THE STRENGTH-BASED APPROACH: PHILOSOPHY AND PRINCIPLES FOR PRACTICE

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................. 3

THE STRENGTH BASED MOVEMENT: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND .................. 3

THE STRENGTH-BASED PHILOSOPHY: OVERVIEW AND DEFINITIONS .......... 5
  From Deficits to Strengths .................................................................................................. 5
  Defining the Strength-Based Approach ............................................................................ 5
  What are strengths? ............................................................................................................. 6
  Resilience .......................................................................................................................... 7

STRENGTH BASED PRACTICE ............................................................................. 7
  Personal Control .................................................................................................................. 8
  Choices and Consequences ............................................................................................... 9
  Environment ..................................................................................................................... 9
  Needs ................................................................................................................................ 10
  Individual-based Programming .......................................................................................... 11

SUMMARY OF STRENGTH-BASED PRACTICE PRINCIPLES ....................... 12

A NOTE ON SOLUTION-FOCUSED THERAPY .................................................. 13

CHALLENGES AND COMMON CRITIQUES .................................................. 14
  Problems and Needs ......................................................................................................... 14
  Applying the Philosophy ................................................................................................... 15

CONCLUSION ............................................................................................................... 15

REFERENCES ................................................................................................................. 17

APPENDIX A ..................................................................................................................... 19

INTRODUCTION

To truly reclaim youth, juvenile justice must become a true community partner and strengthen its own ability to view youth as resources, as potential leaders in need of guidance, as capable contributors, and as youth of promise (Nissen, 2006, p. 42).

This report was written to enhance the research base of Youth Now Intervention Services (YNIS) and its adopted strength-based approach. There is much academic literature around the strength-based philosophy, carrying exciting reports of successful implementation in a number of areas. This report will focus on the strength-based approach as it relates to the social service field, particularly in youth justice. It begins by outlining the historical background of the strength-based movement, followed by an outline of the philosophy behind the strength-based approach and common definitions. Finally, the report reviews principles for practice and common critiques found in the literature. This report does not provide extensive clinical details in applying the approach or methodology of the studies cited. Its purpose is to provide a solid research basis for YNIS, while also outlining principles of practice that, when applied, will enhance unity of the approach across the organization.

THE STRENGTH BASED MOVEMENT: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

It is difficult to pinpoint the beginning of the contemporary strength-based movement. It has numerous origins, including business, social and policy development, community development, social work, and youth justice. Brendtro (2004) traced its roots in the helping professions to the early to mid-1900s. Although it was not called the “strength-based approach” there are records of attempts to eliminate punitive treatments in the mental health field at this time. The approach was proposed to treat patients as partners. The role of doctors was to create positive living and learning environments, and to forge close interpersonal relationships with patients.

In 1920, Karl Wilker wrote the following about work with youth:

What we want to achieve in our work with young people is to find and strengthen the positive and healthy elements, no matter how deeply they are hidden. We enthusiastically believe in the existence of those elements even in the seemingly worst of our adolescents (Brendtro, 2004, p. 69).

Seemingly, these early forgers were successful in the mental health and troubled youth fields worldwide. However, in the mid 1950s a pendulum swing back to more repressive approaches took place following this progress. Brendtro (2004) suggests it was due to a lack of training for professionals, a lack of research support, and a general resistance to alternative methods of practice. It seems that threads of strength-based thinking continued, however, throughout the 20th century. In the 1950s Positive Peer Culture emerged and is reported to also be a movement that steered young offender treatment away from deficit thinking and towards asset and strengths development (Quigley, 2003).
Today and over the past 20 years, strength-based philosophy has been applied to some degree in every client population and area of the helping professions alone. This emergence has run parallel to other disciplines too. For example, in 1995 researchers Marcus Buckingham and Donald Clifton started the strengths revolution in business while doing research for the Gallup Organization (Buckingham, 2007). Areas of application in social services include: at-risk youth, the elderly, the mentally ill, individuals with disabilities, in education, addictions, case management, and community development (Nissen, 2006; Saleebey, 2002; Winter-Messiers, Herr, Wood, Brooks, Gates, Houston, 2007).

