Embracing a Strength-Based Perspective and Practice in Education

Resiliency Initiatives

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"Their Potential - Our Passion"

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> "If schools are able to teach young people to have a critical mind and a socially oriented attitude, they will have done all that is necessary. Students will then become equipped with those qualities which are prerequisite for citizens living in a healthy democratic society."
>
> — Albert Einstein

Introduction

Interest in strength-based practice as a means to enhance the positive developmental pathways of children and youth has increased significantly as practitioners, educators, researchers and community care providers shift their attention from the prevention of specific problems to a more holistic focus on the positive aspects of youth development. Interventions have moved increasingly toward creating a coordinated sequence of positive experiences and providing key developmental supports and opportunities. Rather than the traditional perspective of engaging a person with a problem orientation and risk focus, a strength-based approach seeks to understand and develop the strengths and capabilities that can transform the lives of people in positive ways (Alvord & Grados, 2005; Barton, 2005; Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998).

Although every adult who interacts with a youth educates in some way, it is in the school setting that teachers, support staff and collaborating community members have a profound opportunity to interact with students in ways that will facilitate academic achievement and healthy social development in a safe, caring and supportive learning environment.

As Cummins (1996) has insightfully stated, "Human relationships are the heart of schooling. The interactions that take place between students and teachers and among students are more central to student success than any method of teaching literacy, or science, or math. When powerful relationships are established between teachers and students, these relationships frequently can transcend the economic and social disadvantages that afflict communities and schools alike."

As a beginning step, this resource was developed by Resiliency Initiatives to support those wishing to explore what it might look like to be working from an underlying set of values, principles and philosophy of strength-based practice and to develop a better understanding of what the potential role of transformational engagement of students "at potential" might be in the school-based setting.
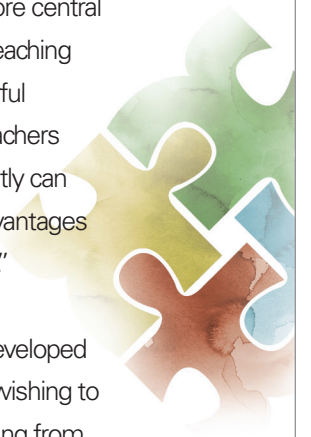
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"If we ask people to look for deficits, they will usually find them, and their view of the situation will be colored by this. If we ask people to look for successes, they will usually find it, and their view of the situation will be colored by this".
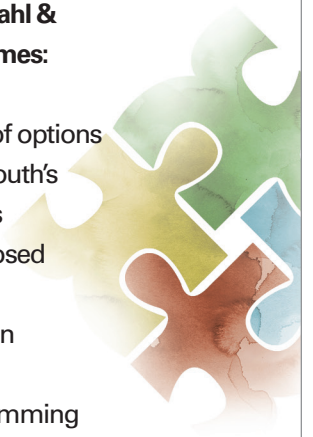
Kral, 1989

What is a Strength-Based Approach?

A strength-based approach is a positive psychology perspective that emphasizes the strengths, capabilities and resources of a youth. Those who embrace a strength-based perspective hold the belief that all youth and their families have strengths, resources and the ability to recover from adversity. This perspective replaces an emphasis on problems, vulnerabilities, and deficits. Strength-based approaches are developmental and process-oriented. It identifies and reveals a young person's internal strengths and resources as they emerge in response to specific life challenges. A strength-based paradigm uses a different language (see appendix A and B) to describe a person's difficulties and struggles. It allows one to see opportunities, hope and solutions rather than just problems and hopelessness.

It is important to understand the strength-based approach is not about denying that youth do experience problems and challenges and that these issues do need to be addressed. But, when the problem becomes the starting point with an emphasis on what a young person lacks, a dependency is created on the helping profession with lowered positive expectations and blocked opportunities for change.

This dependency is disempowering and often results in the following (Herman-Stahl & Petersen, 1996; Sharry, 2004) outcomes:

- Labeling and therefore, limiting of options
- Obscuring the recognition of a youth's unique capabilities and strengths
- Focusing on the "can'ts" as opposed to the "cans"
- Ignoring potential growth that can result from adversity
- Professionals prescribing programming rather than youth identifying their own solutions
- Professionals looking for patterns, such as broken homes, dysfunctional neighborhoods, and poverty, to explain difficulties
- Interventions lacking credibility to clearly show cause versus effect

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Principles of Strength-Based Practice

The strengths approach as a philosophy of practice draws one away from an emphasis on procedures, techniques and knowledge as the keys to change.

Instead, it reminds us that every youth holds the key to his or her own transformation and meaningful change process.

The real challenge is whether educators are willing to fully embrace this way of approaching or working with students. If so, then the change needs to start with the educators, not with the students. It means being part of preparing students to be taught, not just teaching when students are presenting as willing to be taught. Embracing a strength-based approach involves a different way of thinking about students and of interpreting their patterns of coping with life challenges. With a strength-based mindset, one engages and interacts in ways that invites a curious exploration of "what can be" based upon a clear set of values and attitudes.
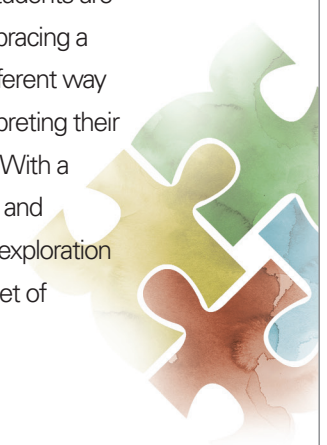
"Everything a school does teaches values including the way teachers and other adults treat students, the way the principal treats teachers, the way the school treats parents, and the way students are allowed to treat school staff and each other."

— Thomas Lickona, 1991

Principles of the Strength-Based Practice

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The following principles that serve as the foundation for guiding and implementing strength-based practice.

(O'Connell, 2006; Rapp & Goscha, 2006; McCashen, 2005):

1 An absolute belief that every student has potential. It is their unique strengths and capabilities that will determine their evolving story as well as define who they are - not what they're not (not, I will believe when I see – rather, I believe and I will see).

