Youth strengths arise from the ashes of adversity

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ABSTRACT
With problem-oriented approaches to practice, policy and research, youth considered to be ‘at-risk’ are not often viewed from a strengths-based perspective. Explorations of youths’ strengths are critical to help create environments where youth can flourish. The purpose of this research was to explore the resilience, healthy capabilities and strengths of youth at risk; from youth and staff perspectives across three community-based organizations in Western Canada. Through 17 interviews analyzed using hermeneutics, and further interpretation using metaphor development, stories arose of a journey progressing from loss and despair to fostering hope. The importance of youth having a voice and being included in decision-making was both a strength and a way of building strengths in youth. Multiple-level recommendations to help mediate the challenges and systems failures identified in these youths’ journeys were identified; with an end goal of creating healthier futures for youth and a society in which they feel they belong.

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Introduction and background literature
Youth in conflict with the law have often been described as vulnerable or ‘at-risk’ due to poor mental health, high rates of violence, substance use, risky sexual behaviour, poor educational achievements, early school leaving, social deprivation, poverty, and poor social relationships (Carr & Vandiver, 2001; Sanders, Schneiderman, Loken, Lankenau, & Bloom, 2009; Watson, Kelly, & Vidalon, 2009). Similarly, youth involved in foster care systems are less likely to complete high school, experience difficulties maintaining employment, and have higher rates of poverty, homelessness, substance use and mental health problems (Ponciano, 2013). Although these can be significant burdens, problem-oriented approaches to practice, policy and research focused solely on these issues ignore important social contexts and consequently label these youth as deficient or deviant (Bender, Thompson, McManus, Lantry, & Flynn, 2007). Connections have also been made between poor mental health, poverty, social disadvantage and stigma; necessitating attention to creating the conditions for vulnerable youths to lead lives with dignity, autonomy and inclusion (Patel, Saxena, De Silva, & Samete, 2013).

An emerging body of knowledge suggests that difficult life situations can lead to the development of new strengths, coping abilities and capacities (Brendtro & Larson, 2004; Lindsey, Kurtz, Jarvis, Williams, & Nackerud, 2000; Michael, Solenko, Yakhnich, & Karnieli-Miller, 2018). Resiliency, or the capacity of youth to cope successfully with adversity (Rew, Taylor-Seehafer, Thomas, & Yockey, 2001), may be promoted by fostering the positive attributes of troubled youth (Kidd, 2003). Yet, little research has examined how street youths for example, cope or define their strengths (Bender et al., 2007). Also, youth programs, schools, systems and even societies rarely document youths’ strengths, or monitor positive outcomes or positive development (Park, 2009; Ponciano, 2013).
Neuroplasticity development studies have identified that youth have strengths that can be capitalized upon to promote thriving (Geldhof, Bowers, & Lerner, 2013), and that the structure of brain cells can be mediated by novel approaches, such as will, acts, aspirations and hope – causing a shift from reality as objective, to one that can be constructed and thereby changed through an appreciative process (McAdam & Mirza, 2009). In addition, research exploring young peoples’ strengths from their own perspectives is rare (Case & Haines, 2015). Further exploration of youths’ strengths and resiliency is critical to provide direction for programming and policy to assist youth to flourish.

**Research purpose and design**

The purpose of this research was to explore resilience, healthy capabilities and strengths of youth at risk in order to inform practice and policy directions for mental health promotion and capability-building activities to assist in building healthier futures for youth. This multi-site project included youth residing in a mental health focused community-based setting, attending an educational setting for youth in conflict with the law, or receiving services for at-risk or homeless youth in a large Western Canadian city. The multidisciplinary research team was comprised of researchers from nursing and social work faculties in partnership with staff from three community-based organizations. Research questions included: What are the personal strengths of at-risk youth, from their own perspectives? What is the meaning of these strengths for how youth are positioned within society? What meaning does visioning youth from a strengths perspective (rather than a deficit perspective) have for policy development and program planning?

Appreciative inquiry (AI) was used as the overall strengths-based philosophical guide in this qualitative research project and Gadamerian hermeneutics were used for data analysis and interpretation (Gadamer, 2007). AI is a philosophy and method of change focused not only on problems but also upon building from the best experiences and knowledge a group has, to inform and strengthen the future in an empowering process (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). AI was used for interview construction to guide data collection that focused on gathering stories of strengths, or assets of the youth.

