Bringing Strength-Based Philosophy to Life in Juvenile Justice

Laura Nissen

The strength-based approach is an organizing principle for a family of theories and practice strategies that encourage helping professionals to seek out clients’ abilities, resources, and gifts and apply them to current life challenges. Despite its successful use in many human service sectors, this approach has not been embraced in the juvenile justice system, where punitive sanctions have escalated while focus has been lost on the restorative and redemptive vision of the court’s strength-based founders. This article explores the strength-based approach, positing its great potential to improve outcomes for juvenile justice clients. These improved outcomes are the result of the strength-based philosophy in action: viewing youth as being capable of change, finding and focusing on their assets and areas of resiliency, and facilitating the cultivation of pro-social and drug-free identities. Ideological, organizational, and political barriers are discussed, and suggestions offered for incorporating the strength-based approach into real world juvenile justice settings.

While over 30 million youth will never come in contact with the juvenile justice system, it is well documented that each year over a million youth under the age of 18 will (Stahl, 2001). It is estimated that each youth lost to a future of delinquency and drug abuse costs society between 1.7—2.3 million dollars (Snyder & Sickmund, 1999). Public attention regularly focuses on the problem of youth crime. Inaccurate portrayals of the facts of juvenile crime dominate the media, and America is as concerned as ever with the overall effectiveness of the courts and institutions designed to remedy youth crime (Soler, 2001). Race and class are widely understood to be critical variables associated with the disproportionate number of poor youth of color who comprise the juvenile justice rolls (Mauer, 1999), and issues such as substance abuse and mental illness contribute to the numbers of youth who are finding themselves in the juvenile justice system in need of opportunities to change and redirect their lives (Schiraldi, Holman, & Beatty, 2000; Cocozza & Skowyra, 2000).

Originally evolving as a youth advocacy movement more than 100 years ago, the contemporary juvenile justice system is better described as not one but a loosely knit series of many local systems with widely varying definitions and interpretations of such key variables as: what offenses are worth charging and how that will occur, what constitutes a sanction and incentive and how those will be delivered, what constitutes accountability and even how success is defined. In general, however, there is agreement that over the past ten years, there has been a dramatic surge in more punitive focus on youthful offenders and a distinct devolution of the authority and role of the juvenile court (Fagan & Zimring, 2000; Butts & Roman, 2004).

During this same period, important scientific breakthroughs have emerged with regard to both the causes of and the pathways out of juvenile delinquency. Researchers, practitioners, families, crime victims, and community members have developed new methods of thinking about and organizing responses to juvenile crime and a new generation of best prac-
tices has emerged (Mendel, 2000; Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, 2000; Stevens & Morral, 2003). Embedded implicitly in the more well-known of these approaches is a distinct philosophical orientation toward clients known as a “strength-based approach” in which cognitive-behavioral, social network and support, and brief approaches are all present.

Despite the availability of models, there has been a substantive gap in the contemporary juvenile justice literature with regard to exploring and understanding the role of the strength-based approach in improving client outcomes, reducing recidivism, and reducing costs to communities. This lack of focus causes under-utilization of a key ingredient to redirecting young lives: their strengths, and those of their families and their communities, and the manner in which those strengths might logically accelerate their transition from anti-social to prosocial activity and identity development.

**The Strength-Based Approach: What Is It?**

The strength-based approach (SBA) 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. From a strength-based approach, this type of negative labeling is considered the most counter-productive strategy possible:

Accentuating the problems of clients creates a web of pessimistic expectations of, and predictions about the client, the client’s capability to cope with that environment. Furthermore, these labels have the insidious potential, repeated over time, to alter how individuals see themselves, and how others see them. In the long run, these changes seep into the individual’s identity. (Saleebey, 1997, p. 6)

SBA’s are unwavering in their focus on optimism and hope in the helping interaction; to find, direct, and amplify those capabilities and potential for health and positive functioning which have been temporarily submerged in a presenting problem. The strength-based approach can be best summarized as any approach in which those intervening consciously attend to the following principles:

1. Every individual, group, family, and community has strengths.
2. Trauma and abuse, illness, and struggle may be injurious, but they may also be sources of challenge and opportunity.
3. Assume that you do not know the upper limits of the capacity to grow and change, but take individual, group, and community aspirations seriously.
4. We best serve clients by collaborating with them.
5. Every environment is full of resources. (Saleebey, 1997, pp. 12-15)

There are strength-based approaches for conducting client interventions and promoting meaningful social change, including solution-focused interviewing (Dejong & Berg, 1998) and strength-based assessment (Cowger, 1994), case management (Rapp, 1998), community development (Kretzman & McKnight, 1997), and even policy development (Kennedy Chapin, 1995). Saleebey (2001) has gone so far as to suggest that the helping professions are in need of a strength-based diagnostic manual to offset the exclusive pathology focus of the classic DSM approach to creating diagnostic profiles. The approach has been applied to virtually every type of client population during the last 20 years. Even the recent past president of the American Psychological Association, Martin Seligman, and his colleagues (2000) have underscored that a burgeoning field known as “positive psychology” is quickly emerging to counterbalance the overabundance of accumulated knowledge regarding human dysfunction, with little to show for itself with regard to optimum human functioning and strengths.