2 What we focus on becomes a student's reality. Focus on what a student can do as the starting point, not what they cannot. See challenges as opportunities to explore, not something to avoid. Start with small success and build upon them to create a foundation of hope and optimism.

3 Be mindful that the language we use creates a reality – both for the educators and the students (e.g., Saying – "It looks like you tried doing this exercise another way let's see how it worked for you."; As opposed to saying – "Did you not hear what I told the other students?").

4 Belief that change is inevitable and all students can and will be successful. All students have the urge to succeed, to explore the world around them and to contribute to others and their communities.

5 Positive change occurs in the context of authentic relationships. Students need to know that school staff care and will be there unconditionally for them.

6 What a student thinks about themselves and their reality is primary – it is their story. Therefore, educators must value and start the change process with what is important to the student. It's the student's story that's important, not the expert.

7 Students have more confidence and comfort to journey to the future (or to the unknown) when they are invited to start with what they already know.

8 Capacity building is a process and a goal. Effective and sustainable change is a dynamic process one supports in cumulative ways that leads the youth to write the next chapters of their story in meaningful ways.

9 It is important to value differences and the essential need to collaborate. Transformational change is a collaborative, inclusive and participatory process – "It takes a village to raise a child."

Implications of Strength-Based Practice in Education

A shift to the strength-based paradigm requires careful attention by educators to system change processes, curriculum and instructional practice, student rapport and evaluation, and appropriate research and best practices.

The following areas need consideration:

1 The role of a strength-based school culture

Developing and sustaining a strength-based approach in a school requires the creation of a strength-based culture. This requires commitment and leadership that reflects and models its principles. It is about having a strength-based way of thinking, describing and practicing that is consistent and purposefully supported by all staff and supporting community volunteers (McCashen, 2005; O'Connell, 2006).

A strength-based school culture embraces the following:

• Understands that a strength-based approach is a philosophy based on values and guiding principles for working with all students to bring about change.

• Sees engaging students in relational ways that demonstrate positive attitudes about their dignity, capacities, rights, uniqueness and commonalities.

• Creates conditions and unique opportunities that enable teachers and students to identify, value and draw upon their strengths and capacity in ways that create meaningful and sustainable progression towards change and goals.

• Provides and mobilizes resources in ways that complements a student's existing strengths and resources as opposed to compensating for perceived deficits. It is a holistic approach of combining excellent instruction with supporting the student's well-being.

• Acknowledges and addresses power imbalances between students and adults (e.g., Not – "I'm the teacher and your role is to respect me and learn from me."; Rather – "Being at school is an opportunity for us to learn and I'm looking forward to getting to know you in a way that I can make learning meaningful and a positive experience for you.").

• Seeks to identify and address social, personal, cultural and structural constraints to a student's desired goals, growth and self-determination.

A strength-based culture is one where school leadership, staff, families, community and volunteers are supported and invited into open and honest communication. Expectations about all aspects of work, performance, attitudes and behaviours are clear as well as one's rights and responsibilities. There is a shared vision and responsibility for achieving that vision. Success is celebrated and good practice acknowledged.

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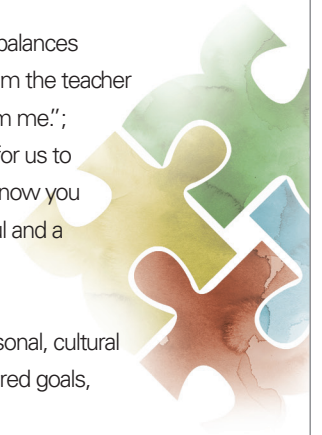
2 The role of a holistic view of students and school success

In an era when school systems are feeling overwhelmed by the problems and challenges facing children and youth, educators are beginning to recognize that cognition and affect are interrelated processes and have a significant impact on one another. There is a growing acknowledgement that academic achievement and well-being of students are the two most important goals of public education. The major contributors to each of these outcome goals are excellent instructional practices and positive in-school and out of school environments that are relational and contextually strength-based (Masten & Coatsworth,1998).

Children and youth can and will respond to the realistic challenges and expectations for academic success when school instructors and environments present as believing in their potential for great things and focus on supporting them to explore, understand and experience their strengths and capacities through supportive relationships, student focused interactions, differential learning environments and strength-based instructional practices. Although academic excellence will always be an important focus and mandate of schools, its success as an outcome is dependent on the constructive and healthy social development of the students (Walsh & Park-Taylor, 2005).

Schools play an important role in nurturing that capacity of well-being in the students because of the inevitable and essential relational support and mentoring influence all school staff have in the lives of students. It has been said that parents may be the primary influence in a child's life, but school staff are the second parent in a child's life and for some children, the only parental influence.

See Appendix C for a list of activities that school professionals can do to support building the social capacity of students.

3 The role of supporting the educator

If we are going to ask teachers to practice from a strengths perspective, the school system needs to support teachers in developing a personal value system that reflects a "cup half full" and resources at work that nurture and solidify that value system.

The characteristics and beliefs of strength-based teachers can be amplified when they are supported by colleagues and administrative staff in the following ways (Benard, 1998; McCashen, 2005):