In 1997 Charles Rapp wrote a book considered to be a psychology classic, called “The Strengths Model”. It focused on “amplifying the well part of the patient”. In 1999 Dr. Martin Seligman, who was the president of the American Psychological Association, made an observation that has fuelled the strength based philosophy of care in recent years. He said:

The most important thing we learned was that psychology was half-baked. We’ve baked the part about mental illness, about repair damage. The other side’s unbaked, the side of strength, the side of what we’re good at (Buckingham, 2007).

Seligman dubbed the strength-based approach, “positive psychology”, and since the 1990s he and a group of like-minded professionals, who call themselves “positive psychologists”, have asked the question “what is a strength?” In 2003 Seligman proposed writing the “un-DSM”, with a list of strengths that have discrete identities of their own - more than just the absence of pathology (Wolin, 2003).

Because the strength-based philosophy represents a shift in thinking in the world today, many fields have also emerged with approaches extremely similar to the strengths perspective, such as “developmental resilience”, “healing and wellness”, “solution focused therapy”, “asset-based community development”. Our present culture is obsessed with psychopathology, victimization, and abnormality. It is mesmerized by disease and disorder. In fact, many businesses, such as the media and pharmaceutical companies, make grand profits from this conception. The strength-based philosophy is a reaction to this popular obsession (Saleebey, 2002).

The strength-based movement is still emerging as a common practice across disciplines. In order to avoid a quashing of its emergence, certain gaps must be addressed. For example, Nissen (2006) and others mention research and practice gaps, including a lack of studies on the application of the strength-based approach in youth justice, although the studies and programs that have been put into place have shown great success in reducing recidivism and encouraging success. One particular American study measured the use of restraints and seclusion in a state-run institution for children and adolescents. When a strength-based philosophy was applied in this setting, the use of restraints was decreased by approximately 73% (LeBel, Stromberg, Duckworth, Krezner, Goldstein, & Weeks, 2004).
THE STRENGTH-BASED PHILOSOPHY: OVERVIEW AND DEFINITIONS

From Deficits to Strengths

One way to view the strength-based approach is to contrast it with a deficit-based philosophy or a focus on failures. Compared to a failure focus, one premise of the strength-based model is that “excellence is not the opposite of failure, and that, as such, you learn little about excellence from studying failure. Success and failure are not opposites, simply different” (Buckingham, 2007, p. 5).

Many psychotherapists find that concentrating on failures and inadequacies can make patients feel worse rather than better, at least in the short run. If the focus on shortcomings and mistakes continues, the patient's self-esteem may decline and the situation may deteriorate (Harvard, 1997).

In youth justice, the mainstream corrections model focuses on risks and needs, and addresses weaknesses. A strength-based philosophy enhances strengths, and builds on characteristics that are already present in individuals. This leads more quickly to fulfillment, future success, competency and resilience. A deficit focus leads a young person to be painfully aware of shortcomings and to feel defeated. A strengths focus encourages and empowers, and results in young people who are more likely to work within a program.

According to Laursen (2003) approaches that focus on deficits have the following effects. They:
- Demoralize youth and erode self-confidence
- Reduce motivation and aspirations to excel
- Focus on past failures and set up negative expectancies
- Stigmatize and stereotype youth
- Alienate youth from belonging in the community (p. 12)

See Appendix A for Nissen’s (2006) table: Comparing Deficit-Based and Strength-Based Traditions in Juvenile Justice Settings

Defining the Strength-Based Approach

A strength-based approach is the filter that you view people through. Powell and Batsche (1997) say that a strength-based philosophy is a critical belief, an all-pervasive attitude that informs all of the professional’s interactions with clients.

The following is a selection of definitions of the strength-based approach:
- Strength-based philosophy holds the core belief that all individuals have strengths and resources (Laursen, 2003).
A strengths-based approach has a simple premise – identify what is going well, do more of it, and build on it (Barwick, 2004, p. 11).

