
INTRODUCTION

Recasting the Ecological and Developmental Roots of Intervention for Students with Emotional and Behavior Problems: The Promise of Strength-Based Perspectives

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In working with children and adolescents with or at-risk of emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD), it is easy to become focused on the problems that they display. However, in recent years researchers and practitioners have distinguished between strategies that center on the reduction of problem behavior and strategies that emphasize teaching and reinforcing positive behaviors (Sugai, 2007). In addition to the work in positive behavioral supports, several conceptual models (e.g., competence promotion, resilience and positive psychology, and positive youth development) have been proposed that share a common perspective. Namely, that the path to productive behavioral adjustment rests in building on existing strengths in high-risk students and promoting their development of new competencies and relationships that enhance their long-term adaptation (e.g., Bierman et al., 2008; Morrison, Brown, D’Incau, O’Farrell, & Furlong, 2006). As a result, new approaches in the assessment and treatment of behavior disorders have emerged that blend strength-based perspectives with early intervention, positive behavioral support, and multi-factored prevention frameworks.

Accordingly, the purpose of this special issue is to present a range of complementary perspectives on strength-based practices that link behavioral adaptation from early childhood through adolescence and that span assessment, early intervention, treatment, and prevention.

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In this introduction to the special issue, we briefly review the ecological and developmental foundations of strength-based perspectives, provide a brief synthesis of the four articles in this special issue, and consider future directions in strength-based research.

ECOLOGICAL AND DEVELOPMENTAL FOUNDATIONS OF STRENGTH-BASED INTERVENTION

The application of strength-based perspectives to the assessment and treatment of youth with or at-risk of EBD in many ways reflects the pioneering views of the ecological framework outlined by Nicholas Hobbs (1982) in the classic book *Troubled and Troubling Children*. From an ecological perspective, children and youth grow and develop within a social system that includes their family, school, neighborhood, and community. A central tenet of the ecological framework is that emotional and behavioral problems do not rest within the child or the ecology but rather reflect problems in the interaction between the child and the ecology (Hobbs, 1966, 1982). The treatment implications of this view are that (1) problem behavior can be ameliorated by bringing the needs and capabilities of the student into alignment with the demands and resources of the social system in which the child is embedded; (2) to do this it is necessary to identify the child's strengths and the corresponding resources in the social system that can best reinforce and maintain these strengths; and (3) it is also necessary to foster new competencies in the child to help her or him adapt to the ecology while simultaneously promoting new capacities and relationships within the environment.

Known as "re-education," the overarching goal of the ecological treatment model is to approach the daily activities of living as a continual intervention opportunity where individual strengths can be fostered and new relationships can be established to promote the behavioral adaptation and emotional adjustment of the child (Hobbs, 1966). Hobbs first outlined this ecological model nearly 50 years ago, and it continues to undergird Project Re-ED programs throughout the United States. It also serves as an example that has guided the development of other programs that utilize a strength-based perspective to support the positive growth of children and youth with/or at-risk of EBD (see Cantrell & Cantrell, 2007).

While the re-education model provides a strong conceptual foundation for a strength-based perspective that builds from an intervention framework, an equally compelling rationale for a strength-based approach can be found in the theoretical tenets of developmental science that are rooted in basic empirical research on behavioral development in childhood and adolescence. According to developmental science, individual functioning and adaptation reflects the interplay between developmental subsystems within (e.g., cognitive, emotional, endocrine, morphological, neurobiological, perceptual, physiological) and external to (e.g., family, peer group, neighborhood, school, community) the child (Cairns, 2000). These various subsystems are bidirectionally linked and operate as an integrated developmental system with each subsystem influencing the others (Sameroff, 1995).

The term "correlated constraints" has been used to describe the fact that a child's developmental system tends to be conservative because the subsystems promote constancy in each other and stability in the youth's behavioral functioning (Cairns, 2000). When a child's developmental system is organized around strengths (e.g., competent functioning, supportive relationships, sufficient resources) he or she is likely to display patterns of positive behavior, and the system of

correlated strengths is likely to protect against the development of EBD (Farmer, Farmer, Estell, & Hutchins, 2007). In contrast, when the system is organized around multiple risk factors (e.g., deficient functioning, problematic relationships, inadequate resources), maladaptive patterns of behavior are likely to become consolidated, and the child will be at high risk of developing EBD.

As an interesting paradox within a systems framework, the same mechanism (i.e., bidirectional influence) that supports constancy in the developmental system can also promote change in behavior and various developmental subsystems (Cairns, 2000). In other words, as one subsystem experiences a sustained significant change, it is possible that a corresponding change in behavior may evoke changes in other subsystems that result in the reorganization of the entire developmental system.

The concept of systems reorganization has two important implications for the aims of strength-based interventions (Farmer et al., 2007). First, when the developmental system reflects correlated multiple strengths, the aim of intervention is to prevent systems reorganization by bolstering strengths in the system and by ameliorating problem behavior that may occur as the result of the introduction of risk into one of the developmental subsystems. Second, when the developmental system reflects correlated multiple risks, the aim of intervention is to promote the reorganization of the developmental system. This requires (a) identifying possible strengths to serve as the core for efforts to promote systems reorganization, (b) identifying possible malleable risk factors in other subsystems, and (c) carefully intervening with these malleable risk factors so they become strengths that promote behavioral adaptation and foster positive adaptation in other risk factors. Diagnostic questions and examples for promoting strength-based prevention and treatment have been outlined elsewhere (see Farmer et al., 2007). It should be noted that behavior serves as a conduit that connects the various developmental systems (Cairns, 2000). Therefore, whether operating from a prevention or treatment perspective, promoting behavioral adaptation that bolsters strengths within the developmental system is critical for sustaining patterns of positive school adjustment and corresponding mental health functioning.