a.) Provide opportunities for school staff to reflect on and discuss their personal beliefs about resilience and strength-based principles: What does it mean in our classrooms and schools if all kids are resilient and at potential? Answering this question as an individual and then coming to a consensus on the answer as a team is the first step towards creating classrooms or schools that tap into its students' strengths and capacities.
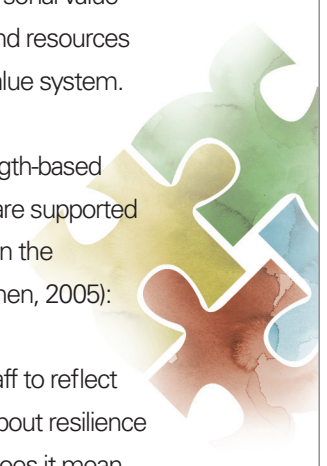
b.) Form a strength-based practice study group: Provide opportunity and resources to read up on strength-based practices, the role of positive youth development and resilience. Share stories of individuals who successfully overcame the odds. Who was the person in our lives that made the difference and what was it about that relationship that made the difference? Polakow (1995) stated that "It is important to read about struggles that lead to empowerment and to successful advocacy, for resilient voices are critical to hear within the at-risk wasteland."
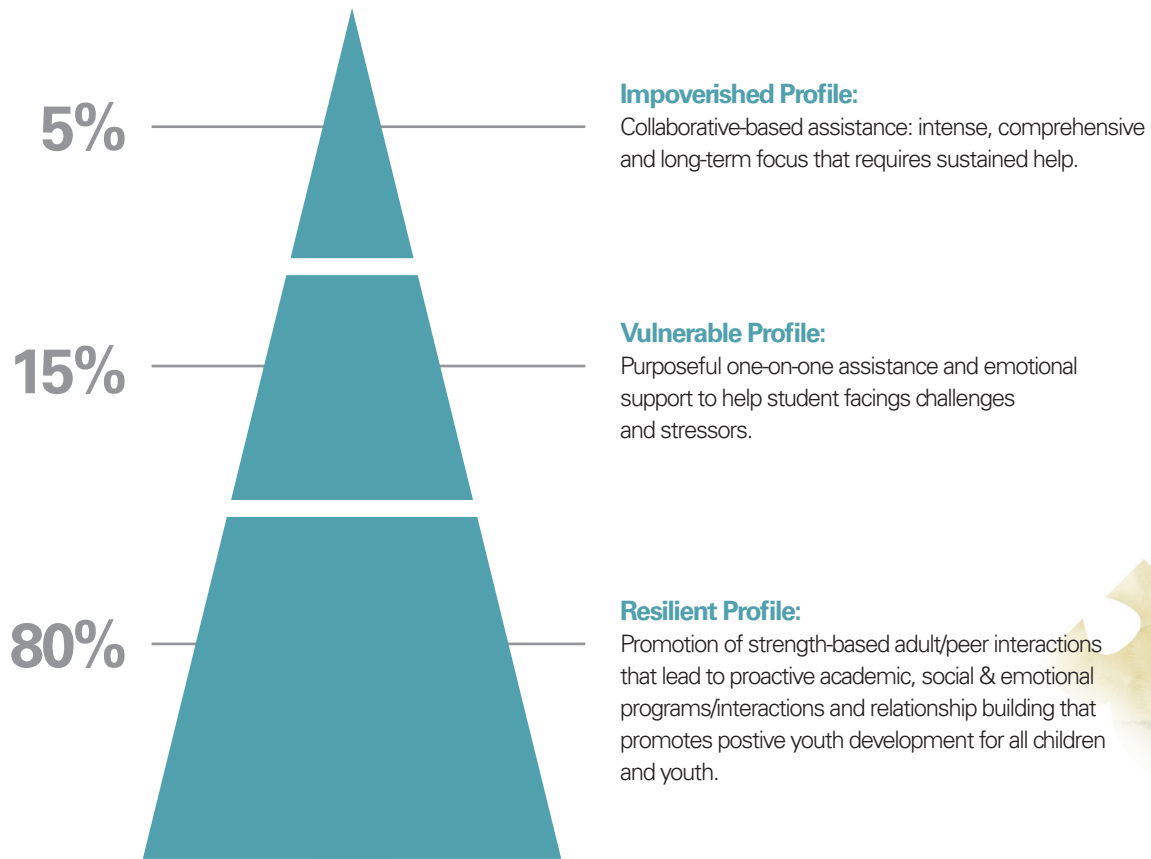
c.) Focus on the school climate: Schools and classrooms that have strength-based cultures and capacity building experiences are often described as being like "family", "a home", "a community I belonged to." Creating a safe haven is just as important for the teachers as it is for the students. It requires a collective focus on working from strengths tied to passion. It is about being inclusive, respectful, encouraging, honest, socially just and supportive. – based upon the relationships that evolve professionally and personally.

d.) Foster school-community collaboration to coordinate needed services for students and families: If one is to be strength-based, the needs of the whole student will be considered and will often require the support of school, family and community in collaborative ways. The supports may include professionals, organizations, information, knowledge, material resources and decision-making resources. In a strengths approach, not only are the types of resources important, but how they are offered and mobilized to complement the youth's strengths and goals is just as important. This is different from attempts to make up the difference of perceived deficits in a person. If external resources and supports are not offered in the context of what is meaningful and building upon the student's existing strengths and resources, it can undermine the student's ability to learn and be self-determining. It can send messages such as: "You have no strengths that are relevant" or "You cannot cope or change your life" or "You need our expertise." A strength's perspective points out that the starting point is "what's right with people" and external resources should be added when required and in ways that are purposeful and complementary to a person's strengths and goals.
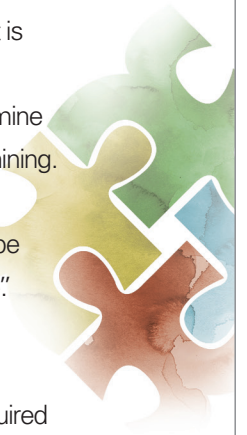
A student's strengths and capabilities are supported as necessary by resources in their natural and school networks.

5%

Impoverished Profile:
Collaborative-based assistance: intense, comprehensive and long-term focus that requires sustained help.

15%

Vulnerable Profile:
Purposeful one-on-one assistance and emotional support to help student facings challenges and stressors.