The strength-based approach is considered to be an organizing principle for a family of theories and practice strategies which have in common a focus on the generally untapped gifts, positive attributes, and under-developed capabilities of persons, families, and even communities, who are in some way compromised in their abilities and/or seeking help for problems. Emerging as an alternative to exclusively "problem" or "deficit-based" approaches, the strength-based approach revealed that an alternative was urgently needed to offset the effects of negative labeling and subsequent practitioner-driven interventions that all too frequently led to poor outcomes (Nissen, 2006, p. 41).

The promulgation of strength-based service delivery is founded on the premise that even the most troubled youth have unique talents, skills, and other resources that can be marshaled in the service of recovery and development (Cox, 2006, p. 287-288).

The strength-based approach is a perspective that works to address a client’s problems by focusing on his or her skills, interests, and support systems, thereby providing a foundation for the client to grow and succeed at positive change (Nissen, Mackin, Weller, & Tarte, 2005, p. 3).

Within the social work context, the strengths orientation is a dramatic departure from conventional social work. It means that everything you do will be predicated, in some way, on helping to discover and embellish, explore and exploit clients’ strengths and resources in the service of assisting them to achieve their goals, realize their dreams, and shed the irons of their own inhibitions and misgivings…The strength-based approach relies heavily on ingenuity and creativity, the courage and common sense of both clients and their social workers (Saleebey, 2002, p. 1).

A strength-based approach has a simple premise: identify the factors that help most young people to lead happy and productive lives, and support them. Rather than having a problem orientation and a risk focus, a strengths-based approach works at developing the factors that protect young people (Barwick, 2004, p. 6).

What are strengths?

To explore a strength-based approach, one must consider what practitioners and researchers mean when referring to strengths. The answer seems to be as broad a definition as one can imagine. This illustrates the creative thinking necessary for strength-based practitioners.

Barwick (2004) said that strengths are positive factors, both in the individual and the environment – pretty much anything that supports healthy development. Laursen (2003)
defined strengths extremely broadly as what youth have learned about themselves, others and the world. They are personal qualities, traits and virtues.

Strengths are also described as protective factors, which provide a buffer against risk factors (Barwick, 2004). For example, prevention researchers have discovered that human strengths act as buffers against mental illness. These strengths include courage, future mindedness, optimism, interpersonal skill, faith, work ethic, hope, honesty, perseverance, and the capacity for insight (Brendtro, Toit, Bath & Van Bockern, 2006). Strengths are often temporarily submerged in a presenting problem. This is why a strength-based approach seeks to “find, direct, and amplify” capabilities and potential for positive functioning (Nissen, 2006, p. 41).

When defining strengths, it is important to point out that researchers conceptualize strengths beyond simply an individual’s character traits. A family-professional relationship starts from an attempt to fully understand the ways in which the family successfully accomplishes its goals and manages its problems (Powell & Batsche, 1997). Individuals live within environments, such as in families, communities, society, and culture. Any positive environments or positive aspects of their environments are strengths and are just as important contributors to good outcomes as individual strengths (Barwick, 2004).

Resilience

The concept of resilience runs throughout the strength-based literature. Resilience is successful adaptation, and an ability to exploit positive features of the environment and the positive ways that people respond to stress. Resilience refers to individual, familial, and environmental characteristics that modify risk and allow children to thrive despite at-risk circumstances (Gleason, 2007; Barwick, 2004).

As one can see, resilience is an assumption or construct at the heart of strength-based philosophy. Building resilience for future circumstances and challenges is one of the key outcomes of strength-based programs (Barwick, 2004, p. 14). Social workers acting from the strengths perspective are concerned with resources, connections, skills, and gifts that will enhance an individual’s resilience in the future (Gleason, 2007).

