (F, 23) articulates her perspective on mentors and role models, describing them as:

*“A source of inspiration that shows me what I can achieve and the person I want can become.”*

Insights shared by youth participants, staff members, and founders all highlight mentorship as a crucial and dynamic element of PYD. Youth participants regard their mentors as role models who assist them in overcoming obstacles, developing skills, and finding motivation. Staff members stress the significance of fostering autonomy while providing support, ensuring that mentorship fosters empowerment rather than dependence.

Similarly, founders view mentorship as a cornerstone of community development, offering youths a sense of belonging and positive examples to look up to. Across all perspectives, mentorship is seen as a crucial element in shaping the future trajectories of youth, providing them with the tools, guidance, and inspiration needed to succeed in their personal and professional lives.

#### **5.4.2. Collaboration and Addressing Diverse Needs**

The theme of collaboration emerged as a focus throughout the discussions with youth participants, staff and founders. Three staff members, three youth participants and all four founders interviewed emphasised the importance of working to address the diverse needs of Thai youth. For instance, to make youth programs more accessible and successful, founder B emphasised the significance of nonprofit, educational, and government partnerships. This viewpoint was shared by youth participant B.1 (F, 21) who advocated for increased government support in education and employment while calling for reforms in the education system to assist graduates in securing job opportunities.

Comparably, youth participant B.2 (F, 21) emphasises the importance of support from non-governmental organisations, particularly their value in providing scholarships to young people, enabling their growth and success. Founder A shares this view, emphasising the need to leverage local resources and involve community leaders to build strong partnerships. She states:

*“Looking at collaboration as an opportunity instead of a challenge is essential for creating strong, lasting partnerships. It allows us to recognise and value everyone’s contributions.”*  
(Founder A)

In a discussion about the importance of collaboration, founder C emphasised the need for methods that consider cultural nuances to tailor strategies to different communities. Youth participant C.2 (M, 23)

agreed with this perspective, noting that collaborative partnerships with his community have helped him develop valuable life skills and increased his self-confidence. Similarly, staff member C highlighted the importance of involving youth in decision-making processes, asserting that engaging them in discussions and choices is crucial as their viewpoints are essential for identifying and tackling the challenges they encounter.

These perspectives provide a nuanced understanding of collaborative efforts, highlighting how youth, founders, and staff view their importance. Youth participants notably emphasise the tangible outcomes of collaboration, particularly highlighting the critical need for increased government support in education and employment opportunities. Their voices advocate for systemic reforms to bridge the educational curriculum with the practical demands of the job market. This focus mirrors a direct call for actions and policies that enhance access to resources necessary for personal and professional development.

In contrast, the founders emphasise collaboration's strategic and practical aspects, highlighting the need to establish partnerships within the wider community. This approach emphasises cultural sensitivity and custom-tailored strategies that resonate with different community needs. The narrative shared by the founders underscores collaboration as a foundational pillar for creating sustainable and effective support systems for the youth.

Staff perspectives bridge these views, highlighting the importance of involving youth in decision-making processes. This vantage point stresses the empowerment and engagement of young people as active participants in shaping programs that reflect their aspirations and needs. Such involvement is critical to ensuring that collaborative efforts are grounded in the realities and preferences of those they aim to benefit.

Collectively, these insights reflect a shared commitment to addressing the diverse needs of young people through collaborative efforts. They also reveal the different lenses through which youth participants, founders, and staff view the process and impact of these collaborations. This nuanced understanding highlights the complexity of developing effective youth support networks. It emphasises the need for approaches that balance building strategic partnerships with active youth engagement and culturally informed methods.

### **5.4.3. Programme Improvement**

During the interviews, the importance of evaluating and improving youth programs emerged as a critical theme. Founders, staff, and youth participants agreed that continuous assessment and refinement are

essential for interventions to remain practical and relevant. Founder E emphasised this necessity, stating:

*"We need a strong evaluation system to monitor how well our program is performing and to adjust our strategies based on the feedback we receive from youth participants."*

Youth Participant E. (M, 16) reflected this need for feedback, who expressed a desire for a curriculum that combines traditional school topics with practical life skills to broaden possibilities for young people. He states:

*"Incorporating practical skills into our program would better prepare us for the challenges of the real world."* (Youth Participant E., M, 16)

Youth Participant E.1 (M, 16) further emphasised the need for financial support in the community, including scholarships for schooling and funds for food. He mentioned a specific example of a student who had to drop out of school due to a lack of support. Illustrating this need, he mentioned,

*"In some families, only one person has a job, leaving them with little time for education as they must work to support the entire household."* (Youth Participant E., M, 16)

Similarly, Youth Participant C.2 (M, 23) suggests that greater emphasis should be placed on the quality of the training provided to the youth within their programme. He believes having an expert or trainer with the proper knowledge and skills to work with and train the youth effectively is essential.

Highlighting a different facet, staff member C emphasised the importance of evaluating programs with cultural specificity in mind, stating that evaluations should address the unique needs of the communities served to ensure initiatives remain effective. This perspective aligns with founder C's focus on culturally sensitive approaches, who affirmed,

*"Our approaches are regularly reviewed and adjusted to meet the diverse needs of different communities."* (Founder C)

Together, these reflections make a compelling argument for the need for systematic evaluation and ongoing improvement in youth programs. Founders, staff, and youth participants all recognise the essential Role of continuous oversight in refining interventions to meet cultural and individual needs and achieve success in youth development. This shared perspective highlights the importance of an

adaptive and responsive program management approach that prioritises feedback and cultural sensitivity to drive meaningful outcomes.

