

Positive Youth Development: The Desert Experience

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Abstract: *The present paper is an exploratory case study of the process of integrating the positive youth development (PYD) perspective in an undergraduate course offering experiences in the eco-cultural context of The Little Rann of Kutch, a mud desert laced with salt pans, where families live in harsh conditions for making salt. As an emerging arena of applied developmental science, PYD focuses on nurturing the potentials of youth through symbiotic relations with the social world leading to positive outcomes for youth. With a view to integrate this perspective in the curriculum, The Department of Human Development & Family Studies restructured an undergraduate course titled Orientation to Rural Life: Placement, which aims to give hands on experience for program planning and implementation in rural context through involved mentoring. Integration of PYD perspective in the course led to inclusion of aspects like lowering the student-mentor ratio, active engagement with the eco-cultural context, encouragement of youth initiatives, developmental life span approach. The outcomes were witnessed in terms of Six Cs - Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, Caring and Contribution towards community, team members and selves.*

Key Words: *positive youth development; youth development programs; youth volunteering; developmental assets; community engagement.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

The present paper is an exploratory case study of the integration of positive youth development perspective in a course titled, 'Orientation to rural life: Placement' in the undergraduate curriculum of Human Development & Family Studies, The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda. The highlight of the process was the Little Rann of Kutch, a mud desert in the state of Gujarat, India where the experience was situated. This desert is known for its salt farming and the sufferings of salt farmers locally called *agariyas*. Salt farming is traditionally done with the salt farmer tending the land with his legs. The salt farmers' legs become so hard that they do not burn on the funeral pyre as salt hardens the legs, which are then separately buried in a grave with salt. The struggle of salt farmer's life is expressed by a student, who visited the place as part of her undergraduate academic requirement for the course titled, 'Orientation to Rural Life: Placement'. She says, "Now I respect salt because I saw salt making process and the *agariyas* (salt farmers) go through lots of difficulties to make salt. For me salt was like a simple ingredient but after this experience, after knowing the process and the kind of hard work put in salt making and the sacrifice of small children for making salt – it made me change my perspective on salt." Signifying the change in perspective of the young student living a comfortable city life within the protective environs of her family, the desert experience was an opportunity for imbibing authentic rootedness and fist hand experience of rural life in desert. The context of desert proved to be a rich basis for structured youth activities facilitating positive development.

2. Applying the Positive Youth Development Perspective in Academics:

The positive youth development perspective is essentially what its name signifies – positive. It creates both hope and confidence for youth development as it advocates nurturing the potential of youth rather than focussing on their insufficiencies. Positive Youth Development (PYD) has provided a framework to view adolescents as agents of life enhancing changes in their selves and surroundings.

Positive youth development is conceptualized as comprising the Five Cs - Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character and Caring (Hamilton, Hamilton & Pittman, 2004). The five Cs are indicators of thriving youth as suggested in qualitative and quantitative analysis of 173 interviews of youth and parents (King et al., 2005).

PYD perspective emphasizes positive relations of the individual with the context relations for a thriving youth (Geldhof, Bowers & Lerner, 2013; Hamilton et al., 2004). When contexts are altered to support the strengths of youth, it encourages cultivation of five Cs (Benson, Scales, Hamilton & Sesma, 2007) resulting in a contributing individual; contribution is therefore the 'sixth C' resulting from the five Cs (Lerner, 2005).

The PYD perspective because of its simplicity and fluidity has diverse applications for research, programming, policy and advocacy for youth. The present study is an exploration in application of the PYD perspective to academics by interweaving the perspective in a field based subject on orientation to rural life in undergraduate curriculum. The objective of the study was to examine how the context of desert and salt farming located in rural areas yield to the thriving of youth.

The mentors sought to integrate academic and community efforts in order to create a positive experience of rural life which is at times perceived as particularly uncomfortable by urban students. Questions like 'is wi fi available in the desert?', 'is it possible to use cell phones there – do we get the towers in range?', 'what kind of food will we get to eat?', 'when will we return back?' are commonly asked as the mentors and students initiate planning for the desert experience. Excited and anxious in anticipation of the experience, the students discover in the end that it was a life changing experience nevertheless.

2.1 Conceptualization of the Process

With a view to integrate this perspective in the curriculum, The Dept of HDFS, Faculty of Family & Community Sciences, The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda restructured a course titled Orientation to Rural Life: Placement. The course provides hands -on experience to program planning and implementation in rural setting through active mentoring of student initiatives.

Since last two years, the program has been reorganized into a formal placement in a community based agency along with mentors (earlier, it was directly organized in a village through local panchayat or school). The process of reorganizing was both formal and informal and has been evolving through learning acquired from each step. The process included the integration of the following aspects:

- Inclusion of the positive youth development perspective
- Immersion in the eco-cultural setting with a life span approach – including children, adolescents, youth, women and men across the developmental life span
- Lowering the student-mentor ratio (from approximately 24:1 to 12:1) – the program now includes 4 mentors compared 2 or 1 earlier
- Student initiated management through enabling work distribution
- Detailed communication and planning with the agency of placement
- Encouragement of student initiatives for collective contribution to the local community and agency
- Placing students in a distinct eco-cultural context like the desert
- Understanding the application of different perspectives like child rights perspective, Gandhian and Gijubhai Badheka's philosophy in the present case.

