



A balanced approach to youth justice: Strengths-based practice, appreciative inquiry and the group consult tool

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Framing practice in youth justice

Youth justice practitioners are well aware of a tension between practice approaches that elicit strengths and resources of young people and approaches that focus on risks and needs. Despite the public perception of youths 'out of control' and unaccountable for their offending, the system works for a majority of young people. The reality of youth justice is that 5–15% of young people commit 40–60% of all offences, and it is these same young people who run the risk of becoming recidivist adult offenders (UNICEF, 2008). The young people who receive the most attention are often those considered "dangerous, delinquent, deviant or disordered". Each label "velcros" to the young person (Ungar, 2006) and can influence the responses they receive. It is under this pressure that youth justice practice can become problem-saturated and feel like "conveyor-belt practice" (Ferguson, 2004). However, there is increasing literature and practice to endorse the efficacy of strengths-based approaches to youth justice work. The aim of this article is to look at a more balanced approach to youth justice, which recognises the

importance of actively engaging young people in responses that positively change behaviour.

Deficit forms of thinking offer a context for explaining and understanding childhood and adolescent problems. For instance the *Youth Offending Strategy* (Ministry of Justice & Ministry of Social Development, 2002) encourages the use of risk psychology to help identify factors in the young person's life that could change with the right support, but cautions against the inherent risk of self-fulfilling prophecy. It suggests that practitioners also apply a strengths-based approach to their practice particularly in the identification of resilience and protective factors in the young person (Beals, 2008).

Strengths-based practice principles are emphasised in the practice frameworks introduced into Child, Youth and Family to support young people and their families (Connolly, 2007). The youth justice practice framework provides a conceptual overview of the youth justice process through phases, strands and practice triggers and assumes a working alliance of collaboration, respect

and empowerment. Critical to this process is the way practitioners engage with vulnerable young people and their families to create relationships and conditions that facilitate change. In line with the Practice Frameworks a number of practice tools and resources have been introduced into Child, Youth and Family to enhance assessment and engagement with children, young people and their families (see for instance Field, 2008).

Practice tools have been designed that are to be used and shared with the family. This shifts the assessment resources from the professional 'expert' domain toward a process of engagement and transparency with the young people and their family, supporting relationship building, and the generation of hope and conditions for change (Chapman & Field, 2007). These tools have had a care and protection focus, and to date their adoption and use has not been mirrored extensively in youth justice practice. However, there is a need for tools in youth justice that can assist to balance risks and needs with strengths and resources.

A balanced approach to addressing offending includes the risk, need and responsivity principles as proposed by Bonta and Andrews (2007).

- risk principle: Match the level of service to the offender's risk to reoffend
- need principle: Assess criminogenic needs and target them in treatment
- responsivity principle: Maximise the offender's ability to learn from a rehabilitative intervention by tailoring the intervention to the learning style, motivation, abilities and strengths of the offender.

A balanced approach also incorporates the five key principles of Core Correctional Practice (Canton, 2005), including:

- effective use of authority – a firm but fair approach with offenders
- modelling and reinforcing anti-criminal attitudes and behaviour in their own behaviour
- teaching problem-solving skills
- effective use of community resources
- relationship factors.

The relationship factor: A starting point for a strengths-based approach

Practice and assessment frameworks provide the foundation for what to do why, but the engagement and relational factors are arguably the engine of youth justice work. Canton (2005) suggests the relationship factors are the most important component of core correctional practice. Feedback from ex-young offenders who have broken free of their offending behaviour supports this notion. They suggested the most effective treatment the young people had received came through protection from stigmatisation, individualised attention from someone who cared, and positive reinforcement (Texas Youth Commission, 2005).

There is a growing emphasis in the literature on the importance of relationships and engagement in creating change in young people's behavior (Brendtro, 2004; Duncan, Miller and Sparks, 2007; Ungar, 2006; Clark, 2008). For instance, the youth cannabis treatment study, a randomised clinically controlled research project that compared a range of clinical treatment approaches, found that the best determinant of effective outcomes (desistance or reduction in cannabis use) was the client's rating of the helping alliance early in treatment (Duncan et al, 2007). They found that the different methods or approaches were equally effective. In other words, they found client engagement is the lynchpin of effective treatment outcomes.

Sometimes we get so caught up in the “science” of assessment, procedures, plans and tasks we lose sight of what Graybeal (2007) describes as the art of social work, and more generally the importance of strengths-based practice.

There is significant literature developing around strengths-based approaches in youth justice (Clark, 2008; Ungar, 2006; Mackin, Weller & Tarte, 2004; Mullins & Toner, 2008; Brendtro 2004). The approach acknowledges that simply eliminating immediate problems does not bring about long-term behavior change; long-term change requires individuals to call upon internal and external strengths that may not always be apparent. The strengths perspective in the justice field is premised on a belief in the offender’s ability to change. It doesn’t deny the reality of the harm inflicted by those we work with but suggests,

if there are genuinely evil people beyond grace and hope, it is best not to make that assumption about any individual first ... even if we are to work with someone whose actions are beyond our capacity to understand and accept we must ask ourselves if they have useful skills and behaviors, even motivations and aspirations that can be tapped in the service of change and to a less destructive way of life. (Saleebey, 1992, p. 238).