## 5.5. Summary

This chapter explored the potential of the positive youth development framework in Thailand with first-hand accounts from youth participants, staff members, and founders. The findings highlight the substantial potential the PYD framework presents for Thai youth. Through their involvement in PYD-aligned programs, youth participants reported enhanced personal development and greater community engagement. Their roles in program planning and execution resulted in a heightened sense of belonging and confidence in contributing to their communities.

These findings underscore the importance of practical and emotional skill development in fostering competence and positive outcomes for youth. Youth participants further recognised mentorship as a significant contribution to their personal development. Interestingly, youth participants viewed their own development as closely tied to the well-being of their communities, highlighting that development within the PYD framework is inherently connected to broader social impact. These findings underscore that community acceptance, awareness, and receptiveness to youth potential contribute to greater self-worth and increased happiness among youth participants.

Founders and staff members emphasised the importance of youth participation and engagement in achieving program goals and addressing youth challenges. Their dedication to providing tailored opportunities for young people and their communities illustrates how PYD principles can be adapted to align with the communal values of Thai culture. This combination of perspectives offers a comprehensive understanding of the positive impact of the Positive Youth Development (PYD) approach. It demonstrates how PYD fosters positive youth outcomes, enhances community engagement, and supports sustainable youth programmes.

The following chapter will explore these results in light of the literature on PYD discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, examining how the results from this thesis contribute to the broader discourse on the adaptability of the PYD framework in countries such as Thailand, outside of the Western context.

# Chapter 6: *Discussion and Conclusion*

## 6.1. Introduction

In this chapter, the fieldwork findings from Chapter 5 will be critically examined in relation to the literature reviewed in Chapters 2 and 3.

This discussion will address the primary aim of this research: To explore the suitability of the PYD framework within Thailand, drawing on the perspectives of youth participants, staff members, and founders from five grassroots youth development organisations. The study seeks to identify both the challenges and opportunities in implementing PYD in a manner that is beneficial for Thai youth. It seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the adaptability of PYD in the Thai context and the potential for application to further Thai initiatives and broader non-Western contexts.

To determine whether PYD can be effectively implemented in Thailand if tailored to Thai cultural and social norms (and hence applied to other non-Western initiatives), the research was guided by the three objectives and key exploratory questions listed below:

### **Objectives:**

**Objective 1:** To explore the following research questions in the context of the Thai grassroots organisations interviewed.

**Objective 2:** To explore the overall suitability of PYD frameworks for the Thai context.

**Objective 3:** To propose potential mechanisms for improving the future application of PYD principles and frameworks to both Thai and other non-Western cultural environments.

### **Research questions:**

**Question 1:** How do Thai cultural and contextual factors intersect with PYD principles?

**Question 2:** If PYD principles are to be effectively implemented when working with Thai youth, what types of considerations and adaptations are required?

**Question 3:** What are the key factors that facilitate effective engagement and empowerment of Thai youth, and how do these factors influence positive youth outcomes?

This chapter will be organised around the key research questions and corresponding findings, starting with an examination of how Thai cultural and contextual factors intersect with Positive Youth Development (PYD) principles. It will then explore the elements that contribute to Thai youth's effective engagement and empowerment. Following this, the chapter will discuss the role of supportive environments in fostering positive youth outcomes, particularly in relation to Question 2, where supportive environments emerged as a significant factor in promoting youth engagement and empowerment. Finally, the chapter will address the necessary considerations and adaptations for implementing PYD in Thailand, focusing on the broader challenges the youth and the organisations involved face.

The research findings have highlighted the significance of community in developing Thai youth, underscoring the need for youth initiatives to address both individual and community needs. The chapter will focus on the varied insights of the founders, staff, and youth participants of grassroots organisations. It will explore youth participants' reflections on the need for more specific vocational training, education, and community/government support, contrasting those views with the organisational founders' more practical aims of focusing on leadership development, mentorship, and tailored support.

The study evinces the influence of cultural and contextual factors on positive youth development strategies, stressing the importance of culturally sensitive approaches. Overall, the findings emphasise the essential role of community involvement and cooperation in achieving positive youth development in Thailand.

Additionally, the discussion will consider the research's limitations and conclude by linking the findings to the overall research aim and objectives. Together, these discussions will offer a comprehensive understanding of the essential factors in evaluating the suitability of PYD within the context of Thai culture and norms.

## 6.2. Cultural and Contextual Considerations for Effective Implementation

One's cultural sphere substantially impacts individual development; hence, culturally relevant practices in one context can potentially be ineffective or even counterproductive in another (Spencer & Spencer, 2014). This is evident from the findings presented in Chapter 5, which highlight the necessity of considering contextual and cultural influences when implementing a Western-based framework like PYD in non-Western contexts (Wium et al., 2019). For instance, the study underscores the role of the community in shaping young people's development.

Youth participants in Thailand view their development through the lens of their communities, seeking to integrate into and contribute to their social environments. This is particularly significant in Thailand's collectivist society, where programs emphasising community engagement are more effective than those focusing solely on individual achievement (Catalano et al., 2022). As discussed in Chapter 2, the cultural norm of "kreng jai," which prioritises thoughtfulness towards others, highlights the need for individuals, when reflecting on their aspirations, to consider the broader social impact (Techasrivichien et al., 2014). Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory (2001) identifies Thailand as a society with large power discrepancies and powerful notions of collectivism, suggesting that community and hierarchical relationships are fundamental to social interactions and personal development (Hofstede, 2001).

