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Research article

Positive youth development practices and better outcomes for high risk youth



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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the findings from a New Zealand longitudinal study of outcomes for a group of high risk, service-using youth (13–21 years, $n = 495$). Consistent use of positive youth development practices (PYD) (rather than the total number of services used) predicted better outcomes. Patterns of risk and resilience endured over time. Individual risks undermined outcomes while resilience had a significant positive impact on outcomes. Contextual risks predicted increases in individual risks, but service delivery that adopted PYD practices contributed to reductions in levels of contextual risks over time. Youth with higher individual and contextual risks were less likely to report PYD service experiences. Individual risks were highest for indigenous youth (Māori) at entry to the study, levels which dropped significantly over time. White (Pākehā) youth had the lowest resilience and highest contextual risks over the course of the study. These differential patterns in risks and resilience indicate a need for services to adapt their responses to youth based on ethnicity and overall study findings confirm that when used consistently across service systems PYD-oriented service delivery produces better outcomes for high risk youth.

1. Introduction

Young people who have been exposed to chronic and ongoing abuse and neglect and who face risks across multiple domains of their lives typically come into contact with more than one service delivery system (Berzin, 2010). Despite the larger volume of supports and resources this multiple service involvement implies, the long-term prospects for these youth are poor (Berzin, 2010; Garland et al., 2003; Haapasalo, 2000; Haight, Bidwell, Marshall, & Khatiwoda, 2014; Hazen, Hough, Landsverk, & Wood, 2004). The accumulating evidence suggests that rather than an asset, involvement in multiple service systems may in fact increase the risk of poorer outcomes over time (Mitchell, 2011). Research also indicates that the relationship between the specific needs of high risk youth and the kinds of services they receive is not straightforward (Dodge, Murphy, O'Donnell, & Christopoulos, 2009; Swenson, Henggeler, Taylor, & Addison, 2009).

The foregoing raises serious questions about the ways in which service systems, and the professionals employed within them, address the chronic and multiple needs these youth confront. Indeed, the characteristics of successful interventions with youth who are clients of multiple service systems have yet to be well articulated (Berzin, 2010). Current scholarship provides only limited guidance concerning how risk factors influence the pathways of vulnerable youth through adolescence, and even less regarding the

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ways in which services can assist these youth to navigate this life stage successfully. Accordingly, Berzin (2010) argues that research must move “beyond system classifications towards broader definitions of risk that more adequately portray youth experience” (p. 487). Because the service landscape through which vulnerable young people must navigate is experienced as a “patchwork of organizations” that often lacks coherence, coverage and consistency (Ungar, Liebenberg, Dudding, Armstrong, & Van de Vijver, 2013, p. 151) the current study seeks to expand our understanding of the ways that service providers can work more effectively with vulnerable young people who are clients of multiple service systems. In particular, it considers whether or not positive youth development practices (PYD) can improve outcomes for these youth. The paper builds on previous work (Munford & Sanders, 2015; Sanders & Munford, 2014). It uses a longitudinal data set to examine the impact that the use of respectful and empowering service delivery practices by two separate service providers has upon a group of New Zealand young people who were clients of more than one service system. These young people were exposed to high levels of risks throughout childhood. The aspects of this heightened risk exposure captured in this study are addressed below (see The Current Study and Method).