Even though the ecological treatment perspective outlined by Hobbs (1966, 1982) builds directly from intervention and the developmental science perspective (e.g., Cairns, 2000; Farmer et al., 2007) is grounded in empirical research on the development of human behavior, the two conceptual frameworks are markedly similar in terms of situating individual functioning within a broader systems context in which individual and ecological factors are linked by behavior. From both perspectives, behavior adaptation is not simply a desired outcome of intervention. Rather, it is a critical component for evoking and maintaining the positive alignment among various developmental subsystems in ways that promote long-term adjustment and functioning of the individual. However, this does not mean that positive behavioral change is enough. On the contrary, such change is likely to be short-lived and to have very little adaptive consequence if it does not help evoke or sustain a system of correlated developmental strengths.

SYNTHESIS OF THE ARTICLES IN THIS ISSUE

Accordingly, we consider the four articles in this special issue in light of their contributions to elucidating the promise of strength-based perspectives in promoting more effective interventions

for youth with or at-risk of EBD. Further, common themes are summarized that reflect the collective contributions of these articles to strength-based perspectives.

In the first article, Cress and colleagues report on the psychometric properties of the Preschool Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale (PreBERS). The purpose of the PreBERS is to measure the emotional and behavioral strengths and assets of children aged 3–5 years that promote personal, academic, and social development. This article demonstrates that the types of strength-based assessments that are necessary to guide both the development of interventions and the evaluation of the impact of such interventions on children's competencies and strengths can be reliably conducted in early childhood with the PreBERS.

In the second article, Sutherland and colleagues discuss the role of teacher-student interactions in effective early intervention and outline specific strategies that preschool teachers can use to promote and bolster young children's behavioral and pre-academic strengths. This article brings to the forefront the critical role of teacher-student interactions in behavioral adaptation, and it explicitly describes how these interchanges can be leveraged to promote children's development of new skills, competencies, and relationships.

In the third article, Lewis and colleagues examine issues in the establishment of effective early intervention and prevention programs and discuss how School-wide Positive Behavioral Support (SWPBS) can serve as a core for comprehensive services to promote the strengths and adaptation of children with or at-risk of EBD. This article clearly illuminates the point that children's behavioral adaptation requires a carefully designed school context that systematically evokes and reinforces desired behaviors and promotes new abilities or capacities.

In the final article, Farmer and colleagues discuss the transition to middle school from a developmental science and person-environment fit perspective and present preliminary findings from a strength-based multi-component intervention model aimed at promoting the adaptation of early adolescents. This article provides initial evidence that academic, behavioral, and social competence support strategies may synergistically help teachers cultivate middle school contexts that foster positive peer relationships and peer norms that promote at-risk students' productive academic engagement and prosocial behaviors.

Three common themes emerge from these four articles. First, the focus of intervention should not be simply on the immediate improvement of behavior but rather on fostering skills, competencies, and capacities that are critical for promoting the student's long-term functioning and adaptation. Second, to do this it is necessary to understand the child as situated within a developmental context that includes teacher-student, peer group, classroom, and school-level factors that collectively contribute to the development and maintenance of new behaviors and strengths. Third, when assessing and intervening to promote children's strengths, it is necessary to simultaneously focus on both the characteristics of the student and the context in which he or she is embedded. More specifically, the emphasis should be on facilitating interchanges between the individual and the environment that foster productive behavioral adaptation.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN STRENGTH-BASED RESEARCH

Collectively, the three common themes of the articles in this special issue indicate that a strength-based perspective requires a focus on the development of the individual child within the ecological context. Further, following from ecological and developmental science frameworks,

it is necessary to understand behavioral adaptation in relation to a system of developmental strengths and/or risks. In essence, the promise of a strength-based perspective is that it moves intervention efforts toward assessing and clarifying the development function of behavior and its role in the alignment of developmental subsystems and the corresponding maintenance of the entire system.

As research in strength-based approaches moves forward, two critical issues need to be addressed. First, there is a need to develop linkages between strength-based assessment and intervention across development from early childhood into adulthood. As suggested in the re-education ecological model, strength-based intervention is not an inoculation—it is ongoing support and capacity development within the activities of living. Many youth with or at-risk of EBD constantly experience risk in internal (e.g., neurophysiological risks, limited processing skills) and external (e.g., poverty, community risks) subsystems that may negatively constrain their developmental opportunities. Consistent with the concept of resilience, there is need for additional research that clarifies which strengths and competencies can be utilized to counter risk in specific developmental subsystems. Second, there is need for research that merges structural interventions such as the SWPBS systems outlined by Lewis and colleagues with “in-stream” interventions strategies such as the teacher-student interaction supports described by Sutherland and colleagues or the competence support approaches presented by Farmer and colleagues. There is much to be done in strength-based research, but the current articles suggest that strength-based perspectives hold much promise for the future of students with or at-risk of EBD.

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