

The implications of an asset-based approach to early intervention

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Abstract

The needs-based approach to intervention in the helping professions has come under increasing attack during recent years. In South Africa this has mainly been the result of the realities of the social context, but it also relates to the growing resistance in many professionals to focus mostly on what is deficient or lacking or needed when they are intervening. In this article we argue for the merits of the asset-based approach to early intervention. By reflecting on the experiences of being part of a transdisciplinary early intervention project conducted by the Universities of Pretoria and Durban-Westville the nature of the asset-based approach is explored. Perceived obstacles to the asset-based approach are identified. The peroration of the article ponders the implications of the asset-based approach to early intervention. These are: i) The conceptualisation of the roles of professionals need to be broadened, ii) Lecturers in the helping professions need to familiarise themselves with the asset-based approach to intervention, iii) the asset-based

approach need to be taught explicitly to students in the helping professions, and finally iv) professionals need to become collaborative partners in early intervention.

Introduction

In this article we reflect on the implications of the asset-based approach to early intervention. In considering the process involved in the development of a transdisciplinary master's degree in early intervention, we explore the implications of adopting an approach that runs contrary to the traditionally accepted approaches in the helping professions.

We will start off by reflecting on the differences between the traditional needs-based approach to intervention and the more recent move towards an asset-based approach. The consequences of the needs-based approach will be considered as a prelude to the reactionary nature of the emerging asset-based approach. This will be followed by a localised interpretation of the research project in which a Master's Degree in Early Intervention is being developed by the Universities of Pretoria and Durban-Westville. It will specifically relate to the challenges faced in the educational psychological task team. In conclusion, some of the most evident implications of this move towards an asset-based approach will be explicated.

Changing horses midstream

Professionals differ greatly in the approach they take when addressing a challenging situation. Two divergent paths can be identified. On the one hand there is the needs-driven approach that has a strong focus on problems, deficiencies and needs. This approach is conceptualised in a variety of terms: deficit-based model, needs-based approach, medical model thinking, the pathology model or the paradigm of scarcity. On the other hand there is the capacity-focused approach, also known as the asset-based approach (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993). Professionals in the helping professions need to take cognisance of the two divergent approaches, as it is evident that they are often not aware of their own approach.

This relates closely to another division amongst professionals – in the differing approaches towards what their clients need. On the one hand many professionals focus on the areas of difficulties or problems (the medical model), and on the other side of the divide there are the professionals who focus on a more holistic view (the social model). In South Africa the eco-systemic approach (Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana, 1997) has made a valuable contribution in overcoming the limitations of medical model thinking, in that it focused on the broader social context in which problems manifest. It also contributed to a more complex understanding of problems, where inter-relatedness and mutual dependency is a given.

Even though the social, more holistic model (eco-systemic model) is more relevant for the challenges of recent-day society, medical model thinking is, however, still deeply

entrenched in the society we live in. Professionals may consider the contexts in which they are working more carefully now, but they may still be prone to deficit thinking, in that they still consider the larger context in terms of limitations and what is lacking. There is a tendency of 'problematizing' in the helping professions. The asset-based approach takes the social, holistic view one step further, by focusing on capacities, skills and assets within the social system. This does not mean that the deficiencies in any given eco-system or sub-system can be negated, but rather that a focus on strengthening the inherent assets in a system, can address the deficiencies.

The needs-based approach has a range of consequences that can be detrimental to any form of intervention. A prominent consequence is the danger of becoming stuck in an endless list of problems and deficiencies. It has been described as: "... an endless revolving door of collecting the same morbidity and mortality and socioeconomic data, writing a report designed to highlight all that is wrong with the community, and moving on without providing further assistance to address identified problems or issues" (Ammerman and Parks, 1998, 34). Even though many proponents of the needs-based approach state that they utilise the so-called T-model of strengths and weaknesses, their practice serves to emphasise weaknesses. This provides them with the basis for intervention where they become the experts who can fix these weaknesses.

This leads to another consequence of the needs-based approach. The perception may be created that only external 'experts' will be able to solve the problems, thus entrenching a cycle of dependence and disempowerment. This approach inhibits participation in decision-making processes. The notion that the professional is an expert who makes recommendations that has to be followed, rather than a person who listens to the views and concerns expressed in the context where she is working, is a fall-out from the needs-based approach. The role of professionals should not be that of "ready-made solutions" to problems (Mokwena, 1997, 66), but rather a role of providing leadership and guidance in supporting the process. Their role is not that of decisionmakers, but rather that of empowering others to assume authentic decision-making during the change process.