STRENGTH BASED PRACTICE

The formula is simple: Mobilize your clients’ strengths in the service of achieving their goals and visions and the clients will have a better quality of life on their own terms. Though the recipe is uncomplicated, as you will see, the work is hard (Saleebey, 2002, p. 1-2).

Now that the history and concepts of strength-based philosophy have been outlined, the following section reviews more deeply core principles of practice that arise in the literature as common themes. Although a philosophy is a good starting point, Nissen (2006) pointed out that the field of youth justice requires tools to craft strength-based interventions in real world settings.
Personal Control

In traditional youth justice settings, the main method of controlling and adapting behaviour is through level systems or point systems. For example, a young person is rewarded for good behaviour by being advanced to higher levels, which have more privileges or he/she is rewarded with more points leading to more privileges. At the same time, poor behaviour receives negative consequences such as lower levels or reduced points. These are classic behavioural psychology methods and do control behaviour at times. However, these methods do not equip children adequately for lives as responsible adults (Boldt, Witzel, Russell, & Jones, 2007).

Point and level systems are controlled by staff and decrease a young person’s personal control. Alternatively, a strength-based perspective hands control over to the young person in order for them to develop an internal locus of control. In a deficit model things are done “for” or “to” clients, whereas a strength-based approach fosters independence, and results in people gaining control in their own lives (Powell & Batche, 1997).

Boldt et al. (2007) reported their experiences when transforming their multi-service agency for children into a strength-based model. In their report they discussed quite frequently the issue of control during the agency’s path to change; they found that they spent a considerable amount of time debating this issue among themselves. When reflecting on the past they said:

We wanted them to do it our way! In fact we had carefully outlined every single behavior that we expected and assigned a point value to it, with carefully designed level-drops for failure. Allowing youth too much freedom and discretion in their choices meant we would not know what they might do; we could not control them (Boldt et al., 2007, p. 244).

At the same time that this struggle for control occurred, Boldt et al. (2007) found literature around the concept of motivation. People naturally resist anything that appears to limit freedom of choice or behaviour in any way. In fact, there is nothing so distasteful as feeling forced to do something and nothing more appealing than what we have been told we cannot do. The harder staff push individuals to behave in a certain way in a residential system, the more powerless young people feel. When young people feel that they have no control over their life, when all decisions are made outside of themselves, young people are less likely to internalize any behaviour changes. Behaviour changes must be made internally. When young people realize a discrepancy between their own personal goals and their behaviour, they will, out of their own motivation and choice, change their behaviour. This realization often does not happen if a young person’s life is completely controlled for him/her (Boldt et al., 2007).

From a staff’s perspective, Boldt et al. (2007) concluded:

The issue of control was ubiquitous, but we found that letting go of it was the harder but wiser choice. Youth in residential treatment may be challenging, but
our experience suggests that less control in combination with proper staff training may be the answer (p. 248).

**Choices and Consequences**

Programming which focuses on developing a young person’s sense of personal, internal control does not ignore consequences to negative behaviour. Instead of unnatural consequences to behaviour, young people are given the opportunity to make choices, and to then experience the consequences of their choices (Powell & Batsche, 1997). Too often in institutional settings, youth are deprived of the opportunity to develop independence and the ability to make responsible decisions (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2005).

Again, when transforming their organization, Boldt et al. (2007) reported that staff used their positive relationships with young people to explore with them and to help them understand choices, actions, and consequences, leaving it up to the young person to make final decisions and to live with the results. This concept favours natural and logical consequences over punishments. In the youth justice context, consequences for problem behaviour are determined on an individual basis and are “natural” (e.g. failing a test that you don’t study for). They are also logical, such as cleaning up a mess before going out, teaching peers about the dangers of tobacco when caught smoking, and being assigned extra tutoring when grades fall. If disruptive behaviour is of sufficient gravity or involves safety concerns, privileges may be temporarily frozen, however they are not be lost altogether. Above all, consequences are discussed calmly through a caring relationship. They are presented as the results of a youth's own choices. Powell and Batsche (1997) label this “shared decision making”.