These aspects were integrated at differential levels of department, mentors and students as indicated in the following figure:

2.2 The Process Flow

A process flow chart was made by the mentors and the students for explaining the steps involved in the entire program cycle of planning, organizing, implementation and evaluation which lasted about seven to eight months in all. The flow chart aided the process in two ways – one, it built in clarity in the program cycle and second, it helped in efficient and effective communication among department, mentors, students and the organization of placement (Gantar). This flow chart is indicated in figure 1.

The desert experience unfolded in the phases of conceptualization and planning, organization and preparations, implementation and evaluation, keeping in view the objectives of the course and philosophy and work of Gantar. Programs were implemented for children in early childhood, middle childhood in desert schools, farm schools

local primary schools. In view of the life span approach, life skills training for adolescent girls and boys w are done both in Gantar premises and in community centres. With women of all age groups, programs on health and social issues were implemented. Street plays on issues like corporal punishment, child rights, right to education were done in for communities in different villages for people young and old. These are indicated in the figure 2.

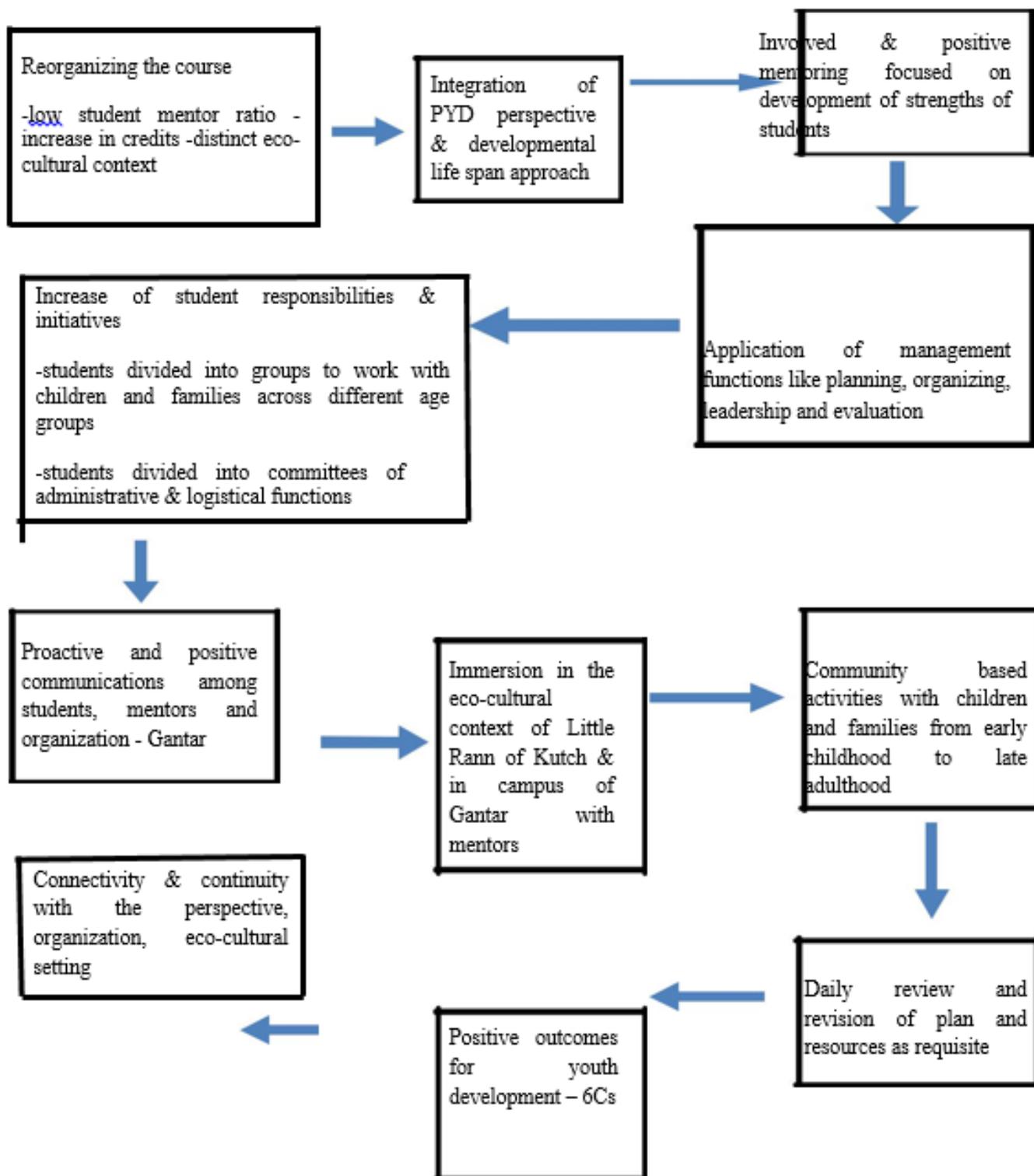
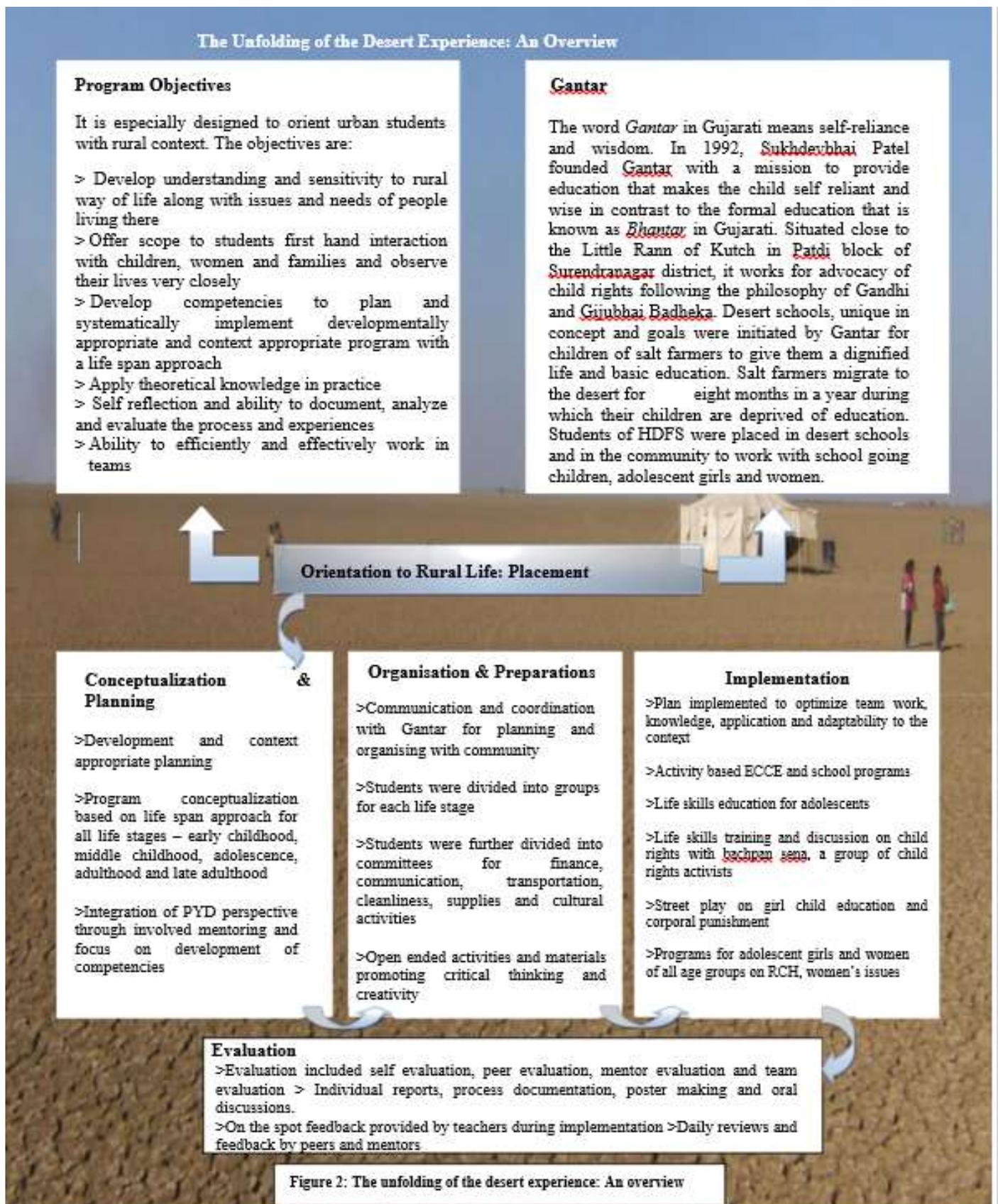