Furthermore, in the context of community work and interventions, making resources available solely on the basis of needs may have negative consequences on various levels. Firstly, it may highlight deficiencies, but it may also affect potential leadership. One of the ways in which successful leadership is measured is the ability to attract resources and support. If this is allocated according to needs, then leaders may ignore strengths and focus on needs, in order to obtain resources and support. Ammerman and Parks (1998, 32) state that the likelihood of obtaining funding increases with the severity of the problems identified in the community. High rates of problems provide legitimacy to fund additional support. This may result in community leaders underplaying community strengths, as it may limit their chances of obtaining suitable funding.

The fragmentation of support efforts has also been an unfortunate consequence of the needs-based approach (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993, 4). The view of any eco-system as a long list of problems and needs has led to different professionals working on different

needs. Levels of co-operation between professionals also differ greatly, resulting in fragmented support with limited collaboration.

In short, the needs-based approach is focused on surviving the status quo and therefore seldom associated with real change or development. It may even contribute to a sense of hopelessness because the solutions to problems and challenges come not from within, but are situated extrinsically. It should be stressed that the needs-based approach is a well-intentioned one. Proponents of the needs-based approach usually have a strong desire to help and support the individuals and organisations they are working with. However, it is the contention of this article that the needs-based approach is inefficient in addressing the challenges of modern day society and particularly inadequate in the South African context.

The potential of the asset-based approach

The asset-based approach has been referred to as the "half-full glass"-approach to intervention (McDonald, 1997, 115). It has also been described as the "capacity focused alternative" (McKnight and Kretzmann, 1997 in Ammerman and Parks, 1998, 35). It has developed from the community development work that has been done by Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) in the USA. They found that the traditional approach to community interventions often had a detrimental effect in the very communities that they intended to help, because of the strong focus on deficiencies and problems. They also point out that their approach is still a largely untraveled road, whereas the needs-based approach is like an eight lane super highway that commands the vast majority of human and financial resources (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993, 1).

This brings us to the relevance of this approach for the helping professions in general and for educational psychology in particular. In this day and age we need to look further than the traditional way of intervention in order to find approaches that is less expensive and more innovative than what we have had (Kelly, 2000a, 102). The asset-based approach, although far from perfect, offers some possibilities in approaching professional practice in a new and refreshing way. It is also applicable across the board of helping professions. Educational psychologists, occupational therapists, speech therapists, social workers, general practitioners, physiotherapists and educationists can all benefit from adapting their traditional approach to the asset-based approach.

The asset-based approach is a bottom-up approach that shifts the emphasis from a services perspective to an empowerment perspective. It implicates a shift away from a mentality of professional dominance to one in which collaboration, dynamic partnerships and participation are emphasised and practised. While identification of problems is still an integral part of the approach, problem solving focuses on creating and rebuilding relationships between individuals, associations and institutions (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993, 7).

Each classroom setting, school or learning environment boasts a unique combination of assets and capacities. If it is not recognised in the first place, it cannot contribute to the

creation and continuance of effective learning environments. There is a basic truth that every individual has something to contribute, even though it may not be mobilised yet. In any context, or eco-system, there may be resources available that are still unacknowledged.

An asset-based approach to intervention starts with the *status quo*. It focuses on what is currently present in the environment and what the capacities inherent to the individuals and the environment are. It does not start with what is lacking or problematic. It has a strong internal focus, which means that problem-solving and mission development need to come from within. The importance of intrinsic creativity, control and power is emphasised. These principles apply, whether working in the contexts of early intervention, community development, individual or family interventions or whole school development.

By definition the asset-based approach is relationship driven (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993, 9). The importance of relationship building is recognised, because there is a multitude of dividing forces that drive individuals apart – a history of segregation in various forms in South Africa being only one of them. As with the rest of the asset-based approach the relationships that are developed while taking this approach, should be based on the strengths and talents of the individuals involved, and not on the weaknesses and problems. Relationships need to be built and rebuilt constantly. In the educational context Kelly (2000b, 31) refers to the fourth "R" in education – that of human relations education and the development of interpersonal skills.