80%

Resilient Profile:
Promotion of strength-based adult/peer interactions that lead to proactive academic, social & emotional programs/interactions and relationship building that promotes postive youth development for all children and youth.

e.) Building Staff Capacity: Nurturing and sustaining a belief in a strengths perspective is not only the critical task of teachers; it should be a primary focus of the school administration. Teachers need the same concepts and resources as their students: caring relationships with colleagues; positive beliefs, expectations, and trust on the part of administration; and ongoing opportunities to reflect, engage in dialogue, and make decisions together. It is critical that the school culture needs to be supportive of creative teachers that are attempting to respond to the story of the students, opportunities for further training, consistent times for staff to share requests for support and to share successes to be learned from and finally, opportunities to be mentored – create mentoring relationships between teachers.
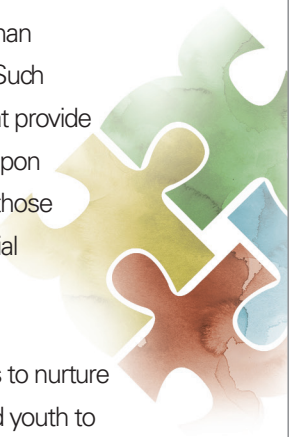
4 The role of positive youth development

"A school can create a coherent environment, a climate more potent than any single influence … so potent that for at least six hours a day it can override almost everything else in the lives of children."

It is in the school setting that teachers, support staff and collaborating community members have a profound opportunity to interact with students in ways that will facilitate academic achievement and healthy social development in a safe, caring and supportive learning environment. However, the idea of promoting strength-based practice in the educational context can be challenging in light of the traditional emphasis on curriculum based instruction in the classroom and the intervention focus on what students may be lacking in order to enhance academic success.

Following the premise that "problem-free is not fully prepared," positive youth development refers to the ecological, capacity building or strength-based approaches that promote healthy youth development through supportive community environments and connections. Positive youth development models tend to embrace a broad set of personal and contextual characteristics for all youth without identifying youth in need or specifying how a particular strength will mitigate risk. This strength-based perspective embraces approaches that focus on ways for youth to build relationships with caring adults within community through engagement in challenging activities in which they are active participants rather than solely recipients of services or supports. Such methods include structured programs that provide opportunities to explore, apply and build upon their strengths and capacities, as well as those support resources in their immediate social environment and communities.

The goal of positive youth development is to nurture and enhance the potential for children and youth to be resilient (See Appendix D) – to effectively cope with, or adapt to, stress and challenging life situations that prepare them for future success in challenges that lie ahead. From this perspective, successful development is viewed not as the absence of risk behaviour but as the presence of positive attributes than enable youth to reach their full potential as productive and engaged adults. Positive youth development approaches typically encompass a broad set of personal and contextual attributes for all youth, without identifying youth most in need or specifying whether and how specific youth strengths can mitigate risk.

Positive youth development model embraces the following guidelines:

1.) Emphasis on positive outcome: The approach highlights positive, healthy outcomes (as opposed to negative) like competence (academic, social, vocational skills), self-confidence, connectedness (healthy relationship to family, friends and community), character (integrity, moral commitment), caring and compassion. It is proposed that if youth experience success, they would prefer the benefits of success to the natural consequences of non-constructive coping.

2.) Youth voice: Youth need to be active participants in any youth development initiative. By youth being equal partners in the process, it presents as a challenge to many community care programs and invites them to rethink how they have engaged in planning and implementing the services they offer.

3.) Strategies aim to involve all youth: The assumption in creating supportive and enriching environments for all youth is that it will lead to the desired positive outcomes as well as reduced negative outcomes. However, it is generally agreed upon that there is a need to blend universal approaches with specific approaches targeting youth facing extra challenges.

4.) Long-term involvement: Positive youth development assumes long-term commitment since activities and supportive relationships need time to create sustainable effectiveness. We need a continued influence throughout the developmental transitions towards adulthood.

5.) Community involvement: Positive youth development stresses the importance to engage the larger social environment that influences how young people grow up and develop – it "takes a village to raise a child."

6.) Emphasis on collaboration: Effective support and prevention requires people and resources from various agencies and community groups working together. Each partner or member brings a strength/capacity that when matched with other resources, becomes significantly more effective in ways otherwise not possible.

5 The role of partnering with community – "It takes a village".

"In every child who is born, under no matter what circumstances, and no matter what parents, the potentiality of the human race is born again."

Agee and Evans, 1960

Essential to success will be the collaboration between different community care providers embracing the same philosophy of a strength-based approach and development of staff skill sets that enable effective engagement, collaboration, facilitating and mentoring of complex youth and their families. Community agencies and schools will require more of a youth-centered and collaborative template that allows for targeting of interventions reflecting relationship and capacity building as well as strengthening key processes for resilience that are meaningful to the intended youth and the community they live in. There needs to be a commitment from all youth agencies to work as co-partners that is inclusive of local schools, parents and other significant community supports to develop informed and evolving effective practice models of nurturing resiliency for all youth and their families. In doing this, youth and their families become more resourceful in dealing with crises, weathering persistent stresses, and meeting future challenges as opposed to developing dependence on the system (Taylor, LoSciuto, & Porcellini, 2005).

A Strength-based collaborative approach in a school lends to the following:

- Seeks to understand the crucial variables contributing to youth resilience and well-functioning families/communities
- Provides a common language and preventative philosophy
- Sees social capacity building and resilience as a common goal that provides a conceptual map to guide prevention and evaluation efforts
- Intervention strategies are youth driven and relationship focused – the story of the youth determines the resources to be introduced and drawn upon
- Engages all youth and their families with respect and compassion
- Perceives capacity building as a dynamic process that evolves over a lifetime
- Affirms the reparative potential in youth and seeks to enhance strengths as opposed to deficits
- Promotes successful change through connecting a youth's strengths and aspirations

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A good resource on exploring the role of connectedness in schools is an article found at "Centre for Disease Control and Prevention." School connectedness: Strategies for increasing protective factors among youth. Atlanta, GA: U.S. department of Health and Human Services; 2009).

No matter the context that mentoring occurs in, it has the undeniable potential to bring about positive change for many children and youth. Like adults, children and youth are social beings, who live their lives in the context of their relationship with others. The goal of mentoring is to connect to and engage children and youth, forming a positive relationship that is based on empowerment, altruism and mutuality – laying the essential basis for the child or youth to move towards ever more positive outcomes and competencies in life.