When young people are given the opportunity to develop internal control, the task of staff is to help young people understand the concept of personal responsibility and to help them understand and solve everyday life decisions (Winter & Preston, 2006). Children fight for freedom, particularly when their freedom is limited. This is a basic need for them, as discussed below. Often in youth justice settings the consequence applied to a young person who fights for her basic need for freedom is to take even more freedom away (Jenny Roebuck, 2007).

**Environment**

In the strength-based approach it is important to create a balance between safety and freedom, and while providing young people with personal control, to still maintain external control. Staff control and create an environment that makes a young person successful, an environment set up so that a child can control him/herself. They create a positive and calm atmosphere: one that teaches young people self-control.

Brendtro (2004) went so far as to say that the core element of a strength-based intervention is to create “growth-enhancing environments”. These environments minimize risks for physical and psychological harm, such as preventing bullying by
either young peers or staff. Leadership must instil a standard where no misuse of power is tolerated.

Change in youth occurs primarily through caring relationships, and so staff focus on building positive therapeutic relationships (Boldt et al., 2007; Brendtro, 2004). One of the easiest practices of a strength-based approach is to look for and give credit for evidence of progress. Successful programs include staff who build caring relationships when they notice positive behaviour (Hewitt, 2005).

Needs

Problem behaviour is seen as the youth’s attempt, however maladaptive, to cope with challenge and meet personal needs (Winter & Preston, 2006, p. 171).

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is often referred to in strength-based literature. Supporters of the strength-based approach posit that at the core of all emotional and behavioural problems are unmet needs (Brendtro, 2004). In order for children to thrive, their basic physical needs must be met as well as their more complex needs, such as attachment, achievement, autonomy and altruism (Brendtro, 2004). Maslow (1970) described these physiological needs as ‘deficit needs’ and the needs for achieving one’s potential he described as ‘growth needs’. Problems result from obstruction of basic physical, social, and growth needs. When growth needs are met, children develop strengths, and if these needs are frustrated, children display a host of problems (Wolin, 2003).

Children in conflict experience internal or external distress that triggers pain-based emotions and behaviour, and coercive behaviour management intensifies this distress. No responsible parent would punish a small child for crying out in pain, but would try to address the unmet needs. No medical professional would try to administer more pain to a patient in pain. This is the way a strength-based philosophy views negative behaviour – as an expression of unmet needs (Brendtro, 2004).

Strength-based approaches carry the same ideas around basic needs, with some variations. For example, Brendtro et al. (2004) described the Circle of Courage, which identifies four universal needs of all children: Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity. These are critical indicators of positive youth development. When these needs are met, children grow and thrive.

In addition, a strength-based approach to family support focuses not just on the physiological and safety needs of families but also on family members’ needs for belonging, love, esteem, and self-actualization (Powell & Batsche, 1997). Although the approaches may differ, one of the essential ingredients for successful strength-based programs is to respond to needs rather than reacting to pain-based behaviour (Brendtro, 2004).
Individual-based Programming

By its very nature, the strength-based approach is individualized. It focuses on each young person’s personality and situational variables. It requires creativity and thinking beyond the usual categories and labels used in youth justice (Nissen, 2006). Upon examining a level system or point system, one sees quite quickly that levels do not leave room for individual differences. In a level system behaviours are rewarded or punished in the same way regardless of the each individual’s unique context and needs as well as personal strengths.

When focusing on a young person’s strengths and resources, he/she feels special, as a one-of-a-kind person who is worth knowing, worth understanding, and worth caring about (Laursen, 2003). The strength-based perspective lends itself to individualized programming that accounts for and seeks to understand the strengths of each young person (Brendtro et al., 2006). Particularly when discussing the strength-based approach with families, Powell and Batsche (1997) note the importance of an individualized response to families and their needs. They refer to strength-based approaches with multi-risk families, and state that “individualization in the delivery of supports requires that the program fit the family rather than fitting the family to a static system of intervention.” Intervention is responsive to the unique nature of the child and his/her family.