The principles of connection, caring, and contribution, as discussed in Chapter 3 (Lerner's 5Cs and 6Cs model of PYD), align with this cultural context (Lerner et al., 2005). For instance, the principle of connection resonates with the Thai value of communal harmony. Caring is reflected both in the principle of kreng jai, (translated as awe heart, meaning 'to be aware of other's feelings and show politeness, respect and consideration') and in the community's support and involvement in youth programs (Khirikoekkong et al., 2020). Contribution, too, finds relevance as youth are encouraged to actively participate in and support their communities. These principles are not merely theoretical but are demonstrated through specific examples from the study, such as youth participants who actively engage in local agricultural projects, thereby contributing to their communities while developing practical skills. This aligns with the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) two, which is the alleviation of hunger and malnutrition through youth involvement in sustainable agricultural projects and policies.

The rewards of receiving support and then becoming an active contributor are borne out by the observation that rather than focusing solely on individual achievements, such as leaving their community to attend university or pursue a career, youth participants expressed a desire to do so to

return and demonstrate the value of further education to their communities. Youth participants reported feeling a stronger sense of belonging when they could contribute meaningfully to their communities through their involvement in these programs.

Conversely, contribution was also demonstrated in the community's support towards program participants. Examples such as village leadership improving roads so youth participants could get to school and taking their participants' opinions into account in community-based forums reflected this positive feedback loop. Larsen and Holsen (2021) demonstrated the effectiveness of the five Cs model in promoting PYD. They argue for expanding PYD models globally by integrating existing frameworks and connecting them with other theoretical perspectives. This approach highlights the framework's adaptability to diverse cultural and contextual factors and its ability to influence the achievement of positive outcomes such as the UN SDG four, which ensures access to equitable quality education.

Interviews with staff members and founders of participating organisations emphasised integrating community resources and traditional practices into program planning. For instance, incorporating local farming techniques respects cultural nuances and increases community receptivity to youth programs. This approach is consistent with literature that advocates integrating traditional practices into modern development programs. Colby and Ortman (2014) stress the importance of local knowledge in creating effective and culturally appropriate interventions. Furthermore, recent research by Li and Zhang (2023) on adapting Western frameworks to non-Western contexts supports such integration, highlighting the positive impact of culturally tailored approaches on program success.

The findings also reflect how cultural and societal norms can create significant obstacles. In some communities where formal education isn't highly valued, young people often struggle to stay engaged, limiting their educational and personal growth. Similarly, in places where family duties are prioritised over schooling, youth face barriers to education. Berryman (2000) notes that the immediate need to contribute financially in economically disadvantaged areas can overshadow the perceived long-term benefits of education. Youth participants shared this sentiment in Chapter 5, who reported that cultural norms, such as girls being expected to marry early or boys being pressured to start working, discouraged further education. In these circumstances, familial and community attitudes create serious roadblocks for young people. This insight aligns with broader research on how cultural expectations impact education and youth development (Bolotta, 2023).

UNESCO (2018) highlights that cultural values and household labour needs often limit children's educational opportunities in rural areas. This supports the evidence shown in Chapter 3 of how global economic inequalities create barriers to education and personal growth (Backes & Bonnie, 2019). Liang et al. (2018) emphasise the importance of modifying PYD programmes to fit local cultural norms, noting

that while Lerner's 5Cs model has been effective in Western contexts, its direct application in diverse cultural environments may yield differing results. Supporting this, Ungar's (2008) research on resilience underscores the need for context-specific approaches, as external resilience factors such as social support and cultural continuity vary across cultures (Ungar, 2008). This stance was supported by participating organisation founder interviewees in Chapter 5, who recognised the need to tailor programs to specific family and community needs.

The research suggests that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to youth development. Programmes must be customised to align with local traditions, engage community leaders, and integrate culturally relevant practices. By doing so, youth development initiatives can effectively address the specific challenges young people face in diverse cultural contexts. This aligns with the concept of cultural competence in program development, emphasising the importance of understanding and integrating cultural differences into program design, thereby achieving more effective outcomes (Sue et al., 2009). As Eichas et al. (2021) noted, successfully engaging marginalised youth in PYD requires that we understand their unique experiences and the PYD processes that are most important to target for that group. As such, these findings highlighted that prioritising culturally responsive approaches ensures that such programs foster meaningful youth development.

### **6.3. Factors Influencing Successful Engagement and Empowerment of Thai Youth**

Several key factors shape youth engagement and empowerment in developmental programs, including positive identity formation, competence development, leadership, social responsibility, cultural sensitivity, and mentorship.

Within this project, positive identity development emerged as a significant factor in youth empowerment. Youth participants in this study reported that their involvement led to significant improvements in self-perception and a stronger sense of purpose, which they connected to their role within the community. This aligns with Catalano et al.'s (2002) concept of positive youth identity, defined as "the internal organisation of a coherent sense of self."

However, the research findings extend this understanding by highlighting the importance of external validation through community participation. Benson (2007) recognises this factor in his framework, which identifies social recognition as a key factor in PYD alongside the development of personal power and agency. This dual emphasis on internal coherence and external validation suggests that PYD programs should foster individual strengths and actively promote social integration by encouraging

youth to engage with and contribute to their communities. Such programs would help solidify a positive self-identity that is both personally fulfilling and socially recognised.