One way of recognising those assets, is by drawing an 'assets map' of all the skills, talents, capacities and resources that are available. An assets map should include capacities from local institutions, NGO's and the talents and gifts of individuals. Three levels of community assets assessment is usually delineated (Ammerman and Parks, 1998, 34):

- An individual capacity inventory of specific capacities, skills, talents and experiences of the stakeholders involved. This is a way in which the richness of personal resources that can be mobilised, can be identified. It may include actual work experience, personal traits, volunteer work or life experience.
- An inventory of local associations and organizations that may contribute to the solution of problems. It may be formal or informal and it may include support groups, church groups, youth groups, political groups, businesses or sport organizations.
- An inventory of local institutions that may contribute resources in terms of materials and services. It may include libraries, schools, hospitals, human service agencies, banks, parks and community centres.

The individual capacity inventory proposed by Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) distinguishes between skills information, community skills, enterprising interests and experience and personal information. They emphasise that the inventory should be used to help that particular individual to make contributions. It needs to be applied in such a way that it will empower the persons with who it is done, either by allowing them to contribute their talents or to increase their income. They caution against participants being used and

alienated, as has so often been the case, in previous endeavours where participants have felt that they were being "studied" by outsiders.

The information obtained in an assets assessment is not useful unless it enables the individuals, organisations and leaders to mobilise these capacities. This mobilisation involves connecting people with other people, local associations, local businesses, local institutions and capital and credit (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993, 18). This may sound strange to professionals who have been trained to regard themselves very much as 'clinicians' having a very distinct task description that so far has definitely excluded linking individuals with funding. Traditionally the system of referrals also radiated a sense of detachment and rarely involved linking individuals with businesses and institutions. The implications of this changing approach is already becoming evident, but will be elaborated upon later in this article.

In a certain sense the role of the professional taking an asset-based approach is essential, but limited (Mokwena, 1997, 67). Individuals and/or communities are not regarded as clients anymore, rather they are guided to become liberated and to gain control over their lives. The community becomes the protagonist (Hernandez, 1998, 274). The role of the professional involves helping them to realise, appreciate and utilize their talents and assets. The professional supplies information that may not be readily available and establishes social support and social networks. The professional enables them to have access to funding as a way of empowering them and affords them the right to use the funding according to their won priorities. The professional develops local leadership and strives to eliminate systemic barriers (Mokwena, 1997, 68).

This brings us to the unique challenges faced when a new qualification in early intervention is developed by two universities in South Africa. The challenges are characterised by the societal forces that is uniquely South African, but also by the dynamic nature of transdisciplinary collaboration where professional role release is a prerequisite for success.

Rethinking early intervention: The collaborative research project

We know beyond a doubt that the quality of the environment in which young children spend their early years is a critical influence in their capacity to develop an adequate foundation for learning later on in their lives (Shonkoff and Meisels, 2000, xi). In South Africa the 16.3 million children comprise almost half of the total population. There are 6 million children under the age of six, many of whom are living in under-resourced rural areas (Smart, 2000, 10). It is estimated that 61% of children live in poverty (Smart, 2000, 10). They can therefore be defined as being at-risk regarding optimal early development. The fact that we agree that the early years is a critical developmental stage, does not mean that we agree on the approaches we utilise to intervene during this essential phase, because of contextual realities Educational psychological interventions in early years settings have traditionally been characterised by the following:

- The medical deficit approach that stresses needs and shortcomings.

- Downplaying or ignoring social contexts.
- An ideology of professionalism.

In South Africa this approach is hugely inadequate in addressing the challenges created by and in early learning environments. Effective support for children between birth and six years is negatively impacted in South Africa due to the prevalence of socio-economic factors such as poverty, unemployment, high levels of illiteracy, urbanisation, and HIV/Aids. A finding of the World Bank global conference entitled Early Childhood Development: investing in the Future, April 1996, Atlanta, Georgia, bears local relevance (Young, 1996). In a country such as South Africa the socio-economic penalties of not doing early childhood intervention is very high indeed. It can comprise of a whole list of social risk factors such as: higher child morbidity rate, later school enrolment, higher repetition rate, more school drop-outs, poor school performance, lower future income and taxes, mother work force that are tied up at home, older sisters taken out of school to take care of younger siblings and higher crime rates. Consequently, early childhood intervention must be considered to be a powerful future investment (Rossetti-Ferreira, 2000).