Competencies, capacities for change, accountability, aspirations, relationships, skills, knowledge, and resources are the foci of this strengths-based approach (Clark, 2008; McCashen, 2005; Mackin, et al, 2004; Pearpoint, O’Brien & Forest, 2001; Saleebey, 2008). This doesn’t replace existing risk- or problem-identification tools, but rather expands, strengthens, and improves the system’s capacity to include the positive elements of a youth and the youth’s family, peers, and/or community in

a well balanced assessment and intervention. “Parents are often shocked by the strengths-based focus, which is often helpful because sometimes the kids have put them through so much that they are having a hard time seeing the kid’s strengths” (Mackin et al, 2005, p.28).

McCashen (2005) describes a key set of skills for the strengths-based practitioner. This includes normalising, reframing, identifying exceptions, scaling, and developing a picture of the future. A strengths focus, effective use of these skills, and appropriate practice tools help practitioners and clients from becoming mired in the problem “rut”. It also shifts the practitioner’s role in the assessment process – from a professional expert assessing families to a role where workers and families collaboratively assess the problems that have come into their lives. The questions we ask and the ways we organise and document the information we receive has a profound effect on our subsequent work (McCashen, 2005).

A strengths perspective invites us to:

- respect offenders as people worth doing business with
- co-operate with the person, not the offending
- recognise that co-operation is possible even when coercion is required
- recognise that all families have signs of sobriety and/or pro-social behaviours
- learn what the youth and family wants
- always search for detail
- don’t confuse details with judgements
- focus on creating small change
- offer choice, avoid unnecessary coercion
- treat the interview as a forum for change (Clark, 2002: adapted from Turnell & Edwards, 1999).

to navigate complex territory in a way that “make sense of the whole”. Visual formats can enhance participant engagement and create a transparent, collaborative environment where solutions can emerge (Pearpoint et al, 2001). Problems can be externalised, risk and strengths separated, judgments located and rated through the use of scaling. Initial information gathering with young people and their families can be assisted by the use of the three houses resource (Weld & Greening, 2004). Anecdotal reports from practitioners suggest that young people and families are easily engaged by the three houses and the information elicited can easily transfer onto the consult tool.

Clark (2008, p. 137) suggests that the optimal conditions for change include “a desire to achieve an outcome (importance), belief that it can be achieved (confidence), and a belief that the new behavior is freely chosen (autonomy)”. The consult tool can assist to create the conditions where this can occur.

Appreciative inquiry

The consult can be used to develop a superficial or “thin” description of a young person and their family if it focuses on deficits and labels and is based on opinions rather than facts. It can also develop a richer or “thick” description (Madsen, 2003) if appreciative inquiry and strengths-based questioning skills are used to elicit the information to populate the form.

Appreciative inquiry is an approach which dovetails with the strengths perspective (Gordon, 2008). Based on the premise that what you focus on is what you get more of, and that change begins the moment we start asking questions, the focus is on stories of success, on strengths, on values, on the most ideal future or most satisfying outcome. Images of that ideal future invite plans, agreements and actions

designed to fulfil it. Lessons from past successes, honouring values and using strengths can be applied to new situations and circumstances.

Developing an “appreciative eye” contributes an immense amount of power and effectiveness to the collaborative process because:

- we can chose what we focus on
- inquiry invites change
- images inspire action
- in every system, something works and what works can be applied to new situations (Belgard & Thompson, 2008).

An appreciative inquiry approach was used to engage with street gangs in America. The interviewers worked past the initial bravado and kept asking appreciative questions, and the young people shared their goals which were compatible with good citizenship (i.e. family, education, jobs, contribution and respect). “Whether it is gang members or community members or members of your parish, when you ask people, across socioeconomic strata, what are their dreams, you will find that they are very willing to talk. Appreciative inquiry serves as a framework for facilitating that conversation ... and forces us to use a language of appreciation” (Easley, 2003, p. 2). Easley notes that without moving from prescriptive, deficit-focused interventions for these young people, we risk suppressing any anticipatory visions they may have about moving from their present condition.

Gordon (2008) summarises the key assumptions which underpin an appreciative approach:

- in every society, organisation, group or individual, something works
- what people focus on becomes their reality
- reality is created in the moment, and there are multiple realities

- the act of asking questions of an organisation, group, or individual influences the group or individual in some way
- people are more confident and comfortable in their journey to the future (the unknown) when they carry forward parts of the past (the known)
- if people carry parts of the past forward, those parts should be what is best about the past
- it is important to value differences
- the language people use creates their reality.

Youth justice is a context where the language of deficit and pathology, risk and need looms large. The challenge is holding these on the one hand while maintaining a sense of optimism and hope on the other. A strengths-based and appreciative approach assists to create an environment of collaboration, participation and empowerment. The youth justice practice framework provides a supportive scaffold to guide the overall process. Effective practice can be enhanced by the use of practice tools that balance risks and strengths and facilitate meaningful engagement of young people and their families.

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