As teachers and other educators reflect on the atmospheres they create in their schools and classrooms, the following questions can be asked and discussed among trusted colleagues (Thomsen, 2002).

1.) Do I (We As A School) Provide Care and Support? Do I communicate in words and actions that I truly care about, respect, and support my students? Research clearly indicates that students will do almost anything (even those odd requests like adding fractions - Benard, 1991) who feel cared for and believe they are liked by their teacher.

2.) Do I (We As A School) Set and Communicate High Expectations? Do I truly believe that all students can succeed and that I provide the necessary support for that to happen? Do I address learning styles and different intelligences in my teaching? Is there an opportunity for students to demonstrate what they are good at? Do I gladly make accommodations for different styles and personalities?

3.) Do I (We As A School) Provide Opportunities for Meaningful Participation? What opportunities do I create for students to contribute to the constructive learning environment of the classroom or school context? What roles and responsibilities can students assume? Could they take turns teaching each other or support tutoring younger students?

4.) Do I (We As A School) Increase Pro-social Bonding? How can I promote pro-social bonding? Do I use cooperative learning strategies? Do I connect students in ways that help them get to know one another? Do I give respect and expect it from others?

5.) Do I (We As A School) Set Clear, Consistent Boundaries? Do we, as a class or school community, develop clear rules and expectations? Are there logical consequences and are they expressed consistently and fairly? Are all teachers and staff on the same page with the expectations?

6.) Do I (We As A School) Teach Life Skills? Am I teaching life skills that help students make decisions or resolve conflicts? Do my students get to practice making decisions? Can they choose from a variety of topics in projects we are engaging them in? Are there options for them to demonstrate their knowledge? Do they get opportunities to work as a team member? Do I model courtesy and politeness and expect it from my students?
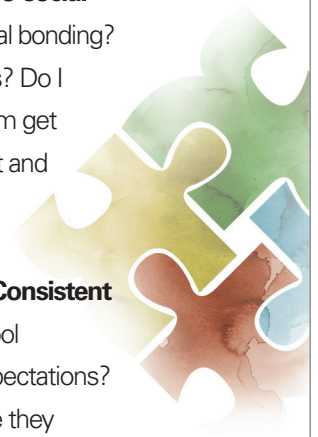
Conclusion

The strength-based approach is not just a model for practice. It is an approach to practice based upon a philosophy and depends on values and attitudes. It is the strength-based values and attitudes that are the primary drivers of the intervention process and outcomes - not skills and knowledge. The strengths approach has a contagious quality and it intuitively makes deep sense to those who reflect a "cup half full" attitude in life.

It is a powerful and profound philosophy for practice that has the power to transform and build the lives of those being cared for and those facilitating the care process. For many, it is not only a philosophy of practice but also a philosophy for life, because it is based upon attitudes and values reflecting a deep respect for the worth and value of others – their intrinsic worth, potential and human rights.

"We must look on our children in need not as problems but as individuals with potential… I would hope we could find creative ways to draw out of our children the good that there is in each of them."

— Archbishop Desmund Tutu

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Appendix A

Strength-Based and Deficit-Based Concepts: A Comparison

Strength-Based Concepts	Deficit-Based Concepts
At-Potential	At-Risk
Strengths	Problems
Engage	Intervene
Persistent	Resistant
Understand	Diagnose
Opportunity	Crisis
Celebrate (i.e. successes)	Punish (i.e. non-compliance)
Time-in	Time-out
Adapt to	Reform
Empower	Control
Process-focused	Behaviour-focused
Dynamic	Static
Movement	Epidemic
Unique	Deviant
Avoids imposition	Dominant knowledge
Validates people's experience	Diagnoses based on norms
People's context is primary	Professional's context is primary
Identifies and builds on strengths	Minimizes people's strengths
Client-centred	Mandate-focused
Professionals adapt to clients	Clients expected to adapt
Meet clients in their environment	Clients always go to professionals
Flexible	Rigid
Focus on potential	Focus on problems
People are inherently social/good	People are inherently selfish/bad
People do the best they can	People do as little as possible
Support	Fix
Client-determined	Expert oriented
Inclusive	Exclusive

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Appendix B

Glossary of Strength-Based Terminology

At-Potential:
The human potential for growth, development and/or change. Meant to counter the still popular focus on deficits and risk, this term re-orients focus on the great potential of children and youth, including those viewed as "at-risk."

Collaborative:
A philosophy and practice of working together toward a common goal.

Community:
A group of people who share a common territory and/or characteristics (i.e. age, culture, religion, sexual orientation, language, interests).

Capacity-building:
An approach focused on the enhancement of individual and/or community capacity.

Core competencies:
Essential skills, abilities and knowledge that are central to health, well-being and success in life.

Developmental Strengths:
The 31 research validated child and youth developmental sub-factors related to resilience and protective factors.

Empathy:
The ability to accurately understand the experience and perspectives of others.

Empower:
To give power and/or authority to another through insight and opportunity.

Engagement:
The degree to which one bonds and builds rapport with another. Research supports this as the most important factor in developing relationships that influence positive growth and change. It also counters the traditional expert driven model of intervention.

Inclusiveness:
A philosophy and practice of being non-discriminatory – To include all.

Influence:
The degree to which one affects the thoughts and actions of another. A positive outcome of meaningful engagement and relationship.

Participatory-approach:
A philosophy and practice of inclusiveness and collaboration with individuals, families, groups other "community" stakeholders.

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Persistent:
Diligence and determination toward the object or activity of focus. Countering the traditional deficit based perspective as seeing others as resistant, this is seen as a strength that can be engaged in constructive ways through meaningful relationship and activities.

Person-centred:
An evidence informed approach first developed by humanistic psychologists to engage people in positive development through authentic relationships and client-directed activities.

Process-focused:
An approach that honours human growth and development as a process that may not appear to be linear in nature.

Protective Factors:
The positive relationships, resources, activities and internal characteristics that enhance well-being and insulate individuals and/or communities from harm.