This is borne out by the submission, in 2023, of the "Youth Led Declaration on Transforming Education in Thailand." This document was created by youth stakeholders working together under the auspices of UNICEF. The document outlines recommendations for "safe nurturing and equitable schools" and was delivered via a series of meetings with both the Thai Office of Basic Education Commission and the Office of the Minister of Education. It will inform future policy reflections and development (Gill, UNICEF, 2023). Nattanicha "Nicha" Kattiyavara, one of the youth leaders delivering the document, commented, "I don't have much self-confidence normally, but when I work with the students and the schools through Student Reflect, and when I'm working with UNICEF on creating change, I feel proud, and I do like myself. And now we know young people can have an impact." Kattiyavara's comments make it clear that the sense of personal recognition she felt at watching her work and that of her student colleagues contribute to educational policy review immensely positively affected her self-esteem and sense of competency and engagement (Gill, UNICEF, 2023). In addition, this outcome shows progress towards UN SDGs five, four, and ten, developing financial capabilities in women, providing better access to quality education, and creating social protection programmes and policies that reduce the lifelong and generational consequences of poverty and discrimination.

Competence development emerged as a key outcome of PYD. This study found that participation in these programs led to notable improvements in emotional regulation, happiness, and community belonging outcomes that are consistent with Lerner's (2005) 5Cs model, which includes competence as a core component. Competence in this context encompasses cognitive (academic and intellectual abilities), social (interpersonal skills and relationships), and vocational (work-related skills and aspirations) domains, further supporting national SDGs. Ettinger et al. (2020) argue that understanding competence within different contexts is essential for predicting youth success. The findings of this study support this view, demonstrating that competence development benefits individuals and enhances communal well-being.

The study's findings align with Alegria et al. (2010) who note that the concept of competence can vary significantly across different cultural contexts. For example, while Western competence models often emphasise individual achievement, non-Western perspectives may prioritise community well-being and social harmony. Maulana and Khawaja (2022) emphasise the importance of a cross-cultural approach when assessing PYD, particularly in relation to well-being. Their study underscores how social and cultural factors shape perceptions of quality of life. Focusing on Indonesia's collectivist society, they demonstrate that values like harmony and participation often take precedence over individual concerns (Maulana & Khawaja, 2022). Group membership is pivotal in forming social identities, with individuals

encouraged to engage in various social groups, such as extended family, neighbourhood, community, workplace, and religious affiliations (Maulana & Khawaja, 2022). This collectivist framework mirrors Thai cultural values and is crucial for understanding well-being in Thailand, especially in relation to competence development. The study highlights the necessity of cultural sensitivity, just as participants in this study emphasised the importance of programs that align with their cultural and social contexts. This reinforces the idea that communal understanding is deeply connected to Thailand's youth well-being and skill development

Youth participants of this study further highlighted leadership development and social responsibility as essential aspects of their engagement. This study found that as youth took on leadership roles, they developed a stronger sense of social responsibility. For example, one participant described how her role as an advocate for education positively influenced community attitudes towards schooling, illustrating how individual leadership can have broader communal impacts. This ties in with the UNICEF project mentioned earlier, in which students were supported in the formation of their collective, Student Reflect. As a group, mentored by UNICEF education specialists, development officers and youth leaders, they were able to pool their knowledge and lived experience to develop grassroots strategies for improving educational outcomes (Gill, UNICEF, 2023).

The literature supports this emphasis on leadership as a means of fostering social responsibility. Catalano et al. (2002) emphasise that PYD initiatives should cultivate leadership skills to empower youth to take ownership of community initiatives. This aligns with the study's findings, where program staff highlighted the importance of prioritising youth leadership in planning and development activities, aiming to break generational poverty and exploitation cycles through empowered youth engagement. However, it is important to point out that this contrasts with Bolotta's (2023) findings that deeply entrenched language patterns and cultural norms could create internal and external tensions in young people seeking to position themselves as thought leaders (Bolotta, 2023). Student leaders often had to work against their own cultural conditioning to redefine collaborative relationships between each other and external authorities. To combat this, Bolotta contends that working within existing hierarchical language constructs and choosing the specific terms to be redefined can bring about gradual, positive change.

However, this research still validates the discovery that grassroots organisations facilitate youth empowerment by providing youth participants with support. Mentorship and support inspire youth to "live up to the example of their mentor" and tackle critical issues such as employment, educational access, and social inclusion within their communities and country as a whole. The research demonstrates that a culturally informed PYD framework can substantially enhance positive youth development in this way.

The literature underscores the importance of mentorship in developing self-regulation skills, which are critical for adaptive development. For instance, Duckworth et al. (2010) found that self-control, a component of self-regulation, predicted academic success among adolescents. In this study, mentorship was closely associated with increased participant confidence, purpose, and community involvement.

Reflecting this idea, the Project K program in New Zealand exemplifies how mentorship can enhance self-efficacy, resilience, and well-being, echoing the positive impacts observed in this study (Deane & Harré, 2014). Youth engagement and empowerment are influenced by a dynamic interaction of factors, including positive identity formation, competence development, leadership opportunities, social responsibility, cultural sensitivity, and mentor guidance. Practitioners can create more effective and responsive youth development initiatives by integrating mentorship elements into program design. These empower young people and enhance their relationships with more experienced members of society. This, in turn, provides behavioural templates that lead to their development as effective future leaders with the capacity to strengthen the communities from which they arise.

These findings demonstrate how offering young people an active role in their development can have meaningful and long-lasting impacts. For youth participants, there was a strong correlation between skill development and its role in fostering autonomy and independence. This implies that tailored skill development plays a significant role in personal development and empowerment. If young people develop skills that are valued by their community, positive interactions are enhanced.