Unfortunately, even when it is mentioned explicitly, the strength-based approach is seldom highlighted in depth, and this represents a significant gap in the juvenile justice literature. Only a fraction of studies (Todis, Bullis, Waintrup, Schultz, & D’Ambrosio, 2001) have delved deeply into the factors associated
with youth success among formerly incarcerated teens, despite the fact that such results yielded extremely useful information with respect to building programs that not only prevent recidivism, but actually encourage success. Without explicit focus, exploration, and capacity development within the juvenile justice system itself, the strength-based approach is likely to actualize only a fraction of its potential. Literature has emerged (Clark, 1995; Clark, 1999) to address this gap, but even more is needed to frame an expanding evidence base supporting this important family of techniques and strategies.

Why Strength-Based Approaches Are Important for Juvenile Justice

As it passes its hundredth birthday, the juvenile court has experienced a turbulent identity crisis, wrestling with whether it is there to reclaim and redirect troubled youth or if it is there to punish youth, and whether it is possible to maintain a balance between the two. The optimism and vision of the “child saving” juvenile justice founders of the late 19th century has been challenged by community frustration and confusion about the phenomenon of juvenile delinquency and a juvenile justice science that is almost exclusively focused on the problems, shortcomings, defects, and problems of youth. The lexicon and landscape of contemporary juvenile justice practice is dominated by a triangle of negative labeling about the youth in question—all anchored in the ideas of deviance from agreed upon social norms and restrictions. These include (1) personality variables (immaturity, alienation, insecurity, anxiety, depression, distress, anger, or suspicion); (2) behavioral variables (aggression, attention-deficits, school drop-out, unsafe sexual practices, and others); and (3) risk-based variables (age at first offense, prior criminal behavior, previous placements, parental control, school discipline problems, and substance use) (Hoge, 2001).

Bazemore and Terry (1997) describe the phenomenon of focus on problems as a challenge of limited lenses reflecting deep inadequacies in the current service delivery infrastructure. This includes too much focus on youth control and treatment at the expense of competency development and community involvement. Their model suggests that a view of youth as villains in need of secure placement and/or as victims in need of protection from themselves and others has limited utility when it comes to the overarching principles of juvenile justice, primarily as a social tool of youth reclamation. 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. These authors posit that this third lens—that of youth as resources—is dramatically underutilized, and that only through systematic and intentional organizational renewal across and beyond the juvenile justice system can this vision be realized fully.

To further complicate the matter, a veritable industry of youth corrections has emerged and anchored itself in the mainstream justice economy. Concern has been expressed about the ethics and threats of constructing a corporate presence with regard to services to vulnerable populations—a presence which has yielded little in the way of positive outcomes, but has shown significant profit margins (Press & Washburn, 2002).

In the face of this formidable infrastructure, youth advocates working within or affiliated with the juvenile justice system are left to ask, at the risk of being ideologically disruptive, a simple but stubborn question: What about the strengths of these youth? Despite at least 50 years of increasing scientific proficiency in understanding youth problems, defects, risks, and inadequacies, this has not led to an increase in the ability of juvenile justice practitioners to use this information to invite and encourage the shifting of behavior in durable ways from antisocial to prosocial. SBA’s have the potential to connect youth to the community in new ways, develop new frames and models to focus on youth success while balancing risk, re-evaluate the role of culture as a positive source of strengths and opportunity, increase family involvement and redirection, and expand the pool of possible community partners. Through increasing community attention to and more widespread acceptance of balanced and restorative justice approaches (Bazemore & Walgrave, 1999), there is equally increased receptivity to understanding that in order to bring the true vision of community justice to life, a strength-based approach is essential.
The potential is great for juvenile justice professionals to balance accurate descriptions of problems with equally accurate descriptions of strengths. Table 1 (see page 44) provides a visual comparison of the deficit/problem-based tradition with a strength-based tradition as applied to a juvenile justice setting.