Relationship-based:
A research validated approach that holds the quality of relationship and engagement as central to positive growth, development and/or change.

Resilience:
Traditionally viewed as the ability to overcome adversity, research links the development of resilience with internal characteristics and the presence of important relationships, resources and activities.

Resiliency Factors:
The 10 research validated child and youth factors related to resilience and core competencies.

Strengths:
Inner characteristics, virtues and external relationships, activities and connections to resources that contribute to resilience and core competencies.

Strength-based approach:
Focus on individual and/or community strengths that place emphasis on meaningful relationships and activities.

Sustainability:
The ability to maintain the positive benefits, growth, development and capacity of an initiative when the temporary components of the project have expired/been removed.

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Appendix C

Strategies for Creating a Strength-Based Culture in Schools for Students

(Rutter, 1984; Delpit, 1996; Seligman, 2007; O'Connell, 2006; Mills, 1991)

Teacher Level Approaches

1.) Respect and demonstrate kindness to all students: A very simple way to let all students know that they are valued is to acknowledge and greet them by name as often as possible through out the day – especially at the beginning of the school day. School staff need to be encouraged to display interest in students through thoughtful words and a pleasant manner.

2.) Promote opportunities for belonging and ownership: Students need to be allowed to express their opinions and imagination, make choices, problem solve, work with and help others, and give their gifts back to the community in a physically and psychologically safe and structured environment. Students develop a sense of pride and acceptance when they are encouraged to participate in their school by helping in ways that reflect their interests and strengths – helping out in the classrooms, being peer mediators, tutoring younger or special needs children, being asked to support developing ways for the school to meet its goals, etc. After-school involvement in arts and crafts, drama, sport teams, clubs and activities can also increase school bonding.

3.) Provide opportunity for caring relationships: There is a saying that the key to real estate is location, location, and location. The key to building the confidence and resilience of youth is relationship, relationship, and relationship. Students need to know that they can have supportive and caring relationships with school staff and peers – relationships that reflect trust, respect and non-judgment. School staff can convey caring support to students by listening, validating their feelings and by demonstrating kindness, compassion and respect. Strength-based teachers refrain from judging, and do not take a student's behaviour personally, understand that youth are trying to do the best that they can, based upon what they have learned to date and the way they perceive the world they have been raised in. It is through caring and supportive relationships that a student develops their personal values and sense of hope and optimism – not because they were just told they should.

4.) Recognize and affirm each student's worth: Students need to be challenged to do their best and express confidence in their ability to do many things well. It is important to have clear expectations and encourage perseverance and critical thinking. Celebrate successes, no matter how small, and acknowledge original ideas or unique points of view.

5.) Emphasize cooperation rather than competition: Structure environments so that students feel safe, secure, and ready to learn. Acknowledge individual improvement as opposed to who has done the best in the class. Give recognition freely and compliment individual and group efforts.

6.) Positive and high expectations: Teacher's with realistic and high expectations can structure and guide behaviour, and can also challenge students beyond what they believe they can do. Effective teachers recognize students' strengths, mirror them, and help students see where they are strong. It is essential to support the overwhelmed student who has been labeled or oppressed in using their personal strengths and capacities to experience thriving by helping them to: 1) not take personally the adversity in their lives; 2) not to see adversity as permanent; and 3) use the student's own strengths, interests, goals and dreams as the beginning point for learning. These steps help tap the student's intrinsic motivation for learning.
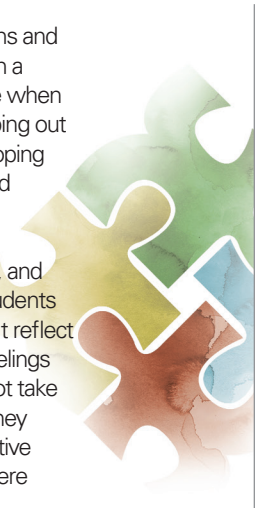
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7.) Help students discover their strengths and capacities: Many students do not know what their strengths are as they have never been encouraged to explore. Provide time for students to imagine themselves doing something outstanding and worthwhile – their passion. After they set some personal goals, discuss ways to reach them and what personal strengths and supportive relationships would look like to help them towards being successful.

8.) Model tenacity, emotional maturity and healthy attitudes: A teacher is not just an instructor for academic skills, but also a confident and positive role model for personal identification. Be genuine, organized, consistent and use appropriate coping skills.

9.) Involve parents or significant relationships in the student's social network: Help parents see that they are their child's most important teachers, and that as role models they need to spend time teaching, training and exhibiting those habits and values they want their child to have. It is about working together and being supportive of each other. A good resource for parents is "Raising Resilient Children" by Robert Brooks and Sam Goldstein and "The Optimistic Child" by Martin Seligman.

Classroom Level Approaches

Fostering resilience through strength-based strategies in the classroom does not require teachers to add another component to their curriculum. Rather, strength-based teachers provide students opportunities to develop their social capacity and resilience during daily instruction – it is how one teaches. Bickart and Wolin (1997) have outlined the following strategies:

1.) Students are involved in assessing their own work and in setting goals for themselves: Constructive feedback (instead of just marks) helps students to honestly consider the quality of their work, think about what has been learned and understand how they performed in relation to expectations. As a student's insight develops, they will begin to evaluate their own work while supported by teachers asking "What was easy (or difficult) for you?" or "What might you do differently next time?"
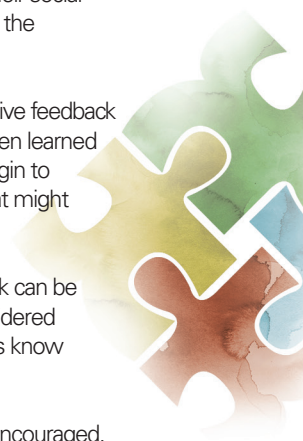
2.) Students participate in developing standards for their work: Working hard and mastering a new task can be frustrating for many students. Time needs to be taken to discuss what is expected and what would be considered successful. By seeing models of excellence and participating in establishing the criteria for success, students know how their efforts will be evaluated and are better able to overcome frustration.