Community acceptance was associated with a stronger sense of belonging and purpose among youth participants. From the perspectives of the founders and staff members of organisations participating in this study, it was clear that community involvement and leadership development were viewed in tandem with the empowerment and engagement of young people. The emphasis on youth participation as a means for both personal and communal development underscores the importance of promoting PYD, considering the communal nature of Thai society and its values. This, in turn, reciprocally impacts youth development, initiating a cycle of positive interactions and positive outcomes that build upon itself.

## **6.4. Considering the Role of Supportive Environments in Fostering Positive Youth Outcomes**

In Chapter 5, it was emphasised that the environment in which programs are conducted plays a crucial role in their success. Several authors have outlined the critical elements of an ideal environment for promoting positive youth development (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Gavin et al., 2010; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). The literature points to various critical components of an optimal environment, such as

creating a physically and psychologically safe space, ensuring stability, and establishing strong connections between an individual youth participant and their family, school, and community. These environments are essential for providing young people with supportive relationships and opportunities to feel connected and valued, which, in turn, helps them develop a strong moral framework and self-confidence (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Gavin et al., 2010; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003).

Dimitrova et al. (2021) elaborate on the characteristics of supportive environments, emphasising their permanence, engagement, and mutual benefit. Our research supports this notion, showing that communities benefit from active youth participation. Youth engagement not only enhances individual development but also contributes to the overall vitality and resilience of the community (Catalano et al., 2002). This reciprocal relationship highlights how supportive environments are enriched by the involvement of young people, reinforcing the importance of their active participation in community life.

Community support emerges as a crucial factor in fostering PYD outcomes. For example, one youth participant noted that improvements in infrastructure, such as road conditions, facilitated greater educational accessibility. Similarly, another participant highlighted how the installation of reliable internet access, supported by community initiatives, allowed him to meet academic deadlines even when off-campus. The involvement of community leaders in program initiatives was observed to enhance program execution and build community trust, demonstrating the mutual benefits derived by individual youth participants and their communities when each committed to engagement. This, in turn, led to the achievement of UN SDG nine, establishing access to digital infrastructure, which ultimately benefitted the entire community.

PYD literature further recognises an enabling environment as pivotal for enhancing program effectiveness (Chowa et al., 2023). Chowa et al. (2023) argue that an encouraging environment includes social, structural, and physical elements that support youth while promoting their interpersonal and emotional competencies. This perspective resonates with our findings, as staff members from the organisations studied emphasised that robust support systems are essential for effectively addressing youth-centric issues. Additionally, Nagler et al. (2019) highlight the critical role of safe, accessible spaces in fostering PYD, particularly for vulnerable and marginalised youth (VMY). They argue that such environments provide a nurturing ground for a sense of belonging, acknowledgment of strengths and weaknesses, and a stigma-free atmosphere.

One of the issues that developing countries face is the availability of resources. Youth programs may provide hope, familiarity, connection, and progress in communities affected by poverty and health challenges. Thailand has made excellent progress in improving access to basic education, with a literacy

rate greater than many other Southeast Asian countries. With mandatory schooling lasting nine years, most children obtain a basic education. The National Education Act of 1999 was an important part of Thailand's greater educational reform, emphasising holistic development by encouraging academic knowledge and moral and ethical values. The development of a moral approach to life and problem-solving is in keeping with Thailand's Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP), which espouses principles of moderation, reasonableness and sustainability (Suksatan, S., Tungkunan, P., & Choomnoom, S., 2017).

A study conducted in India supported this, demonstrating that youth programs providing safe spaces and mentorship significantly enhanced VMY's sense of belonging, moral development and the recognition of their positive contributions to the community (Nagler et al., 2019). These initiatives profoundly impacted the attitudes, behaviours, and future aspirations of youth participants, underscoring the effectiveness of well-structured support systems in shaping positive youth outcomes (Nagler et al., 2019).

Further, studies by Gozkan & Wiium (2021) in Turkey explored how social and individual developmental factors influence identity formation and development, highlighting that such factors are linked to different stages of identity formation. These stages range from exploring options without making commitments or committing to an identity without thorough exploration to having a clear intellectual, moral and emotional identity (Gozkan & Wiium, 2021). The findings suggest that supportive environments, with the creation of safe spaces where youth can talk to mentors, test ideas, and engage in robust discussion, can contribute to healthier identity formation. Conversely, lack of support, overthinking, and unresolved exploration can lead to less stable identities (Gozkan & Wiium, 2021). These studies explore various facets of identity development, including 'trying identity options on for size', deep self-reflection, commitment maintenance, and developing strategies to handle overthinking. Understanding these dimensions provides insight into the complexities of identity formation and underscores the challenges individuals face in achieving a stable and coherent sense of self.

This research highlights the substantial role of mentorship in creating safe spaces in PYD. Youth participants consistently identified mentorship as crucial for skill development, guidance, and inspiration. Mentors are seen as essential facilitators who provide direction, serve as positive role models, and help youth navigate new experiences. This aligns with previous research indicating that mentorship is instrumental in developing confidence and competence, particularly in unfamiliar or challenging situations (Nagler et al., 2019).

The findings also underscore the effectiveness of integrating a supportive environment with tailored support. A notable example from this research is a youth participant who excelled in a vocational training setting due to personalised support despite their former challenges in traditional educational environments. Thailand's diverse urban and rural areas and multifaceted communities require unique approaches in each instance. Combining an enabling environment with individualised attention demonstrates a more nuanced strategy for fostering effective youth development, consistent with PYD literature advocating for comprehensive, uniquely tailored support systems (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Gavin et al., 2010).