Barriers to Operationalizing a Strength-Based Approach

Juvenile justice practitioners have some credible feedback about their frustrations and challenges in trying to bring the SBA to life in real world settings (Nissen, 2003). First, the juvenile justice system functions increasingly like a machine and is in fact, by any measure, becoming more systemic and mechanized given the increased presence of risk and other forms of assessments, computerized planning tools, and manual- or protocol-driven processes. To their credit, all of these have been designed to increase efficiency and improve outcomes by improving uniformity and conformance with a given “best practice.” But cumulatively, they have created something of a conveyor belt in which youth enter, progress, and transition in a series of predictable and containable standard practice-methods all tightly ideologically entwined. The strength-based approach, by its very nature, resists the contemporary trend toward the industrialization of the juvenile justice system. It requires a truly individualized appreciation of each youth’s situational and personality variables in a way that is unique to him or her. The very act of initiating strength-based activity challenges the increasingly tightly controlled client processing and monitoring systems and implies engaging resources beyond a typically strict and limited menu of dispositions. In a juvenile justice system where cutbacks are real and time is precious, many juvenile justice practitioners voice concern that it takes additional time they do not have to be as strength-based as they would like to be.

A second barrier is the presence of overly punitive attitudes and behavior toward youth in juvenile justice which have been on the increase in the last 20 years (Butts & Roman, 2004), or the mistaken notion that punishment (or at another level, discipline and accountability) cannot co-exist with strengths development. In fact they can and should co-exist—something that good parents have known for many years. In the face of misbehavior, both limits and opportunities to improve behavior through rewards and development are essential parts of the equation of how to guide youth to improved functioning. Punitive attitudes within the juvenile justice system are exercised through policies created in an increasingly conservative criminal justice environment: national, state, and local. To address this, strength based advocates must do a better job of demonstrating the value of youth development and strengths-focus in the juvenile justice matrix of services and opportunities, highlighting success stories and the cost-benefit value of supporting strength-based opportunities as real world programs in which individuals can explore, embrace, and act out their crime-free and drug-free emerging identities. As partners, strength-based researchers must demonstrate this effectiveness through increasingly rigorous scientific inquiry.

Building Capacity in Real World Juvenile Justice Settings

An innovative philosophy is an important starting point, but juvenile justice practitioners need tools with which to craft strength-based interventions in real world settings. 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. Three areas of focus are suggested for immediate development to accelerate efforts to bring the strengths-approach more into focus:

1) Assessing for strengths

To date, there has not been a strength-based assessment instrument available that reliably and validly allows juvenile justice practitioners to balance the heavy emphasis on risk and problem focus with the presence of strengths in the lives of their clients. Introduction of such a device is a critical building block. Such a tool must include exploration into such areas as: personal and familial resources for change, experiences with previous success and/or change, presence of goals, capacity for meaningful activity, and cultural strengths including culturally-driven interpretations and variations of the concept of accountability and repairing harm. Without an instrument, individuals committed to the approach can assure case-by-case that such data becomes
Table 1: Comparing Deficit-Based and Strength-Based Traditions in Juvenile Justice Settings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deficit/Problem Tradition</th>
<th>Strength-Based Tradition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Isolates youth from communities with relatively exclusive focus on professionals, programs, and institutional responses to youth problems.</td>
<td>Connects youth to communities with balanced focus not only on remedial psychological or public safety foci, but on building relationships between youth, families, and the community to which they will return following their experience with the juvenile justice system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damage control model. Risk prediction and problem identification model.</td>
<td>Success promotion model. Assumes strengths are present and accessible given the opportunity to activate them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limits youth and implies poor prognosis for success.</td>
<td>Celebrates the potential of youth to overcome any difficulty given the proper guidance and resources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Views youth problems as fundamental, enduring, and intrinsic.</td>
<td>Views youth problems as developmental, transitory, and dependent on the guidance of caring adults and positive opportunities to resolve.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture as a factor associated with lack of capacity for prosocial behavior.</td>
<td>Culture as a factor associated with a new variety of potential solutions, ideas, and fuel for success for youth, families and communities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social injustice 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.</td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families viewed as the cause of the problem.</td>
<td>Families viewed as essential partners to the ultimate success of youth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities for youth to “do their time” seen synonymously with paying debt to society.</td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth responsibility to “change their ways” and “turn their lives around.” Pick self up by the bootstraps mentality.</td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on youth as bad or sick. Secondary focus on controlling or healing youth.</td>
<td>Focus on youth as a potential resource within his/her family and community. Secondary focus on building and reclaiming youth.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

integrated, but does not necessarily become a consistent systemic feature of the ways that cases are handled if not administratively authorized and driven by policies requiring their unilateral inclusion (Nissen, Mackin, Weller, & Tarte, 2005).