Fig 1: Flow chart depicting the process of integration of positive youth development perspective in the subject of Orientation to rural life: Placement, leading to positive outcomes for youth development and sustained efforts over time



3. METHOD:

Focus group discussions, questionnaire, in-depth interviews and case study were used as methods of studying the desert experience with a PYD perspective. The sample for these methods was as follows:

- Focus group discussions were done with 30 students of academic year 2015-16
- Questionnaires with open ended questions were given to 15 students of academic year 2014-15 and 2013-14. Five students of academic year 2013-14 did not respond to the questionnaires.

- In-depth interviews were conducted with five students of academic year 2014-15

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS:

It has been three consecutive years that students have been undergoing the desert experience and the department at present has decided to continue with the process. In general, as mentors it has been our observation that despite doing rigorous work and living in very difficult conditions students return from the desert looking very refreshed and happy. An attempt has been made in the present paper to analyze student experiences in terms of the overall nature of experience, perceived self transitions and positive outcomes vis-à-vis the 6 Cs. Positive outcomes for youth development have emerged indicated through matrices, pathways and figures.

4.1 Nature of experience

As an experience, the exposure and program and implementation in desert in coordination with Gantar has been a very enriching life experience for the students. While a student calls it, 'Unforgettable, loving learning experience', another says, 'A valuable experience which is applicable to my whole life.' The following figure depicts varied responses of students on the experience.