The social context in South Africa necessitates an asset-based approach to early intervention that stresses capacity building and internal control. An asset-based approach to the early intervention in South Africa is suitable because of various reasons: It starts with the status quo. It is a diligent, compassionate approach that supports strengths and helps to create connected, caring communities (McDonald, 1997, 115). It focuses on what is currently present in the environment and on the capacities inherent to the individuals and the environment. It does not start with what is lacking or problematic. It has a strong internal focus. Problem-solving and mission development come from within, thereby creating potential for sustainable empowerment. Intrinsic creativity, control and power are emphasised.

In light of the abovementioned background, i.e. the need for early intervention and the complexities of the social context, a project is being undertaken at the Universities of Pretoria and Durban-Westville, South Africa, to develop a master's degree in Early Childhood Intervention. This research project is a broad interfaculty research programme undertaken by a transdisciplinary team at the University of Pretoria, as well as the University of Durban-Westville. Participating faculties, departments and centres at the University of Pretoria and the University of Durban-Westville are: Centre for Augmentative and Alternative Communication; Department of Communication Pathology; Department of Educational Psychology; Department of Nursing Science; Department of Dietetics; Department of Physiotherapy; Pediatrics Unit (Kalafong); and the Department of Social Work.

This qualification is transdisciplinary, asset-based and family-centred. Students from the various professional disciplines will be able to enrol in this course. Six of the seven modules in the course are generic modules, taken by all the students in the course. A seventh module will be discipline-specific.

The development of this discipline-specific module (in this case educational psychology) requires a departure from traditional educational psychological curricula and invites a rethinking of the content, knowledge, skills and values that will be reflected in such a module. It is a process that involves focus groups to establish the relevant content of such a module. The focus groups consist of task team members that are part of the broader research project, a stakeholder from the disability sector, a transdisciplinary member and an early intervention specialist.

The process of the development of this qualification has led to the careful consideration of the implications of choosing the asset-based approach to early intervention, which is considered in this article. One of the key aims of this research project remains capacity building of those involved in the process. It is in itself therefore an asset-based approach. However, all the participants have been trained in a strong medical deficit model of approaching their interventions. This opens up a scenario where they constantly need to reflect on the validity of their actions, measuring it in terms of being authentically asset-based. The impulse is to fall back on what is known and what is familiar, and what is familiar is the medical model approach.

Some obstacles to active commitment to the asset-based approach have been identified. These obstacles have been identified in a rather arbitrary manner and therefore provide only a tentative gaze at the issue. The potential obstacles include:

Immediacy: When people start looking for solutions to their problems they prefer finding immediate solutions. The asset-based approach requires far more time and interaction than the deficit approach. In order to conduct a true asset-based intervention it is necessary to identify and catalogue many assets, which means interacting with multiple individuals, associations and institutions (Ammerman and Parks, 1998, 36). In this project this has meant that the time involved needed to be re-conceptualized by focusing on the benefits reaped in terms of sustainability of interventions, rather than resorting to the comfortable practice of one-on-one interventions that required almost no geographical movement from professionals.

Empirical confirmation: As duly noted by Kretzman and McKnight (1993, 1) the asset-based approach is the road less traveled at the moment. In the intensely political act of generating new knowledge and creating new ways of approaching old problems, academics often find reassurance in numbers. At the moment literature searches offer few results that include the key term 'asset-based'. Asset-based community development is in the early stages of formation and little guidance exist about how to proceed in terms of implementation and adaptation in other contexts and for other purposes (Page-Adams and Sherraden, 1997, 432). On the one hand this is reassuring because it indicates a scarcely explored research domain, leaving the research possibilities open. However, in terms of creating a discipline specific module in the project, it leaves a scarcity of reference materials and elusive theoretical statements. It has been shown that assets have positive effects on wellbeing (Page-Adams and Sherraden, 1997, 431), but the explanations of such positive effects are not mutually exclusive and reciprocity has not been established

conclusively in many instances. Initiatives that make use of the asset-based approach can benefit from thorough theoretical and empirical research on and in the approach.