One essential element of a strengths-based approach is accepting that solutions will not be the same for every person, and that the strengths of individuals and their circumstances are different. People must be fully involved in identifying their goals and building on their strengths and resources (Barwick, 2004).

Again, when transforming their agency, Boldt et al. (2007) replaced their level-based point system with “individual goal planning in an alliance between youth and adults” (Boldt et al., 2007, p. 244). The program was child-centered (it’s not about staff) and throughout their transition, by reviewing past literature and other agencies’ experiences, they noted the importance of individualizing treatment plans and involving a young person in developing his/her treatment plan goals.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| Young person has personal control             | - young person makes decisions around his/her program plan, program goals, consequences to negative behaviour, and everyday living.                                                                       | - young person’s need for independence is met and developed.  
- young person develops personal control and personal motivation.  
- young person is equipped to apply behavioural progress in real life settings.                                                                 |
| Young person makes choices regularly and experiences natural and logical consequences to behaviour. | - natural and logical consequences are applied to negative behaviour.  
- through positive staff-youth relationships, staff teach youth about choices, actions, and consequences.  
- young people make choices around their behaviour and everyday living.                                                                   | - young person develops independence.  
- young person develops the ability to make personal decisions.  
- young person develops an understanding of real life consequences to behaviour.                                                                 |
| Staff create a positive and calm therapeutic environment | - staff control and create an environment that makes a young person successful (i.e. sets a young person up for success); one where a young person can control him/herself.  
- the environment is positive and calm.  
- staff build caring relationships with young people  
- staff notice and give credit for progress and strengths                                                                 | - young person’s need for belonging is met.  
- young person understands his/her personal strengths.  
- young person lives in a calm, supportive environment where he/she can make rational decisions.                                                                 |
| Young person’s needs are identified and met    | - staff identify unmet growth needs related to negative behaviour (e.g. need for independence, mastery, belonging, and generosity).  
- staff respond to needs instead of reacting to behaviour by developing positive ways to meet these needs                                                                                     | - young person’s basic and growth needs are met  
- young person gains understanding of his/her basic and growth needs                                                                                                                                |
| Programming is individual-based               | - residents have individual program plans, which account for a young person’s unique characteristics and strengths; internal and external strengths  
- individual plans include personal goals developed by residents themselves.                                                                                                                      | - young person gains understanding of his/her unique strengths, skills, and personal goals.  
- young person develops within a program that is tailored to his/her interests and personal goals.                                                                 |
A NOTE ON SOLUTION-FOCUSED THERAPY

Solution-focused therapy is highly interrelated with the strength-based approach, hence, this section provides an overview of the therapy within this context. It originated in the 1980s and 1990s and was developed by de-Shazer (1985), Berg (1994), Miller (1992) and their colleagues at the Brief Family Therapy Center in Milwaukee, Wisconsin (Dielman & Franklin, 1998). Solution-focused therapy assists clients in generating their own solutions, particularly solutions that are already available to them. Clients are empowered when shown that they can solve certain problems with resources they already have. This therapy is very future-focused; there is a very minor focus on the problem itself and a main focus on solutions (Harvard, 1997). In fact, one reason for the popularity of this technique is the growing conviction that psychological problems can often be solved without investigating their origins (Harvard, 1997).

In solution-focused therapy the service provider and client co-construct solutions to a presenting problem. This co-construction emerges as a result of a service provider’s careful and skilful questioning in order to facilitate a client’s recognition of prior successes and solutions as well as visualizations of future solutions (Dielman & Franklin, 1998). Solution-focused therapists also use specific types of questioning techniques that help clients think about behaviour changes. The “miracle question” is the most commonly used (Metcalf, Thomas, & Durrant, 1994). Dielman and Franklin (1998) provided the following sample:

Let's suppose that you leave here today and you go home. You do your regular routine [describe some aspects of evening routine interactively with the client] and then you go to sleep. While you are sleeping, a miracle happens, but you do not know it because you are sleeping. And the miracle is this--all the problems you were talking about with me today are solved [describe the problems as they have been discussed by the client]. When you wake up, what will you notice that is different that will tell you that while you were sleeping a miracle happened?