3.) Students have opportunities to work collaboratively: In classrooms where collaborative learning is encouraged, students are given the opportunity to develop and maintain positive relationships with others. These relationships develop and mature over time as the students learn from and are supportive of each other. In collaborative learning, students turn to each other to solve problems, share ideas, and creatively explore new ideas.

4.) Students participate in meetings to solve classroom problems: Challenges often arise in the classroom and can be used to nurture initiative in students through the use of classroom meetings as oppose to defaulting to the teacher's authority. Calling a meeting conveys the message that "In this classroom, we do not regard problems as something to avoid or that we screwed up. Rather, it is about you as students having the ability and power to solve your problems." Classroom meetings provide the opportunity for students to practice sharing ideas and listening to the story of others.

5.) Students have the opportunity to make choices: Providing students choices encourages creativity and the realization that there are options. A choice may simply be selecting a book to read, but choices can also allow students to decide how they can express themselves through their work. To better understand what "makes them click" and how they can express their story in ways that others understand.

6.) Students feel connected in a classroom structured as a community: When classrooms are organized as relational communities rather than as authority-based hierarchies, a group synergy emerges. It is in this atmosphere that students feel safe and learn to build those resiliency factors like humor, positive peer relationships, differential thinking, respect for the cultural views of others etc.

7.) Students play an active role in setting rules for classroom interactions and behaviour: Developing expectations and boundaries is a way for students to develop an internal value and moral system. Creating their own rules helps them to develop responsibility for their own behaviour, for one another, and for the group.

8.) Students experience success: Starting with what students can be successful at and building upon cumulative successful experiences will enlist their intrinsic motivation and positive momentum. It keeps the students in a hopeful frame of mind to learn and motivation to take on challenges as a way to learn.

9.) Students understand that they have innate resilience: Help students understand that they have the ability and capacities to construct the meaning they give to everything that happens to them (it is their story and their understanding of that story is extremely important). Support them to recognize how their own conditioned thinking (such as they are not good enough or I'm not acceptable to others) robs them of being able to draw upon their innate resilience.

10.) Students experience growth opportunities: This would include asking questions that encourage self-reflection, critical thinking and self-awareness and dialogue around personal areas of interest; making learning more experiential and reflective of differential learning styles; providing opportunities for creative expression (e.g art, writing, theatre, video productions, etc.) and for helping others (community service, peer helping, cooperative learning, etc.) involving students in curriculum planning and choosing learning experiences; using participatory evaluation strategies; and involving students in creating the governing rules of the classroom.

School Level Approaches

1.) Teacher support: Just as teachers can create a strength-based environment in the school classroom, administrators can create a school environment that supports teachers' resilience. They can promote caring relationships among colleagues; demonstrate positive beliefs, expectations, and trust; provide ongoing opportunities and time, in small groups, to reflect, dialogue and make decisions together as well as share success stories.

2.) Staff development: Teachers should reflect personally on their beliefs about strength-based principles and practice, and also, and exchange experiences and learnings about successes in enhancing resilience and applying strength-based strategies. They should be provided with resources and training to support their personal and professional development towards being resilient and strength-based. Reaching a staff consensus about innate resilience is the first step towards creating a strength-based classroom or school culture that nurtures resilience in students.

Suggested Resources:
"How Full Is Your Bucket" by Tom Rath and Donald Clifton
"Strength-Based Teaching" by Tim Carman
"What's Right With You" by Barry Duncan
"The Resiliency Factor" by Karen Reivich and Andrew Shatte
"What's Right With The World" by Dewitt Jones
(http://celebratetraining.com)

3.) School community collaborations: Fostering the development of the whole student needs to involve the school, family, and community collaboration. It is important that the collaborations are based upon the same philosophy of strength-based principles and the goal of resilience. Hence, schools need to be purposeful in what community collaborations they engage in so the students experience consistent relationships and messages.
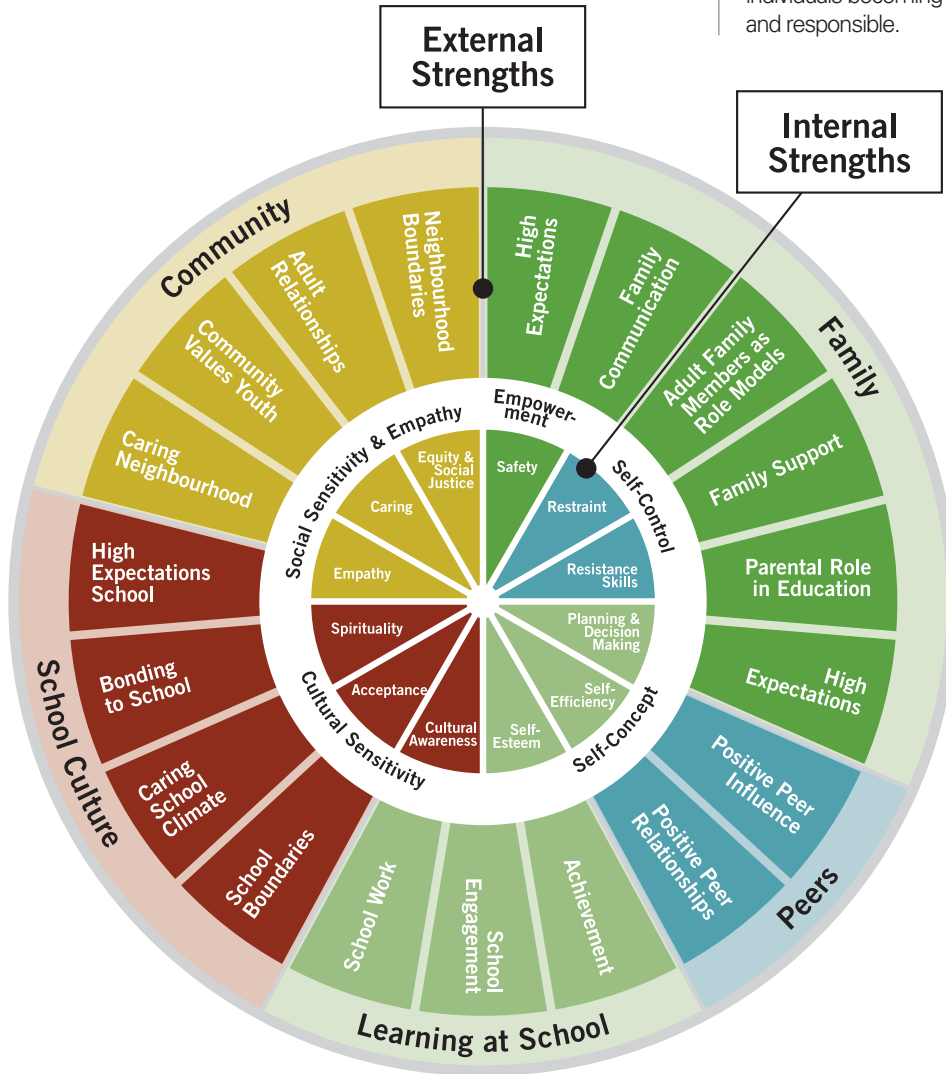
Appendix D