The comfort zone: People and professionals alike often display entropic tendencies which mean that they will resist change in more instances than not. In the project it has meant that the old way of doing needed to be shed energetically and continuously. The comfort zone is per definition very comfortable and re-assuring, requiring little cognitive, emotional and functional effort. Going from a traditionally based authority to an authority that is seated in terms of situational factors, is not just a social phenomenon. It is a process that also has to occur in individuals (Hernandez, 1998, 277). Surpassing the comfort zone does create huge potential for creativity, inspiration and effecting dynamic change. The very intentions of individuals who involve themselves in the field of early intervention are in this instance an asset in overcoming this obstacle. In aspiring to help and support others they usually display the flexibility and intentions to move from their comfort zone, to embrace an alternative approach.

The implications of the asset - based approach to early intervention

In considering the implications of any approach the reality of subjectivity is duly noted. The implications proposed in this article are based on the processes of action-reflection-action involved while participating in the collaborative research project in early intervention. The active dialogues between all involved in the project, the networking with international academics in the field of early intervention and the constant involvement of stakeholders contributed to the construction of these subjective meanings, i.e. implications.

- *The conceptualisation of the roles of professionals need to be broadened*

The traditional needs-based approach limited the roles of professionals to that of 'experts' who will identify needs and deficits and then is at a loss as to how to address the overwhelming list of woes with the lack of resources. The asset-based approach moves away from this limiting role – to that of 'connector' between individuals and potential sources of support. It may also mean that professionals may engage in unfamiliar activities, such as scouting for funding opportunities, if they are to regard themselves as effective. The issue of sustainable interventions creates the challenge of intervening in a manner that will liberate those who are the target of intervention.

The issue of role release is also implicitly intertwined in this implication of the asset-based approach. Traditionally professionals were careful not to overstep onto the domains of related professions. However, the transdisciplinary nature of this project and the high level

of generic modules in the course that is created, necessitates progressive role release. This will create an environment where various professionals fulfil various roles – beyond the traditional limits of their particular task descriptions.

- *Lecturers in the helping professions need to familiarise themselves with the asset-based approach to intervention*

This is needed to initiate the cycle of learning-and-teaching created in the training of students. Lecturers need to familiarise themselves with the theoretical and practical aspects of the asset-based approach. A constructive scenario that may follow from this is the possibility of research projects in this domain. There is a need for applied research in asset-based approaches in a variety of contexts. The approach needs to be translated to suit different purposes and a solid research knowledge base is essential in this regard.

- *The asset-based approach needs to be taught to students*

This is a critical start to effective implementation of the asset-based approach, but it is also a key implication. If the asset-based approach are not taught to students, their knowledge and skills run the risk of becoming outdated in the changing South African context. Ammerman and Parks (1998, 41) state that one real benefit of adopting an asset-oriented philosophy is that it helps students to view community members as individuals rather than a collection of statistics. Some educational psychologists may balk at this idea, by stating that clients are always viewed as individuals, but the long list of deficits often evident in educational psychological assessments, bears relevance.

The asset-based approach should also form part of the practical training of students in the helping professions. Experiential learning is often the best teacher, and it may create opportunities where students can become partners in intervention efforts.

- *Professionals need to become collaborative partners in early intervention*

Earlier efforts in what was then called 'multidisciplinary' teamwork created fragmented interventions. One of the implications of the asset-based approach is that professionals need to become partners in their efforts in the true sense of the word. Collaboration and effective communication are key ingredients in this process. It also holds the potential to create a total that is more than the sum of the parts.

The notion of role release also becomes inevitable. We can no longer cling to our 'terrain' in a manner that promotes exclusivity. In the helping professions the areas of knowledge and skills often overlap. The idea that some other professional is impinging on 'our' terrain does not reflect a sense of collaboration. In the spirit of the asset-based approach we should rather be focusing on the inherent assets of those involved and create a synergistic effort that may benefit those we intend to support.

Conclusion

The asset-based approach is more than an approach to intervention. It is a philosophy about how we engage in the important work to be done in the field of not just early intervention, but also intervention in general. It holds great potential in revolutionising the way in which

we define our roles as professionals in early intervention, but it also holds great potential in effecting sustainable changes in the contexts where we aspire to make contributions.

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