The discussion highlights those environments characterised by community support, enabling conditions, personalised attention, and safe spaces as fundamental to facilitating PYD. The integration of mentorship can be seen as a key component, further enriching offerings. These insights contribute to the broader PYD literature and offer practical guidance for designing more effective youth support programs. The evidence and narratives presented affirm the necessity for comprehensive, tailored support systems for each participant community to maximise young individuals' potential. This is shown to foster not only their healthy growth and development but also the ability of young people to thrive. Finding support through mentorship promotes personal agency in young people and facilitates their developing ability to engage with and contribute to their communities.

#### **6.4.1. Broader Challenges and PYD Adaptation**

As discussed in Chapter 5, the broader challenges faced by PYD programs and the requirements for their constant adaptation highlight the critical need for ongoing evaluation and improvement to ensure their effectiveness and relevance. This section explores how integrating continuous assessment with practical skills, financial support, and cultural sensitivity can enhance the PYD framework in the Thai context, particularly in addressing the specific challenges that youth encounter. Both staff members and youth participants of the organisations studied emphasised the significance of systematic assessment in monitoring program success. And, that of making essential modifications to better align with both youth and community needs. The findings from this study align with broader research conducted by Lerner et al. (2022), who contend that there is a clear need for enhancing the design and reporting of process evaluations in studies of PYD programs for underprivileged youth, advocating for a greater awareness of the barriers and enablers that impact program delivery (Lerner et al., 2022).

Lerner et al. (2022) established the notion of "goodness of fit," emphasising the need to align individual strengths with contextual resources, such as supportive mentors and opportunities for skill development, to promote the well-being of young people (Lerner et al., 2022). This approach emphasises the need of

adaptable environments that can accommodate the evolving needs of young people. In addition, Lerner et al. emphasise the need to conduct longitudinal research and maintain methodological rigour when assessing PYD (Lerner et al., 2022). This further reinforces the necessity for a complete and context-sensitive approach to review that enables programs to adapt to varying, dynamic factors (Lerner et al., 2022).

Another significant point raised by youth participants was the value of integrating practical life skills with traditional academics. They argued that combining these elements equips them better for real-world challenges, thus aligning with the PYD framework. This perspective is supported by Joy Davidson's Master's thesis on PYD in the Solomon Islands. Davidson's research highlights that health and economic inequities in developing nations can significantly impede youth development. Health disparities, such as malnutrition, inadequate access to healthcare, and economic barriers, including high unemployment rates, limit youth's ability to engage fully in educational and vocational activities (Davidson, 2012). Davidson's findings underscore the necessity of addressing these multifaceted challenges and dynamically adapting them to enhance youth development effectively (Davidson, 2012).

Financial constraints emerged as a major barrier affecting youth's ability to pursue education and personal development. Limited resources, including insufficient funds, staffing, and time, pose substantial obstacles to achieving consistent outcomes and sustaining long-term efforts in PYD programs. This concern is echoed in a 2019 review published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*, which analysed 35 PYD and academic programs in low-and-middle-income countries (LMICs) (Catalano et al., 2019). The review found that while 60% of the programs demonstrated positive effects on behaviours and developmental outcomes, such as reduced substance use and improved employment rates, there is a need for more rigorous long-term evaluations and cross-checking to confirm these benefits, especially in light of the broad range of studies reviewed (Catalano et al., 2019).

As discussed in Chapter 5, Founders of PYD programs face several significant challenges, including resource limitations, the need to address youth's diverse and complex needs, and overcoming cultural and societal barriers. The varied backgrounds of the youth that participated in this study presented both challenges and opportunities, as these differences can be harnessed to build a sense of community and mutual support across a vast landscape of Thai cultural and geographic environments. However, cultural practices in specific communities often present significant barriers to development and integration (Bolotta, 2023). These cultural factors can complicate the implementation of programs designed to address deeply rooted societal issues, making it difficult to achieve desired outcomes. These reflections underscore the need for program-specific, systematic evaluation and ongoing improvement. The consistent feedback from founders, staff, and youth participants from the organisations studied highlights the critical role of continuous oversight in refining interventions. This collective insight

emphasises the importance of adopting an adaptive and responsive approach to program management, one that prioritises feedback and cultural sensitivity to drive meaningful outcomes.

Overall, addressing these challenges requires a self-reflective, in-depth and flexible approach, integrating continuous evaluation, practical skill development, financial support, and cultural relevance. PYD programs *can* be tailored to enhance youth development outcomes in Thailand, but each program must remain responsive to the specific challenges faced by youth in that particular environment, fostering a more inclusive, holistic and effective strategy for youth development.

## **6.5. Conclusion**

This study provides a critical examination of the PYD framework's applicability and workability within Thailand's cultural context, revealing how youth development initiatives can be adapted to meet the unique needs of Thai youth and their communities. Given the limited research on adapting the PYD framework to the Thai context, this study offers valuable insights into tailoring PYD principles to align with Thailand's cultural and societal norms. The findings underscore the fact that while the core elements of PYD—such as fostering competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring—are universally relevant, their implementation in Thailand requires a nuanced, community-specific approach.