Example in a real-world setting: Youth would systematically be asked questions about the presence of positive qualities, characteristics, or resources in their lives in the same manner and in conjunction with the ways that they are now assessed for risk and problems in case planning. Information gleaned from this strength-based assessment could be used to build a service plan that seeks to accentuate any positive influence or capability in a youth’s life while still addressing problems, the need for youth accountability, and community safety (Mackin, Weller, Tarte, & Nissen, in press).
2) Case planning for strengths

Strength-based assessment leads to strength-based actions. Once identified, strengths need to find their way into the actual plans generated that shape the activities and programs that will comprise a youth’s experience in the juvenile justice system. This very individualized and idiosyncratic “strengths profile” represents important energy and resources for change. But in that these are generally new resources, justice professionals may or may not have existing resources to match to newly discovered strengths and talent. Youth are typically referred to programs based on their problems, not their gifts and abilities, and thus, juvenile justice workers face a gap in what is needed and what is known and available. To case manage to strengths, practitioners will have to reach into the community in a new way and develop relationships with people who are amenable, available, and willing to help build healthier and more high-functioning young people through their strengths.

Example in a real-world setting: If possible, youth accountability might best be established by activating a strength and allowing a youth to “pay back” and demonstrate his or her efforts to make amends by contributing a talent, a service, or an ability on which he or she had not previously focused energy. Through multiple activities in this area, greater youth competence might be established, successes and positive feedback experienced, and likelihood of recidivism discouraged.

3) Viewing the community as an untapped reservoir of strengths

The stereotype of a community where juvenile offenders live is pervasive—neighborhoods full of crime, indifference, and pain. However, a commitment to the strength-based approach means a commitment to learning to see potential, opportunity, and hope where others might least expect it. It is an active ability to find the people, places, and resources—even in the most impoverished communities—who love and protect children, who believe that people can change, and who are willing to take a chance to stand up for youth no matter how dire their circumstances. Such people may be parents or relatives; they may be friends, neighbors, faith community members, teachers, or business people. Such a view of community strengths is operationalized through a variety of community mapping and engagement techniques (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993).

Example in a real-world setting: Business partners, faith community partners, and natural helper partners need to be invited to participate in success-building when it comes to the problem of juvenile delinquency in their communities. Juvenile justice professionals would map resources in innovative ways including engaging youth to identify resources and opportunities for safety, opportunity, and sanctuary even in the most troubled and stressed communities. It may mean reaching beyond the immediate community and seeking out resources, opportunities, and partnerships of neighboring communities to stimulate focus and innovation in new ways.

Future Directions and Conclusion

Juvenile justice administrators and practitioners face a complex future, but the strength-based approach could serve as a useful road map for setting the course of future reforms. Introduction of SBA offers a family of new interventions and opportunities for members of the juvenile justice system but has been explored only in a preliminary sense to date in justice settings. Undoubtedly, this is at least partially due to the fact that SBAs introduce ideological challenges to the more prevalent institutional array of punitive approaches against those which are more developmental and redemptive in nature. Additional investments to further study, analyze, and integrate lessons from this important approach should be prioritized among reforms. At a time when careful deployment of scarce resources is more important than ever, it becomes essential to avoid waste. The strengths, capabilities, and potential of the youth, families, and communities served in the juvenile justice system comprise a significant but all-too-frequently untapped resource for change in delinquent behaviors. Juvenile offenders represent a marginalized group to the community, too frequently viewed through lenses that are unforgiving and insensitive to the contributing factors of their challenging young lives. Strength-based juvenile justice professionals represent a source of possibility within systems and communities that are littered with the anger, frustration, and disillusionment of young people in their care. A strength-based approach, then, engenders a host of new opportunities to build a more effective 21st century juvenile justice system through identification and activation of the
strengths, power, and potential of temporarily juvenile justice-involved youth.

Laura Nissen, PhD, is associate professor in the graduate school of social work and serves as national program director for Reclaiming Futures at Portland State University, Portland, Oregon. Her interests are in improving juvenile justice approaches to substance abuse, systems of care, and strength-based methods. She can be contacted by phone: 1-502-725-8911; or e-mail: nissen@pdx.edu

REFERENCES
Kretzman, J., & McKnight, J. (1997). Building communities from the inside out: A path towards finding and mobilizing community assets. Chicago, IL: ACT Publications.

46 Reclaiming Children and Youth


Juvenile justice literature has lacked research around strength based approaches, which has ultimately lead to these approaches being underutilized (Nissen, 2006). Many juvenile justice programs simply focus on the problems. These principles are based on the belief that everyone has strengths and their strengths can be used to turn challenges into opportunities to learn and grow from (Nissen, 2006). Drug courts are able to employ these approaches by using motivational interviewing techniques during assessments, screening, and interactions with juveniles and the drug court team. ...