When answering this question, clients focus on the presence of behaviours, attitudes and feelings rather than the absence of them. Social workers who use this approach encourage pictures of specific, observable behaviours (Dielman & Franklin, 1998). It turns out that many patients are so preoccupied with their troubles that they have not given much thought to this question. When their attention is drawn to it, they often come up with useful ideas (Metcalf et al., 1994).

A related question, designed to encourage patients by helping them evaluate their progress, is, "What is the smallest sign that would prove to you conclusively that you were getting better?" (Harvard, 1997) In another question clients rate a current problem on a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being the problem at its worst and 10 being the problem resolved. After rating it, a service provider asks what they did to increase the number from the past and what they will do to increase the number in the future (Dielman & Franklin, 1998).
Laursen (2003) noted that practitioners and researchers are still searching for the best ways to apply the strength-based approach in practice; it is still a developing field.

Problems and Needs

One common criticism of the strength-based approach is that it ignores problems or areas that need improvement. Supporters of the strength-based approach dispute this point strongly. A strengths-based philosophy does not imply an absence of problems or denial of needs. In fact, professionals have a responsibility to help young people, families, and anyone with problem issues. However, a strength-based philosophy does not focus on the past or place blame on individuals. Instead it asks what strategies and resources individuals and families currently use to solve problems and it seeks to build capacity in order to resolve current problems and minimize future ones (Gleason, 2007; Powell & Batsche, 1997).

Nissen et al. (2005) noted that a strength-based approach does not eliminate accountability or the need to understand the nature and challenge of presenting problems. Instead, it seeks to see these risks and needs in balance with the most likely resources present (personal, family, or community-anchored) that will bridge the client from a troubled present to a more positive future.

Some researchers seem to argue for how extreme to take the strength-based approach when applying it to organizations. According to Barwick (2004), there is clear evidence that strengths-based approaches make a valuable contribution to reducing offending, however they may not be sufficient in themselves. Research into reducing offending indicates that as well as focusing on building strengths, in order to reduce re-offending, one must identify and address risks.

Saleebey (2002) acknowledged that critics often claim that the strengths perspective ignores problems and glosses over real pain. Traditional psychology calls for someone to learn all there is to know about a person’s problems before he/she can truly help. Taking the primary focus off a problem does not diminish it or remove responsibility or concern. Often energy is used to understand a problem and less attention is devoted to determining creative ways to reduce its presence and ameliorate its effects. The strengths perspective meets people where they are, joins with them in discovering and reaffirming talents, abilities, and aspirations, and carves a path that leads beyond the problem (Saleebey, 2002). To traditional psychologists this is counter to their core approaches to problem solving.

Saleebey (2002) suggested the following strategies for handling problems:

- View a problem in its context: as an obstacle to attaining client-determined goals.
- Pay less attention to problems.
• Use everyday language when talking about problems; this makes them less mysterious and more manageable. Problems are real, life sized challenges that come with being human and living in human communities.

“The strengths perspective is anchored in the belief that a problem does not constitute all of a person’s life” (Saleebey, 2002, p. 103). The real test comes from developing constructive ways to meet, use, or transcend the problem.

**Applying the Philosophy**

In the 1950s a seemingly strong beginning to strength-based philosophies died out. One reason for this was likely an inability to equip professionals and to apply the philosophy in practice. Youth justice practitioners report frustrations and challenges when bringing the strength-based approach into real world settings (Nissen, 2006). In particular, the youth justice system often focuses on efficiency and consistency, yet by its very nature the strength-based approach is individualized and takes time to apply when an organization is first adopting the philosophies. Thinking beyond usual categories and labels in youth justice, and developing an understanding of each young person’s situational variables and unique personalities, is challenging and takes time (Nissen, 2006). LeBel et al. (2004) emphasized the need for leadership, training, supervision, and quality management systems in order to increase the likelihood that systemic changes will be sustained, regardless of organizational change.