Effective adaptation of existing and proposed initiatives should involve integrating traditional values with modern developmental strategies, ensuring that PYD initiatives are not only culturally sensitive but also practically applicable within the Thai context. This research emphasises the importance of community involvement in such forms as mentorship, highlighting that successful PYD adaptation depends on the active participation of local stakeholders, including families, educators, and community leaders. Embedding PYD within the cultural fabric of Thai society in ways suggested by the research and involving consistent, valid review mechanisms and adaptation strategies could lead to more resonant and sustainable outcomes for Thai youth.

### **6.5.1. Limitations**

Despite the contributions of this research, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the small sample size of 20 participants, consisting of five staff members, four founders, and eleven youth from the organisations studied. The interviewees provided a diverse range of perspectives from both urban and rural environments. However, the small sample size may not fully capture the full spectrum of experiences within Thailand's youth population. Additionally, the organisations involved in the study,

while representative of grassroots efforts, may not reflect the practices and challenges of other youth organisations, such as government-run programs or larger NGOs.

The study's cross-sectional design is another limitation, offering a snapshot of the current state of youth development within the selected organisations but not allowing for an assessment of the long-term impacts of these particular PYD initiatives and of PYD programs in general. The lack of longitudinal data limits the ability to evaluate whether the observed changes in youth behavior, skills, and community involvement are sustained over time.

As with all qualitative research, the findings are subject to the researcher's interpretation, introducing an element of subjectivity. Despite rigorous analysis, this subjectivity, particularly in thematic analysis where linking perspectives across different participant groups was prioritised, could influence how the data is understood and applied.

Another potential limitation is social desirability bias, where each participant's responses might have been influenced by their desire to present themselves in a positive light, especially when discussing sensitive topics like cultural norms, gender expectations, and economic challenges. Since the study involved interviewing participants already engaged in youth development programs, their perspectives may inherently lean towards more positive opinions, potentially underrepresenting those with negative experiences.

Language differences also present a challenge, as the study was conducted in Thailand. Despite efforts to ensure accurate translation and interpretation of the interviews, nuances in language and expression may have been 'lost in translation,' potentially affecting the depth and accuracy of the findings.

### **6.5.2. Contribution to Understanding Positive Youth Development in Thailand and Southeast Asia**

This research makes significant contributions to understanding PYD frameworks within the Thai cultural context and offers broader insights relevant to Southeast Asia, where communal values are integral to social life. By examining the experiences of youth, staff, and founders involved in grassroots organisations, the study provides a nuanced perspective on adapting PYD principles to align with the cultural and societal norms prevalent in Thailand and similar regions.

In Thailand, as in many Southeast Asian countries, the concept of self is closely tied to the community (Bolotta, 2023). The study underscores the importance of integrating communal values into PYD

initiatives. The findings reveal that youth development is not viewed in isolation but as part of a broader effort to enhance community well-being. This perspective contrasts with the more individualistic approaches often found in Western contexts, where PYD frameworks were originally developed. By emphasising the collective over the individual, the research highlights the need for PYD programs that prioritise community engagement and support through mechanisms such as mentoring and participation in community forums as integral components of youth development (Lerner, 2005).

Beyond Thailand, the findings have broader implications for Southeast Asia, where many countries share similar communal values and face comparable challenges in youth development. The study suggests that regional youth development strategies should incorporate community involvement and cultural sensitivity as core elements. It also highlights the importance of mentorship, financial support, and the addressing of economic barriers to enhance youth engagement and empowerment. These insights can inform the design and implementation of PYD programs across Southeast Asia, ensuring they resonate with local values and effectively address the unique needs of young people in these communities.

### **6.5.3. Implications for Research and Practice**

The findings underscore the pressing need for further research into the adaptation of PYD within the Thai context, as limited scholarship exists on this topic. There is also a growing interest in longitudinal studies of PYD, particularly in diverse settings outside the United States. Such research is essential for understanding the developmental processes and outcomes over time, especially in LMICs, where youth face unique and varied challenges.

Improving the design and reporting of process evaluations of PYD programs, particularly for disadvantaged young people, is necessary. Future studies should consider employing more mixed-method designs, providing detailed information on staff training and founder motivations, and clarifying the authors' philosophical standpoints. In addition, interviewing youth participants and family or community members before they entered a PYD program would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the effects of such programs on the participants and their communities. This approach would enable a more comprehensive understanding of how PYD programs are delivered and the extent to which they achieve their intended outcomes.

By integrating systematic evaluation with a strengths-based, adaptive framework, PYD initiatives are well-positioned to effectively support youth in realising their full potential. The intersection of theory

and practice, as highlighted in this research, suggests that ongoing evaluation and adaptation are not only beneficial but necessary for the sustained success of PYD programs.

## 6.6. Summary

This research demonstrates that successfully applying PYD in Thailand requires a deep understanding of local cultural norms, such as respect for elders, gender roles, and community obligations (Bolotta, 2023). These cultural elements significantly underpin how youth perceive their development and their role within the community. This study contributes to the growing recognition that PYD frameworks must be flexible and adaptable to the cultural contexts in which they are applied. This adaptability is particularly crucial in Southeast Asia, where cultural, economic, and educational diversity is vast, and the communal fabric of society plays a dominant role in shaping youth behaviours and expectations.