Using a semi-structured in-depth interview guide 17 interviews were completed with youth (n = 11), ranging in age from 15–20 years, and staff and management (n = 6) across three sites (see Appendix for sample youth interview guide questions). One staff and one management interview were completed across each of the three sites. Four youth interviews occurred from each of the mental health focused setting and the educational setting, and three youth interviews from the setting with services for at-risk or homeless youth. All 17 interviews were completed by the sixth author of this article. Recruitment of youth was facilitated by our experienced community partner team members with careful consideration for the welfare of the youth. Interviews with staff and management provided multi-level perspectives on the strengths of youth. Individuals shared stories of when they had overcome (or if a staff person, when they had seen youth overcome) difficulty, achieving success or personal growth. Ethics approvals were obtained from the university health ethics board, the provincial Solicitor General and a local board of education.

**Results and interpretation**

Hermeneutics is described as the theory and practice of interpretation (Gadamer, 2007), with its philosophical guidance occurring through a search for meanings. Hermeneutics provides a guide for reading texts, in this case for texts arising from semi-structured interviews. Transcripts are read using a hermeneutic circle of interpretation, which includes examining the whole text for an initial understanding, then examining parts to inform and adjust the understanding of the whole in a continuous process (Koch, 1996). Generalized truths are not sought in hermeneutics because there are no two situations that are exactly the same in human research. Meanings are not realized
through individual intention, but through intersubjective transactions (Usher, 1996), and conversations with texts. In a hermeneutic approach, themes are treated as a way of identifying statements that enable researchers to increase their understanding of the topic (Gadamer, 2007). Neither thematic arrangement nor a reductionist search for an ultimate meaning in the data is the goal of a hermeneutic interpretive analysis; it is meant to be a tool to convey the range and richness of the experience the participants shared. In hermeneutics, metaphor development is used to reveal deep structures, bring out richness in stories and provoke reactions to the text, facilitating deeper interpretations in the hermeneutic circle. Metaphors also create evocative and provocative writing aimed at stimulating the reader’s reflection and action (Wiklund, Lindholm, & Lindstrom, 2002).

Interpretive methods fit well with a goal of this study to obtain a depth of understanding of youths’ experiences, allowing us to make sense of their life experiences to arrive at a deeper understanding of how youth in difficult life circumstances can experience resilience and strengths. Hermeneutics seeks to understanding the meaning of a transcript; not the intended meaning from an interviewee, but rather its meaning in language (Geanellos, 1999) and in a societal context (thus addressing our second research question). Informed by the research purpose and questions, the hermeneutic circle of interpretation was used to guide the analysis of transcripts through multiple readings to evolve and deepen understandings. In reviewing all 17 transcripts recurring ideas arose and particular stories stood out for a deeper analysis and discussion by the research team; leading to metaphor development to bring out richness in interpretation, including building upon youths’ own metaphors. The academic members of the team completed analysis independently, then met to compare evolving understandings of the data and refine and label major idea headings that were seen repeatedly throughout the transcripts. For an example of the process undertaken, in one of the research team meetings major idea headings that had been laid out in a table with illustrative quotes were reordered – and the conceptualization of a process or a journey towards realization of youths’ strengths was born, providing a framing for presenting a story of a journey.

Many strengths were compiled from an analysis of the interviews (see Table 1), with an overarching metaphor ‘Youth strengths arise from the ashes of adversity’ representing their origins. Youths’ stories portrayed a journey towards realizing their strengths, depicted as legs of the journey: 1. Family, 2. Despair, 3. Seeking value, 4. Seeking normal, 5. (In)adequate preparation for adulthood, 6. Systems failure/gaps, and 7. Fostering hope. The following section describes each of these concepts with illustrative quotes drawn from the transcripts.

**Family**

Many of the youth in the study discussed family as a ‘loss’, depicting a keen sense of the contrast between the social norm of a loving, secure family and their own lives… growing up, you’re told your family is your

**Table 1. Youth Strengths.**

| Resiliency; can withstand a lot, endurance | Sense of humour/funny | Caring/Compassion/Nice person, friendly | Altruistic; desire to do good | Artistic |
|--------------------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------|
| Protective & loyal/look out for their friends on the streets | Hard working & driven, show initiative | Hopeful for future/can set future plans | Stubborn/determined | Learn from experiences/Eager to learn |
| Courageous | Smart | Flexible & adaptable; Resourceful | Persevere/don’t give up | Can change |
| Positive attitude/responsible | Giving | Have opinions. Want to be included in decision-making | Relationship-focused | Love animals |
| Forgiving, easy going, can rise above a situation | Can work through barriers; problem solvers | Respectful | Empathetic | Creative |
| | | | | Accepting of others & open minded |

presented in their own words; underlined strengths were strong themes
family … So that’s where the sadness comes from’ (Interview #8); or through youth-created stories of family as people they cared about ‘… family is someone that is close to me… Whether blood or not.’ (Int. #17). In contrast, staff held more traditional understandings of family and discussed their contribution in more abstract terms, such as their preparatory (or harmful) roles for youth’s involvement in society.