Organizations cope with the immensity of applying a strength-based approach in different ways. Because of the challenges of applying the approach in a deficit-based field, some organizations report that they do not dismiss certain aspects of the traditional model of youth justice. Boldt et al. (2007) reported that they transformed their level system instead of completely stopping its use. They got rid of all language around points, and young people progressed to new levels as they met certain personal goals and gained certain skills. In many ways, the young people set their own goals and set their own pace. Also, young people could only move forward; they could not go down to lower levels. The level system turned into a road map for a young person’s journey instead of as external reinforcements for behaviour. The participants also learned how to take ownership of their efforts in this way (Boldt, et al., 2007).

**CONCLUSION**

Because organizations differ, there are certainly no pre-packaged solutions to transforming an organization into a strength-based system. However, at the same time, the field is progressing by sharing common principles and practice ideas across disciplines. By reporting success stories and disseminating strength-based tools, the field will grow and strengthen in effectiveness, while guarding against a pendulum swing back to traditional methods. In order for the approach to have success across fields and disciplines, researchers and practitioners, experts and young people, must work together, valuing and respecting one another’s contributions and strengths. The strength-based approach is quickly catching on as a revolution – viewing individuals through a strengths
filter and searching for their potential and unique gifts, regardless of how lost they may appear at first glance.

Indeed, the passion, energy, and commitment of juvenile justice workers who espouse a strength-based approach against all odds in increasingly punitive juvenile justice environments are likely the greatest strengths of the juvenile justice system itself (Nissen, 2006, p. 43).
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rates in solution-focused therapy. *Psychotherapy Letter, 6, 3.*


APPENDIX A

Table: Comparing Deficit-Based and Strength-Based Traditions in Juvenile Justice Settings (Nissen, 2006 p. 44).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Deficit/Problem Tradition</strong></th>
<th><strong>Strength-Based Tradition</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Isolates youth from communities with relatively exclusive focus on professionals, programs, and institutional responses to youth problems.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Connects youth to communities with balanced focus not only on remedial psychological or public safety foci, but on building relationships between youth, family, and the community to which they will return following their experience with the juvenile justice system.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Damage control model. Risk prediction and problem identification model.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Success promotion model. Assumes strengths are present and accessible given the opportunity to activate them.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Limits youth and implies poor prognosis for success.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Celebrates the potential for youth to overcome any difficulty given the proper guidance and resources.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Views youth problems as fundamental, enduring, and intrinsic.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Views youth problems as developmental, transitory and dependent on the guidance of caring adults and positive opportunities to resolve.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Culture as a factor associated with lack of capacity for prosocial behaviour.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Culture as a factor associated with a new variety of potential solutions, ideas, and fuel for success for youth, families, and communities.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social justice issues as irrevocable social pathology among the poor and disenfranchised. Communities as the hub of youth pathology. Juvenile delinquency as a natural outgrowth of these combined phenomena.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Social justice still worth fighting for and the juvenile justice system as a target for, agent of, and partner in a call for community activation through community strengths. Delinquency not regarded as inevitable no matter how highly stressed the community.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Families viewed as the cause of the problem.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Families viewed as essential partners in the ultimate success of the youth.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Opportunities for youth to “do their time” seen synonymously with paying debt to society.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Opportunities for youth to repair harm they’ve caused others, develop life skills, competencies, and insights, and emerge with greater likelihood of civic engagement and durable community relationships.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Youth responsibility to “change their ways” and “turn their lives around”. Pick self up by the bootstraps mentality.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Youth expected to show up, acknowledge wrongdoing, and participate actively in building accountability and a prosocial life. Community responsibility to guide, support, encourage, and grow youth into positive, thriving young adults.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focus on youth as bad or sick. Secondary focus on controlling or healing youth.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Focus on youth as potential resource within his/her family and community. Secondary focus on building and reclaiming youth.</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>