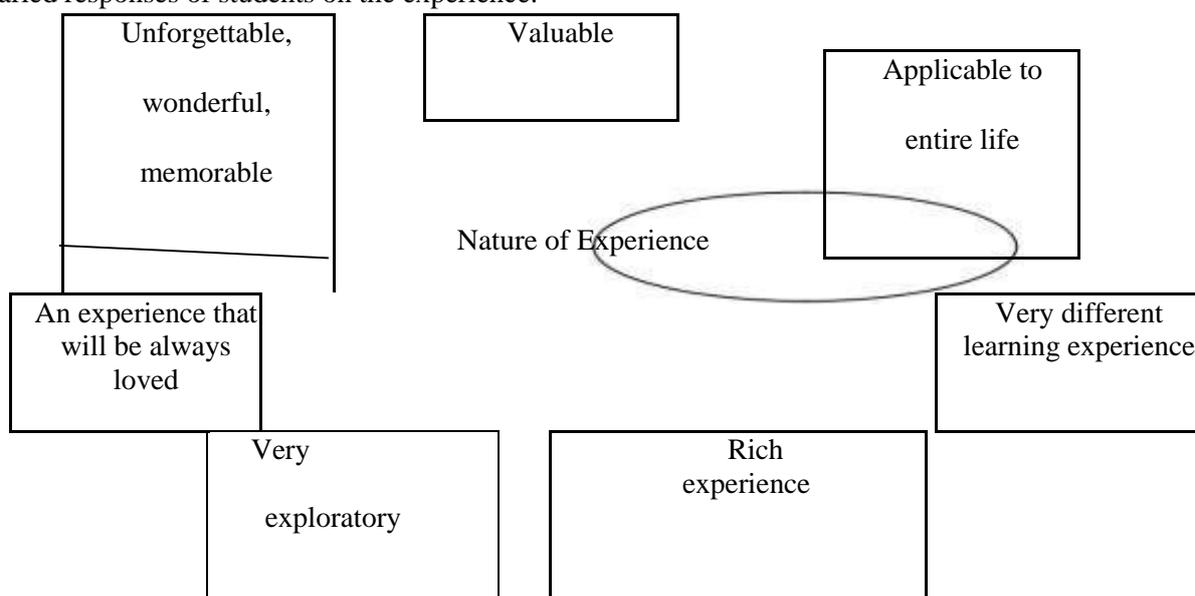


Figure 3: Nature of experience as reported by students

4.2 Attribution of quality experience

Students attributed the enriching quality experience to different people and aspects including the desert, the organization - Gantar, the people living in the desert and in the organization, peers and mentors. The following figure depicts the same (figure 4):

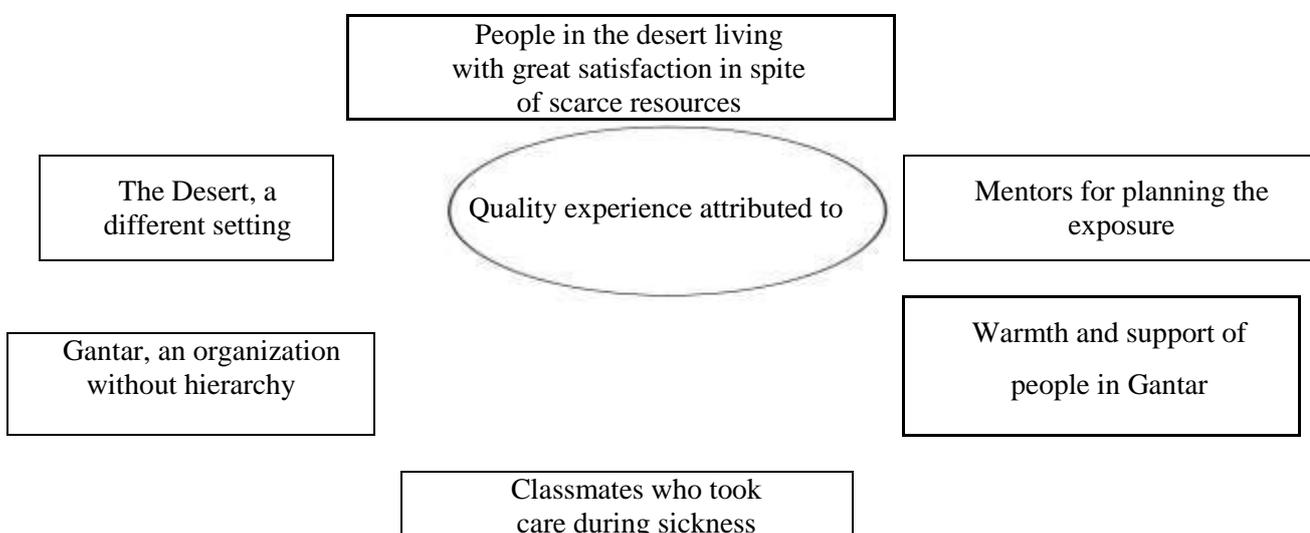


Figure 4: Students attributing the quality of experience to multiple factors

4.3 Perceived self transitions

Most students have perceived a change in their level of self confidence and capability to adapt to a different eco-cultural context. The program process has been instrumental in seeing themselves as individuals who are confident of dealing with their environment efficiently and contributing effectively to themselves and people around them. Some of the self perceptions related to transformation quoted by students are presented in the following matrix (figure 5).

Perceived self transitions (verbatim)

Self confidence

- ‘Self confidence to complete my work appropriately.’
- ‘I developed confidence as I had to deal with each and every problem by myself.’

Flexibility & Adaptation

- ‘Be flexible with people around’
- ‘I have learnt how to behave in a group - we have to compromise and let go of something and also learn how to deal with different kinds of persons.’
- ‘Developed adjustment to food and living arrangements.’

Value of being satisfied

- ‘Have understood the value of being satisfied as I saw that people in the desert live in very scarce resources and still they are happy and satisfied.’