Child/Youth Resiliency Framework

Promoting Developmental Strengths Through
Resiliency Assement & Development

The foundation of the Resiliency Framework
is based on the child, youth and adult resiliency
assessment and developmental protocols
which promote a strength-based approach
and holistic framework for understanding
the major components that contribute to
individuals becoming both productive
and responsible.

External Strengths · Internal Strengths

Community: Neighbourhood Boundaries, Adult Relationships, Community Values Youth, Caring Neighbourhood

Family: High Expectations, Family Communication, Adult Family Members as Role Models, Family Support, Parental Role in Education, High Expectations

Peers: Positive Peer Influence, Positive Peer Relationships

Learning at School: School Work, School Engagement, Achievement

School Culture: High Expectations School, Bonding to School, Caring School Climate, School Boundaries

Empowerment: Safety · Self-Control: Restraint, Resistance Skills, Planning & Decision Making · Self-Concept: Self-Efficiency, Self-Esteem · Cultural Sensitivity: Cultural Awareness, Acceptance, Spirituality · Social Sensitivity & Empathy: Empathy, Caring, Equity & Social Justice

"Although we understand the importance of resiliency or developmental strengths in
nurturing healthy development, we continue to underestimate the direct and indirect
influence that family, peers, schools and communities have on the development of
resiliency and in the promotion of prosocial choices in our children and youth today."

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Youth Developmental Strengths
Understanding Youth Resiliency in Your Community

Resiliency Factor	Developmental Strength	Description
Parental Support	Caring Family	Family provides a nurturing, caring, loving home environment
	Family Communication	Youth can communicate with family openly about issues/concerns
	Adult Family Role Models	Family provides responsible role models
	Family Support	Family provides trust, support, and encouragement regularly
Parental Expectations	Parental Role in Education	Family is active in providing help/support with education
	High Expectations	Family encourages youth to set goals and do the best he/she can
Peer Relationships	Positive Peer Relationships	Friendships are respectful and viewed positively by adults
	Positive Peer Influence	Friendships are trustworthy and based on positive outcomes
Community Cohesiveness	Caring Neighbourhood	Youth live in a caring and friendly neighbourhood
	Community Values Youth	Adults in the community respect youth and their opinions
	Adult Relationships	Adults try to get to know the youth and are viewed as trustworthy
	Neighbourhood Boundaries	Neighbours have clear expectations for youth
Commitment to Learning At School	Achievement	Youth works hard to do well and get the best grades in school
	School Engagement	Youth is interested in learning and working hard in the classroom
	Homework	Youth works hard to complete homework and assignments on time
School Culture	School Boundaries	School has clear rules and expectations for appropriate behaviours
	Bonding to School	Youth cares about and feels safe at school
	Caring School Climate	School environment and teachers provides a caring climate
	High Expectations	School/Teacher encourages goal setting and to do the best he/she can
Cultural Sensitivity	Cultural Awareness	Youth has a good understanding and interest in other cultures
	Acceptance	Youth respects others beliefs and is pleased about cultural diversity
	Spirituality	Youth's strong spiritual beliefs/values play an important role in life
Self-Control	Restraint	Believes that it is important for him/her to restrain from substance use
	Resistance Skills	Is able to avoid or say "no" to people who may place he/she at-risk
Empowerment	Safety	Youth feels safe and in control of his/her immediate environment
Self-Concept	Planning & Decision-Making	Youth is capable of making purposeful plans for the future
	Self-Efficacy	Youth believes in his/her abilities to do many different things well
	Self-Esteem	Youth feels positive about his/her self and future
Social Sensitivity & Empathy	Empathy	Youth is compassionate with others and cares about other people's feelings
	Caring	Youth is concerned about and believes it is important to help others
	Equity & Social Justice	Believes in equality and that it is important to be fair to others

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Resiliency Initiatives is an independent consulting organization that specializes in evidence based, research grounded and strength focused assessment and evaluation tools that provide a verifiable measurement of an organization and its impact on their clients. Resiliency Initiatives is strategically aligned with the University of Calgary, Alberta and actively collaborates with various community service providers, health-based organizations, government agencies and academic institutions with the goal of promoting a strength-based approach to assessing and understanding best practices for strategic and social capacity building initiatives that support the well-being and healthy development of community, individuals and families in sustainable ways.

To accomplish this mission, Resiliency Initiatives engages in the following activities:

- conducts both applied and scientific research,
- develops community-based evaluation initiatives and academic publications,
- designs practical evaluation protocols and questionnaires based on resiliency factors and strength-based practice, and
- provides training on resiliency assessment protocols and strengths-based practice training and/or consultation services.

Should you wish to know more about or engage the services offered by Resiliency Initiatives, please contact us by calling 403.274.7706 or e-mail us at info@resil.ca.

Or visit us online at, www.resiliencyinitiatives.com

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