Despair and seeking value

The second major leg of youth’s journey described as despair, arose out of the often desperate situations youth experienced without the necessary supports (physical/home, emotional, sense of family) to help navigate challenges. Youth shared that living on the streets can be ‘soul-sucking’, pulling youth further down into the muck, leading the team to develop metaphors of ‘living inside of dirt’ and ‘muck on your boots’. Youth identified a number of successes, despite the challenges. However, as the muck ‘sticks’ to youth it becomes harder for them to feel valued in society, the third leg of the journey. Youth prioritized feeling ‘respected as a human being. Like, I was worth something.’ (Int. #8). A key component of not feeling valued was youths’ experience of stigma, which in addition to creating its own harm, compounds other harm. One youth shared poignant examples of stigma ‘So, when I personally go out into the public with a friend and we’re talking, I always see those … you know, those glares from people who are older. And they’re like, “wow, like, these obnoxious [kids]”, and “oh my gosh, they’re loud!” “Who could believe? Can you believe that?”’ (Int. #8) – stated in her presence, as if she was invisible. Another youth said ‘… there’s a lot of mistreatment and a lot of discrimination [towards us], and I feel like it’s just overlooked’ (Int. #15). The unquestioned and accepted discrimination and stigma directed towards youth is troubling. Another key metaphor that arose from this theme was ‘thrown-away children’ representing the height some youth have to climb to feel valued in society.

Seeking normal

Connected to the metaphor of ‘want[ing] to be a human being’, youth expressed the desire to feel normal, the fourth leg of the journey. As one shared, ‘… really that’s all that street kids want to feel, is normal’ (Int. #6). Youth needed to feel respected as a human being, able to engage in other than treatment-oriented conversations with adults. Youth noted how showing personal interest in and having everyday social conversations with them demonstrates caring and interest and supports them in feeling like they are a normal human being. Staff articulated the belief that all youth need opportunities for success along with positive messages received from staff, and reiterated ‘… don’t label them…’ (Int. #13). Seeking normal was expressed by one youth through her spoken word poetry desire ‘to smile without a mask’.

(In)adequate preparation for adulthood

Youth noted mixed perspectives on preparation for adulthood. Some youth felt their adversity had shaped them into being a better person and they were taking responsibility for themselves ‘[I know where I’m going and] I think that’s a good thing. Because, like, a lot of people my age are still trying to find out what they want to do…’ (Int. #16). Others felt inadequately prepared for adulthood ‘… I turned 17 this year. And that just hit me really hard. It’s like, “oh shit, next year I’m going to be an adult. … I have to get my whole life together…”’ (Int. #14). This theme led to the metaphorical reflection that ‘youth grow themselves’, which is a statement of faith in natural change and in positioning staff as facilitators of healthy development.

Systems failures/gaps

Systems failures and gaps were raised in most of the youth and staff interviews, captured in the metaphor the social safety net is ‘made of concrete riddled with cracks’, arising from one youth’s
statement ‘I fell through the cracks’ (Int. #6). The social safety net was criticized as inadequate with problems such as youth facing homelessness upon aging out of service, the urgent need for more housing programs and job opportunities for youth. The frustration involved in dealing with systems was expressed by a staff person ‘... it’s like pulling teeth to get someone to listen to us’ (Int. #9). A major assertion shared by staff was that adolescence is a ‘lingering condition’, and they experience youth aging out of services at age 18, regardless of need.

**Fostering hope**

Fostering hope, the final leg of the journey was present in multiple stories. Youth offered many suggestions for fostering or building upon hope in creating better futures for them and staff identified finding and nurturing a little spark in youth was a way of cultivating hope. Helping youth build a future-orientation is another way to foster hope; one youth stated his forward-looking outlook helped save his life when he was suicidal. A sense of humour was a protective factor that enhanced resiliency as shared by a number of youth, as exemplified by the metaphor ‘laughter is a natural prescription’ stated by one youth.