Bonding with peers

- ‘I respect each and every member of my B.Sc. class now.’
- ‘I learnt to care for my classmates even if they were not my friends because they cared for me while I was sick.’
- ‘I felt positive bonding with those classmates who I was not even talking to before.’

Self Awareness

- ‘I got to know that I am an artistic person through all the activities and resource making that we did.’

Sensitivity

- ‘I have become more caring and emotional for human beings.’
- ‘I developed empathy for people around me because of Ishwarbhai (co-ordinator at Gantar) who worked so hard for everyone without the help of anyone.’

Figure 5: Verbatim of students on perceived self transitions

4.4 The Desert Experience: Reflections in the Seven Cs

Competence

Competence refers to an outcome because of an ability to apply knowledge, skills and behaviour to undertake and complete an action or a task. The PYD model outlines social, cognitive, academic, health and vocational competences as crucial for the youth to develop a positive view of self.

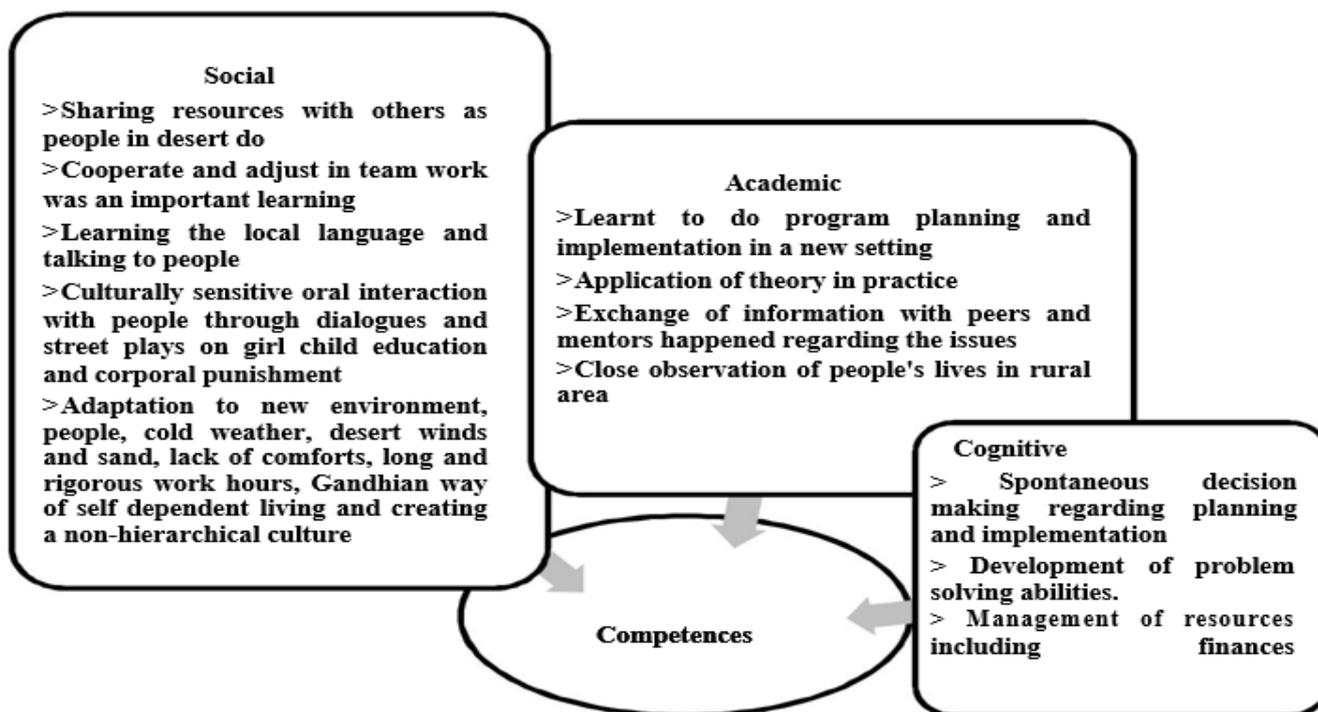


Figure 6: Competences evolved through the desert experience

Despite the academic objectives of the course students felt that they were more enabled in social competences primarily because they were moving out of the comfort and protection of home and family and for many, a first time without any family members. Cooperation, sharing of resources, adjustment with peers, learning the local language, culturally sensitive oral interaction, adaptation to new environment, people, weather, Gandhian way of self dependent living formed the major social competences according to students. Students were highly impressed by the self dependent living as a result of which they were supposed to do their cooking and cleaning and begin their day as early as 5.00 am. Also, they learnt how to treat each other equally, as Gantar has a non-hierarchical organisational culture. Figure 6 provides a list of diverse competencies evolving during the desert experience.

Although, a separate listing of different competences has been done here, a connected co-occurrence among different types of competences was observed. For instance, students learnt to share resources with their peers as they had observed sharing of food and water among people in the desert. There were instances when they had to exchange or even give away the activity resources and learning material to their fellow mates because of sudden change in plans. They were also encouraged to change their groups during the travel to the desert daily. As shown in figure 7, cultivation of sharing (social) lead to spontaneous decision making in change of plans (cognitive) leading to successful program planning and implementation in a new eco-cultural context (academic).