This study bridges a critical gap in PYD research by offering empirical evidence from a non-Western context, contributing to a more globally inclusive understanding of youth development. It challenges the universality of PYD frameworks and calls for ongoing research into how these frameworks can be adapted to diverse cultural settings. By providing a detailed exploration of PYD in Thailand, the research enriches the broader discourse on youth development in Southeast Asia, advocating for approaches that are both culturally relevant and community-centred and contending that consistent, program-specific review, evaluation and refinement are key to their success. While PYD frameworks hold significant promise for fostering youth engagement, empowerment, and skill development in Thailand, their success depends on the careful consideration of cultural and contextual nuances, active community participation, and the addressing of economic barriers. By continuing to refine and adapt PYD strategies, youth organisations can play a crucial role in supporting the growth and well-being of young people in Thailand and beyond. This research lays the groundwork for future studies and offers practical implications for practitioners seeking to implement PYD frameworks in culturally diverse settings.

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# Appendix A - Interview Questions: Staff & Founders

## Category 1: Understanding PYD in Thailand

Question 1: Do you think your organisational values align with the PYD framework?

Question 2: How does Positive Youth Development (PYD) significantly improve youth engagement and empowerment and inclusion?

## Category 2: Factors and Challenges in PYD Implementation

Question 3: How can PYD be adapted to be culturally relevant and sensitive to the diverse backgrounds of Thai youth?

Question 4: What are the main challenges in your programme when it comes to supporting Thai youth?

Question 5: What roles do cultural and contextual factors play in promoting positive outcomes for Thai youth?

Question 6: How do social and cultural contexts influence the challenges faced by Thai youth, and how does community support address these issues? (Linked with 5)

Question 7: What role can stakeholders, including government agencies, non-profit organizations, and local communities, play in addressing the identified concerns and difficulties for Thai youth?

## Category 3: Impact and Targeted Interventions

Question 8: From your experience, how do you perceive the current state of youth development in Thailand? (= what other NGOs are doing)

Question 9: What collaboration strategies can be employed among various stakeholders to maximize the positive impact for Thai youth?

Question 10: What role can mentorship and role models play in positively influencing Thai youth and their development?

Question 11: How does your NGO consider the diversity of challenges that youth face and how do you plan a program to address those needs?

# Appendix B - Interview Questions: Youth

## Category 1: Understanding PYD in Thailand

### 1. Engagement and Capacity Development

1. How long have you been involved in this organization, and how did you hear about the organization?
2. Do you think your program uses aspects of Positive Youth Development (PYD) in their program? If yes, how so?
3. How has Positive Youth Development (PYD) significantly improved your engagement in your community?

## Category 2: Factors and Challenges in PYD Implementation

### 2. Cultural and Contextual Factors

4. From your perspective, what role do cultural and contextual factors play in promoting positive outcomes for Thai youth? Does culture affect your life?
5. What are the main challenges you face in the program that affect your support and development as a Thai youth?

### 3. Social and Cultural Contexts

6. How do social and cultural contexts influence the difficulties you encounter, and how does community support help you deal with these issues?
7. From your viewpoint, what role can stakeholders, including government agencies, non-profit organizations, and local communities, play in addressing the concerns and difficulties faced by Thai youth like yourself? How can government, NGOs, and the community better support you?

## Category 3: Impact and Targeted Interventions

### 4. Current State of Youth Development

8. Based on your experiences, how do you perceive the current state of youth development in Thailand? How has your life changed since being in the program?

### 5. Designing Targeted Interventions

9. How can the insights you share from your experiences help in designing targeted interventions to support the overall well-being and positive development of Thai youth like yourself? What type of program will benefit you more (or on what other topics)?
10. From your personal experience, how can mentorship and role models positively influence Thai youth and their development? Is having a mentor or role model important to you and why?
11. How can we make sure that interventions consider the diverse needs and challenges faced by youth from different regions and backgrounds in Thailand, including yours? In the current program that you participate, what can be better in the program?

## Appendix C – Letter of Ethics Approval



Dear:

Thank you for submitting a low risk notification for your research/teaching/evaluation.

This email is to acknowledge receipt of the low risk notification and to inform you that the details of your project have been recorded in our database for inclusion in the annual reports to the Health Research Council Ethics Committee (HRCEC) and the Massey University Research Committee (URC).

You may proceed with your research, though it is advisable to provide a couple of weeks before commencing, as all low risk notifications are checked for completeness and clarity by a Research Ethics Advisor. You may be contacted if your application is incomplete and/or further clarification is required.

The low risk notification for this project is valid for a maximum of three years.

Please notify me if situations subsequently occur which cause you to reconsider your initial ethical analysis.

*If a sponsoring organisation, funding authority (e.g., the Health Research Council) or a journal require evidence of ethical approval from a Human Ethics Committee (with an approval number), you need to complete a full Massey University Human Ethics application to be reviewed and approved by one of our Human Ethics Committees. Applications must be submitted and approved prior to the commencement of the research.*

Please note that travel undertaken by students must be approved by the supervisor and the relevant Pro Vice-Chancellor and be in accordance with the Policy and Procedures for Course-Related Student Travel Overseas. In addition, the supervisor must advise the University's Insurance Officer.

*If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you want to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the Research Ethics Office, email [humanethics@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethics@massey.ac.nz).*

Please include the following statement on all public documents (e.g., information sheet, consent form) related to your project:

***This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named above are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.***

***If you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of this research that you want to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Massey University Human Ethics by email: [humanethics@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethics@massey.ac.nz).***

I wish you all the best in your research, teaching or evaluation activities and appreciate your thoughtful consideration of ethics principles and practices.

Ngā mihi nui,

Dr Brian Finch Chair, Human Ethics Chairs' Committee and Director (Research Ethics)

Research Ethics Office, Research and Enterprise  
Massey University, Private Bag 11 222, Palmerston North, 4442, New Zealand T 06 951 6841; 06 951 6840  
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