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the rehashing of wounds and raising of obvious personal issues with the Church never find resolution or establish a path toward healing – or even a need for it.

But to anyone whose spiritual frame of reference includes organized religion, the numerous outbursts indicate that Higgins’s work has perhaps accomplished a therapeutic purpose for the author but offers little to the world beyond. Judging by the author’s own commentary, maybe that is all it was ever intended to be; this makes it difficult, however, to recommend the book to anyone whose ministry is exercised within the institutional Church. The educational value is further limited by the fact that many of the films reviewed have R ratings, and even for those that could or should be shown in the classroom, Higgins’s jaded commentary offers little spiritual insight that could be easily translated to even a high school audience. The book may have some limited use for fine art or film instructors, or perhaps appeal to parents or teachers that are avid filmgoers with an interest in spiritual themes. But even they will be wishing that many of Higgins’s scenes had been cut or sent back for a rewrite.

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INVESTING IN CHILDREN, YOUTH, FAMILIES, AND COMMUNITIES: STRENGTHS-BASED RESEARCH AND POLICY

KENNETH I. MATON, CYNTHIA J. SCHELLENBACH, BONNIE J. LEADBETTER, & ANDREA L. SOLARZ, EDS.
AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION, 2004
$49.95, 380 pages

Reviewed by James M. Frabutt

This edited book is an engaging text that brings together social science and policy experts to articulate the advantages of strengths-based research and
The central tenet of a strengths-based approach is that youth, families, and communities are not defined by their challenges, but rather by their multiple gifts, and that “prevention of future difficulties begins with the identification and marshaling of these strengths” (p. 7). The book presents multidisciplinary perspectives – from education, public health, developmental psychology, and community development – on the need to reframe the thinking of researchers, practitioners, and policymakers from a deficit-based to a strengths-based orientation.

The first three chapters provide an overview of the strengths-based movement and a guide to the strategic goals of the book. A key theme discussed here is the notion of resilience, often defined as individual competence or adaptation in spite of significant adversity. Many chapters provide a rich empirical basis to document the specific protective factors that contribute to resilience. For example, chapter 3 explores data from the National Survey of America’s Families to show that despite other adversities youth might face (e.g., poor parent mental health, family poverty), positive engagement in school significantly reduces the probability of behavior problems. Another important theme that transcends several chapters is the need to engage youth, families, and communities in the design, implementation, and evaluation of interventions. Too often those who are the focus of social policy are “done to” instead of “partnered with.” The authors advocate a more participatory and empowering approach to social problems instead of an expert-driven, top-down approach.

Chapters 4 through 18 present several topics that are of particular interest to educators, educational researchers, and school-based support providers, including negative peer influences, school organization and school transitions, promoting resilience in schools, and fostering Latino school adaptation. Although the other areas covered do not contain an explicit school focus (e.g., children of divorce, children of alcoholic parents, abused and neglected children, community violence and youth), the crosscutting nature of these social issues merits educators’ attention. Chapter 12 directly addresses opportunities for schools to promote resilience in children and youth. It reviews the role of schools in areas such as classroom behavioral environments, teacher attitudes, and cultural relevance of the curriculum in positively influencing children’s academic and psychosocial outcomes, and how school-home-community partnerships can bolster academic achievement.

While the chapters cover a broad range of topics, they each follow a distinct pattern of organization: review of empirical research, concrete examples of programs or interventions that have demonstrated effectiveness, and how the research and programming base link to public policy. A major asset
of the book is its basis in current scientific findings and epidemiological
data to frame the scope and magnitude of the social issues under discussion.
A second important contribution is that the authors of each chapter have
made relevant social policy recommendations and solutions based on the
available knowledge base. In that regard, the book is especially useful for
those interested in shaping federal, state, and local policy initiatives so that
they build on and support youth and families’ strengths.

A complementary framework to strengths-based, resilience approaches
is that of positive youth development. Several chapters either implicitly or
explicitly draw on this framework, originally articulated by Benson and col-
leagues and now promoted by organizations such as Search Institute and the
Youth Policy Forum. The positive youth development model outlines inter-
nal and external support factors, also known as developmental assets, for
youth. Internal assets focus on positive values, social competencies, posi-
tive identity, and a commitment to learning. External assets – those societal
supports that all youth need – center on supporting and empowering young
people, setting boundaries and expectations, and encouraging positive and
constructive use of time. Those who work with youth will benefit from
exposure to the positive youth development framework as it increases per-
sonal and community awareness of how best to meet the developmental
needs of all youth.

This book is an important and timely work. Deficit-based approaches
operate by responding to problems when they emerge. They are reactionary
rather than proactive. As a result, inadequate funding and policy support are
directed toward strength enhancement and prevention. This book makes a
sound case for the long-term value of investing in current youth, family, and
community strengths. In doing so, the authors show the power of bridging
science, practice, and social policy to better support youth, family, and com-
community development.

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