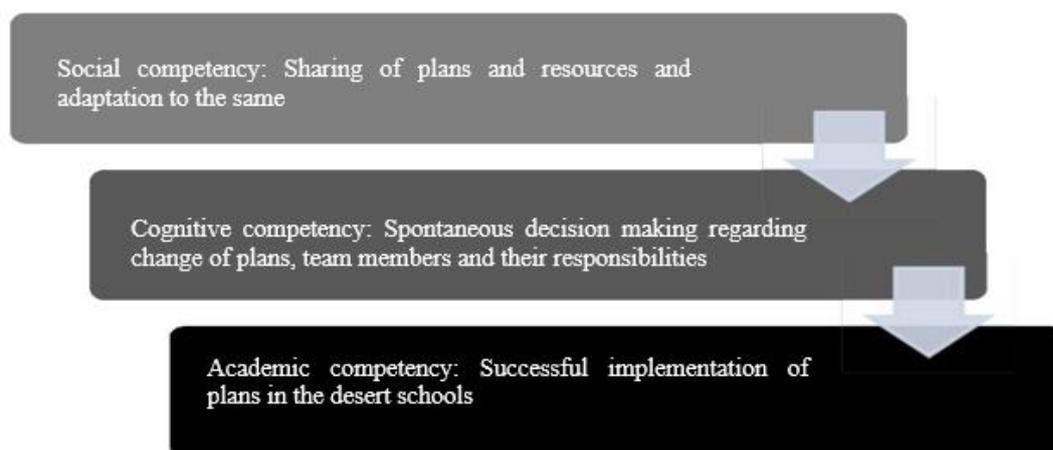


Figure 7: Connected co-occurrence of different types of competences

Vocational competency

It would be interesting to present the case of a student who has been motivated to do her Masters in Human Development and Family Studies as she acquired interest in understanding people and their behaviours and developed the competency of caring for people after rural placement in the Little Rann of Kutch. She is currently in the second semester of Masters. Her career choice is to work for deprived children particularly street children and children in tribal areas. This according to her would be returning back to the community what she has acquired from the children in the desert (see figure 8 for her verbatim).

Prospective Career Choices and Decisions

Advanced studies for understanding people and working for deprived children and people

Student A: “Earlier, I was not very interested in knowing anybody. I was more self absorbed. Now, I am interested in knowing people and understanding their behaviours and that is the reason that I have taken admission in Masters –to know people and understand their lives, their behaviours. My mother says that I care more for people around me after I have come back from the desert. Now, I feel more sympathetic towards street children – *jo mall ke bahar hotein hain*. Earlier, I felt sympathetic towards puppies only. Now, I want to do something for deprived children – especially tribal children and street children. Teaching children in the desert was a unique experience and I want to contribute back to children by teaching them in future.”

Student B: “I will do Masters in Social Work as I have become interested in working for people now. I will also volunteer with an organization doing social work.

Figure 8: Verbatim of students indicating career choices and decisions

The above experience of the student creates a pathway between the desert experience, development of care and sympathy, vocational choice and future vocational aspirations regarding contribution to society, children being her special interest (see figure 9). However, this was only a case in point suggesting that there is potential for integrating vocational interest components in the program.

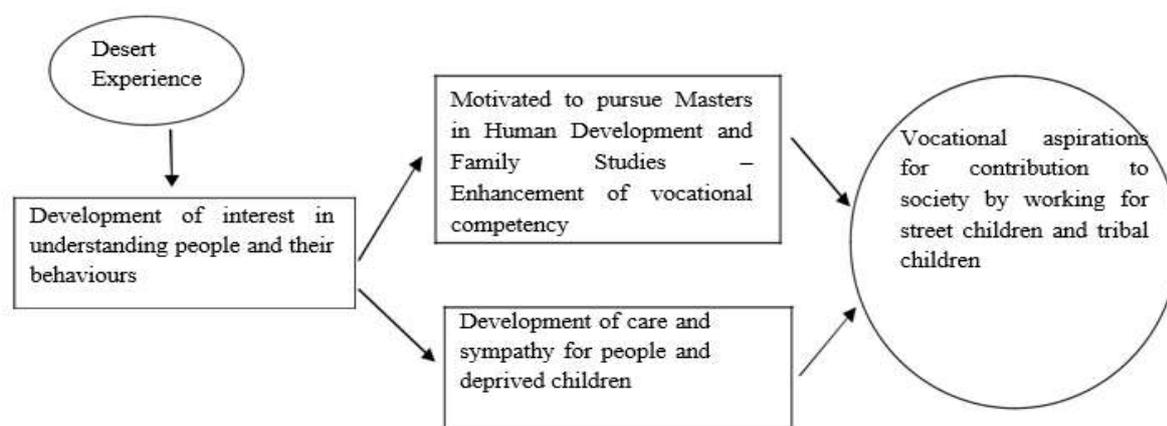


Figure 9: Pathway between the desert experience and vocational aspirations

Confidence

The PYD perspective strives for enhancing confidence of the youth which is reflected in their academics, work, bonding with peers, family and community and contribution to society. All students who participated in the focus group discussions and interviews stated that they perceived an increase in their self efficacy particularly for adapting and working in a different context, working in cooperation, solving problems spontaneously, living on their own and contributing effectively wherever they are placed in future. Enhancement of self efficacy in students was one of the major contributions of the desert experience.