**Challenges and limitations**

Challenges and delays arose in data collection for this research, such as having to coordinate days and times for interviews across multiple settings with multiple stakeholders, and obtaining parental consent (for youth under 18 years old). Rescheduling interviews, and changing locations occurred frequently, necessitating interviewer flexibility. An example of unanticipated flexibility needs included our research assistant (RA) holding a participant’s baby during parts of the interview. Building rapport with a youth pre-interview was a critical component (Michael et al., 2018) of helping create a safe, non-judgmental environment to share stories. Also, not captured in interview transcripts but showcasing their talents, a number of youth shared their art work, their poetry or played music they had created. Our RA was struck by the pride and excitement in the youths’ voices when they shared their current activities with her, and amazed by the youths’ wisdom – not often acknowledged in conceptualizations of youth.

Consistent with hermeneutics, rigor in this research process was established through personal reflexivity (Berg, 2001) and ongoing research team discussions and documentation of joint decision-making. The results from this small qualitative research project are not intended to be generalizable; rather their transferability may be evaluated by the degree to which the outcomes of the research provide the reader with sufficient information to establish the degree of similarity with their circumstances and their usefulness (Lincoln & Guba, 2000).

**Discussion**

This research adds to emerging evidence of protective factors that build resiliency in at-risk youth (Brownlee et al., 2013; Sanders, Munford, Thimasarn-Anwar, Liebenberg, & Ungar, 2015). A number of youth strengths identified in this research project echoed those of Nott and Vuchinich’s (2016) study of homeless youth, namely creativeness, stubbornness, acceptance of others, compassion and having future-oriented goals. Nott and Vuchinich (2016) concluded that homeless youth may be forced to use their internal assets (such as greater self-reliance and inner strengths) to a heightened degree compared to youth of higher social class. This is consistent with the descriptions of youth strengths (see Table 1) arising from this project. Other key strengths from this project included resiliency, loyalty, empathy, altruism, wanting to be included in decision-making, and artistic talents.

Study findings align with research on marginalized youth populations that a greater investment in outreach that links youth in a strengths-based manner to services empowers youth and
contributes to improving mental health and exiting homelessness (Slesnick, Zhang, & Brakenhoff, 2017). The importance of having a voice; being included in decision-making, as noted in this study, was both a strength and a way of building strengths in youth. It also served youth as a way to achieve a sense of belonging and feeling treated like a human being.

Multiple-level recommendations arose from the interviews that provided specific suggestions to help mediate the challenges and systems failures identified in the journey – across societal, system, and organizational levels. At the societal level, stigma against youth must be addressed. As a corrective, providing elementary school children with foundational education in understanding mental health and illness, bullying prevention, and the harms of stigma was suggested. Youth housing, programs, services for parents (including counselling and parenting support) and jobs for youths were identified as important gaps in service provision at the systems level. As was evident in this study, and as reported in the literature, systems are frequently siloed resulting in failures in communication and lack of early recognition and prevention initiatives (Bozino et al., 2017; Doll et al., 2018). Thus, there is a role for staff to advocate with their front-line practice stories and knowledge of gaps shared with managers, decision-makers, funders and politicians. Recommendations at the organizational level include ensuring staff are hired for their genuine interest in youth and having positive attitudes towards youth. To further this goal, staff training must include communication skills and strategies for working with youth from a client-centred perspective: adopting a caring relational approach, acknowledging youth as valued human beings, seeking out youths’ opinions and actively involving them in discussions and decision-making.

As Kisiel, Summersett-Ringgold, Weil, and McClelland (2017) suggested, gathering and sharing information on strengths can be a way of fostering hope and better supporting strengths-building in service delivery. Practice and policy directives should shift from a focus on risk factors and the etiology of problem behaviours towards youth-centred, resilience and strengths-based perspectives in service delivery. Recommendations to this end include: 1. Create intervention programs designed to enhance protective factors and contribute to youth resilience, and that consciously adopt youth and family perspectives; 2. Increase staff awareness and knowledge of client voice and how to incorporate it into service delivery; 3. Improve staff recruitment, hiring and training to promote the incorporation of client voice and participation; 4. Increase staff education related to stigma; and 5. Develop funding initiatives to further study resiliency.

Research exploring youths’ complex stories from their perspectives, although rare, offers important possibilities for enhancing youth well-being and improving professional practice (Michael et al., 2018). Youth voices have an important role to play in decision-making and shifting viewpoints and practices from a deficit approach towards a strength-based model, and in doing so, create healthier futures for youth and a society in which they feel they belong.

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**Appendix**

Sample semi-structured youth interview guide questions

1. Tell me about a really good experience you had while at [this program].
2. Can you tell me a story about a strength you have shown when faced with difficult times?
3. When people say good things about you, what do they say?
4. What strengths have you seen in your friends?
5. In your opinion, what kinds of environments build youths’ personal strengths?
6. In your opinion, what makes youths feel like they belong in society, and are valued?
7. What could be improved upon?