1.1. Risks, the quality of service delivery and positive youth development (PYD)

When individual risks (for instance, those relating to youth behaviour, mental health and learning disabilities) combine with contextual risks (for instance, maltreatment by families, risks in neighbourhoods and schools) youth can become exceptionally vulnerable (Haight et al., 2014). Accordingly, the current study includes several measures of risk, captured at both the individual and contextual levels to reflect both internalising and externalising aspects of individual risk as well as contextual risks such as family, neighbourhood and educational risks. However, as contemporary debates about ‘high risk’ youth emphasise, poor outcomes for such youth cannot be attributed solely to the ways that risks combine together, neither to youth reluctance or inability to engage with providers nor to the presence of fewer supportive resources in their own social networks (see for example, Ungar et al., 2013). As we and others have argued elsewhere, the quality of service delivery is also implicated when outcomes do not improve (Munford & Sanders, 2015; Ungar et al., 2013). Indeed, quality issues within service delivery have been found to explain more of the variance in outcomes than the capacities, responsiveness and individual risk profiles or characteristics of young people (DuMont, Widom, & Czaja, 2007). The quality of the relationships workers build with at-risk young people play a critical role in positive development and the achievement of better outcomes (Bastiaanssen, Deslingm, Kroes, Engels, & Veerman, 2014). Indeed, there is emerging evidence to suggest that when professionals form positive relationships, encourage active client involvement, and demonstrate respect for the individual, family and culture, good outcomes can be achieved for youth irrespective of their individual characteristics and circumstances, (Munford & Sanders, 2015; DuMont et al., 2007; Ungar et al., 2013).

The current study is informed by this research and operationalises service quality as the presence of careful relationship building and empowering as well as respectful engagement practices with youth. These components of service quality are consistent with the philosophy underlying PYD (Liebenberg, Sanders, & Munford, 2016). In particular, they have a good fit with “The Big Three”, characteristics of PYD programs: positive and sustained relationships with competent, caring adults; the development of life skills; and, opportunities for youth engagement and empowerment.

Lerner (2005, p. 5) notes that PYD offers a fundamentally different way of understanding young people so that rather than being seen as “broken” and “in need of repair”, youth are rather seen as “resources to be developed”. This perspective emerges from the individual \longleftrightarrow context model of relational development theory (Overton, 2010) that informs the PYD model. This model advocates aligning the strengths of youth with resources found in their physical and social ecologies in order to promote positive, healthy development (Lerner, 2004).

This positive orientation to understanding adolescence provides a way of working with at-risk youth that emphasises their skills and capacities to adapt to challenging circumstances as well as the wisdom they have gained in living challenging lives. These constitute key resources to draw upon when providing support (Case, 2006). This is not to say that the risks and challenges such youth confront, the difficulties they face in adapting positively, nor the troubling behaviours they exhibit are unimportant, rather it is to suggest that these risks comprise only one part of a young person’s social ecology. Lasting solutions are more likely to be found by engaging directly with the positive, resourceful dimensions of youth lives and encouraging their active involvement in the process of change at the same time as the risks they confront are addressed.

While much of the focus in PYD is upon youth on relatively normative developmental pathways, there is evidence that interventions using PYD principles can contribute to positive changes for high risk youth who have been exposed to abuse and neglect (Gardner, Roth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; Scales, Benson, & Mannes, 2006). Three characteristics of PYD appear to offer value for interventions with high risk youth. First, PYD encourages youth to exercise personal agency and this has particular significance for work with adolescents because of the centrality of independence in adolescent development (Umaña-Taylor, Updegraff, Jahromi, & Zeiders, 2015). Interventions that encourage personal agency are likely to find a good fit with these youth who are accustomed to having to make key decisions on their own. Second, the strengths emphasis (Dunst, Trivette, & Deal, 1988) encourages practitioners to actively draw upon young people’s capacities, competence and resources at the same time as they address the risks and challenges youth face (Cheon, 2008). In this way, formal service supports augment personal and contextual resources (Munford & Sanders, 2015; Ungar et al., 2013). Finally, the ecological emphasis of PYD calls for interventions that are respectful of and responsive to the uniqueness of each youth and their family. Such practices are more likely to respond and adapt to the realities of youth circumstances increasing the chances that interventions will be meaningful and relevant (Bottrell, 2009).

Identifying and capitalising on youth strengths however, requires the development of meaningful relationships with youth, based on trust and respect. Respectful relationships provide a safe and trusting context in which youth are able to voice their experiences and needs, knowing that what they say will be heard and taken seriously. Empowering relationships ensure that youth feel they have

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