Self efficacy

An individual's confidence regarding his or her capabilities to complete a specific task within a given context is said to be self efficacy. Self-efficacy is defined as an individual's belief (or confidence) about his or her abilities to mobilize motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to successfully execute a specific task within a given context (Bandura, 1997; Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998a, 1998b). Verbatim of self efficacy are listed in figure 10.

Self efficacy/Self confidence

“I am more positive about myself, more confident. I can do anything alone. Do not require support.”

“I have developed self confidence as I had to deal with each and every problem myself.”

“My self confidence has increased that despite illness I can work and others will support me.”

“Living in scarce resources with climatic challenges in the desert, now I feel confident that I can live in scarce resources myself too.”

“I can adapt to changes in environment and on the spot as we had done during implementation.”

“I had no self confidence earlier and had never gone on my own away from home. I would always be with family and friends. Now, I am confident that I can be on my own and go out anywhere I wish to.”

“I have learnt to work in groups. I have learnt how to get work done from others and how do I give my inputs and do the work at the same time.”

“As I was the finance manager, I feel satisfied about managing the finances and that enhanced my confidence and also my managerial skills. My leadership qualities also developed because of this responsibility.”

“Now I feel confident about openly and freely talking to strangers.”

Figure 10: Verbatim of students on self efficacy

Co-variance between confidence and competence

As suggested by the verbatim in figure 10 confidence or self efficacy is related to competencies like financial management, problem solving, leading a team, working in a team, ability to work with scarce resources and environment challenges, enhanced social interaction, getting work done from others, these being social or cognitive competences primarily. Shared co-variance between Confidence and Competence has been noted while gathering evidence for revising the model of PYD (Lerner, Theokas & Jelicic, 2005).

Self worth

While self efficacy is a cognitive appraisal of one's capabilities, self-worth is relatively an affective appraisal of the self that nurtures an overall positive image of the self (Schunk, Pintrich & Meece, 2008). It is difficult to say that the desert experience contributed to the self worth of the students. However, the narrative of a student belonging to a conservative family where daughters are trained to be housewives suggests the difference in her perceived self worth before and after the rural placement. As she says, the experience has empowered her to become an independent woman firmly expressing and exercising her choices (see figure 11).

Self worth: A girl from a conservative family feels empowered to make choices

“I was very shy. Now I don't feel shy. Earlier, I was a follower, now I put my point of view.

My personal relationships have improved a lot in my family after I came back from the desert. Earlier, my family members were very confused about me – what I will do. Now, I am very clear that I want to be self dependent and I will be so. My family has realized that I will not take any gender discrimination among me and my brother.

My family's perception regarding me has changed. *Pahle jab rishtey aate thein toh* my father would say *ki meri beti housewife banegi*. My father would say so. Now, my father says that she will be earning herself and be self dependent, so I do not want a match for my daughter who does not give freedom to her – even if he is financially very sound.

Earlier, I had no point of view and was also ready to become housewife. But now I want to do something.”

Figure 11: Verbatim of students on self worth after the desert experience

Connection

The desert provided a secure environment for both formal and informal gathering with peers, children and adults that helped the students to safely express themselves, trust and bond with (see figure 12). Obviously, connection with the peers topped the list in terms of quality and lasting bonding. Salt farming and visiting the famous wild ass sanctuary, where they had the rare opportunity to see the *ghudkhar* (Indian wild ass) and *nilgai* (blue bull) provided opportunities for connection with the environment.

Connection with peers		
<p>“We have formed lifelong friendships.”</p> <p>“Earlier, our class was divided in groups. There was lot of <i>groupism</i>. Earlier, there were more clashes amongst us. Now we are unified T.Y. HDFS class.”</p> <p>“We used to wake up whole night and take care of classmates who were unwell even if she was not a close friend.”</p> <p>“Since two years, we are together but we did not have actual bond with each other. But the rural experience filled that gap between us. And even now when I meet any of my classmates, I feel like they all are my best friends.”</p>		
Connection with the organization	Connection with mentors	Connection with children in the desert
<p>“We used to call our rooms in Gantar as ‘<i>ghar</i>’. While returning from the desert we would say <i>ghar jaana hai</i>.”</p> <p>“Felt that we were living in Gantar since many years.”</p> <p>“We did not want to come back from Gantar.”</p> <p>I felt it was a second home for me.</p>	<p>“I felt a positive bond with the teachers.”</p> <p>“I shared my feelings with my teachers and felt connected to them.”</p> <p>“Teachers expressing confidence in us that we can do and we will enjoy the process helped in our performance.”</p>	<p>“We became very friendly with children in the desert. They became very attached to us.”</p> <p>“We were crying and the children were also crying when we parted. We did not want to leave.”</p>

Figure 12: Connection as a positive outcome of desert experience

Character

According to PYD model, youth development programs help to promote respect for societal and cultural norms, possession of standards for correct behaviours, a sense of right and wrong and integrity. This outcome was partially visible in the desert experience. Students for instance have reported change in temperament and change behaviour with others, recognising the difference between appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. A student says, “My short temper has reduced. Now, I do not become angry if my choice or opinion is not executed. Now, I respect children and call them *aap*. I have learnt that if you give respect you get respect.”

Prominently visible was appropriate behaviour in the group or team. Says another student, “Yes, I learnt to behave in the right way. So, if I have to work in a group, I have to compromise and let go of some things.”

In terms of learning the desired values, primary response of students has been to learn to be satisfied and live happily despite scarce resources and harsh conditions. As a student says, “We saw that they were living with great satisfaction in limited resources. Now, whenever I am frustrated, I try to become positive towards difficulties and adversities and try to feel happy and satisfied as they were.” Another student says that for her this experience proved to be a life changing perspective in terms of living a happy and satisfied life and being flexible with food and living habits.

Care

Care is one of the six Cs that involves a feeling of sympathy and empathy for others. Quoting a student, who had never moved out of her home on her own, ‘I have observed people living in difficult conditions in the desert. Now, I respond with empathy as I can understand their issues and concerns and so I have learnt to behave accordingly with family members and people around me. Now, I listen carefully to problems of family members and try to sort the same through my suggestions. Earlier, I never participated in any family problems.’

It is also an example of enhanced empathy leading to family contribution as is conceptualized in the PYD perspective. A pathway to family contribution emerges as a result of self transition and enhanced competences and sense of empathy for others as shown in figure 13.

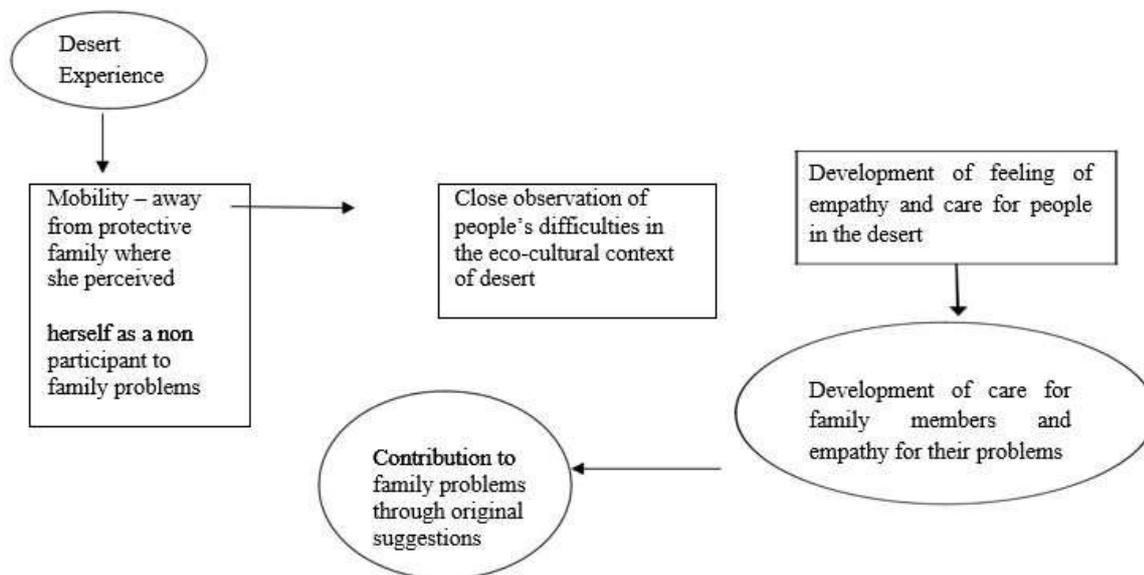


Figure 13: Pathway to active family participation through enhanced care for family problems

Caring for others has emerged in terms of expression of sympathy for the difficult conditions in which children, women and men living in the desert as reflected in the verbatim of students (see figure 14).

Care towards people in desert

“Now, I have become more emotional for other human beings.”

“I feel sympathy for people living in the desert and doing salt farming. They live a very difficult life.”

“I worked with adolescent girls. They were very talented in handicrafts and dancing. But I feel bad for them that they do not have opportunity to showcase their talent.”

“I felt sad with the fact that women do not take care of themselves. They ignored their bodily needs and developed tolerance for pain.”

“Women there were given *chappals*, sweaters by some organization, but they did not wear them. They were very rough and tough with their bodies. I felt bad for them.”

“Felt bad that children were walking long distances without *chappals* in desert from home to school. We would never be able to do that.”

“Feel sad that they do not get enough opportunities. They should be given enough inputs - like women are not aware about the government schemes and programs that are available for them.”

Figure 14: Care as a positive outcome of desert experience

Contribution

In the PYD model, contribution is the outcome of the five Cs. However, since the desert experience was of a short duration, contribution was integrated into the plan in terms of training teachers of Gantar, sharing plans and activity resources with government teachers and life skills training of child rights activists. With a view of sustainability of knowledge resources, the teachers of Gantar were trained in activity based approach for holistic early child development. Training of teachers by students was an empowering experience for the students as it was a role reversal for them. In addition, the students shared their plans and resources with government teachers in desert schools as contribution to the state school system. The government teachers expressed that they will continue implementation of the plans and use the resources shared with them by the students. In addition, students also gave life skills training to *Bachpan Sena*, a group of child rights activists mentored by Gantar. These child rights activists are instrumental in promoting enrolment of children in schools, preventing corporal punishment in schools and stopping child marriages through intervening in the same.

5. CONCLUSION:

The case study of desert experience was an initiative of the department to provide key inputs to youth through consistent mentoring, safe and stimulating places and opportunities for exploring, developing skills, behaviours and competencies across cognitive, social, emotional, behavioural and academic domains. It is a reaffirmation of the outcome orientation of the PYD perspective. The present case study indicates that the PYD perspective can be integrated in curriculum and strengthen academic outcomes.

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