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Bozic, N and Lawthom, Rebecca and Murray, Janice (2017) *Exploring the context of strengths – a new approach to strength-based assessment*. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 34 (1). pp. 26-40. ISSN 0266-7363

Downloaded from: <http://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/619165/>

Version: Accepted Version

Publisher: Taylor & Francis

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02667363.2017.1367917>

Please cite the published version

<https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk>

Exploring the context of strengths – a new approach to strength-based assessment

Nick Bozic^{a*}, Rebecca Lawthom^b and Janice Murray^b

^aSchool of Education, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT.

^bFaculty of Health, Psychology & Social Care, Manchester Metropolitan University, Brooks Building, 53 Bonsall Street, Manchester M15 6GX.

Abstract

Since the 1990s many strength-based assessments (i.e. inventories, checklists, interview schedules) have been developed for use with children and young people, but these have offered a limited appraisal of the contexts in which strengths are present. In this study a new form of contextualised strength-based assessment was used within the routine practice of an educational psychologist. A multiple case study explored how this approach worked with eight children and young people referred to a local authority educational psychology team, ranging in age from 6.9 to 19.2 years. Qualitative data was analysed holistically using a story-board method. In all cases, participants identified situations or contexts which they associated with the presence of specific strengths. In some cases they highlighted aspects of a situation which might be hypothesised to have pedagogical value. There is discussion of the tensions that can arise in using this approach in schools when a more negative view of a pupil has already emerged. Nevertheless, the introduction of fresh information, about the type of contexts which suited specific children and young people, was helpful in providing ideas and recommendations which may have been missed otherwise.

Keywords: strength-based assessment; context; educational psychology practice; children and young people; labelling.

*Corresponding author: Email: n.m.bozic@bham.ac.uk

Introduction

This paper considers published strength-based assessments that can be used with children and young people (CYP). An important limitation of these assessment tools is identified – namely their weaknesses in eliciting the contexts in which strengths are found. This leads on to a description of an assessment called the Context of Strength Finder (CSF) which was designed to remedy this problem. A multiple case study is presented which explored the kind of information that was generated when the CSF was used with a sample of CYP referred to an educational psychology team in the UK.

Professional context

The last three decades has seen growing recognition within the profession of educational psychology (and school psychology outside the UK) of the importance of learning about the strengths (i.e. positives qualities and resources) within the lives of CYP, as well as their difficulties and needs. It can be seen in the history of publications within professional journals which have explored the potential of solution-focused approaches (e.g. Rhodes, 1993; Redpath & Harker, 1999; Stobie et al., 2005), positive psychology (e.g. Gertsch, 2009; Miller & Nickerson, 2007) and strengths-based approaches (e.g. Jimerson et al, 2004; Bozic & Miller, 2013). Strength-based approaches have been advocated in order to gain a more holistic assessment of a child or young person (Tedeschi & Kilmer, 2005), to promote better levels of engagement from CYP (Jimerson et al., 2004); and to create interventions which can take advantage of strengths and preferred ways of being (Bozic, 2013).

Recently, in the United Kingdom, the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years (DfE, 2015) has emphasised the importance of gathering information about the strengths of CYP. The importance of learning about their strengths and competences is mentioned at several points within the document. For example, in the description of the progress check at age 2 (para 5.23); the nature of SEN support in schools (para 6.52) and the assessment and planning process for an Educational, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) (para 9.22).

The assessment of strengths

One of the first and most influential proposals to focus on the assessment of client strengths came from Saleebey (1992) in his recommendation for a strength-based approach to social work. In this vision, the assessment of strengths forms a guiding notion in work with clients: a way of learning about their unique qualities and how to most effectively collaborate with them. Early approaches in this genre used inventories of potential strengths to aid the assessment process (Cowger, 1992). These were criticised for not necessarily containing the strengths which the client valued (De Jong & Miller, 1995). This led some to advocate more content-free forms of strength assessment, in which the interviewer sought to learn about the unique strengths a client possessed and even the special language that they might use to express such strengths (Wilding & Griffey, 2015; Wong, 2006). On the other hand, adopting a content-free form of assessment might mean that certain potential areas of strength are not specifically checked for during the assessment.

Historically, the literature on assessment in education and child psychology has drawn attention to strengths, but usually as a way of showing how they combine with difficulties in a domain of professional interest, for example, strengths and difficulties in reading (Sheldon & Hatch, 1950) or early developmental skills (Ysseldyke & Samuel, 1973; Ullman, 1979). A change occurred in the late 1990s when a number of North American assessment tools were developed for use with CYP, which focused exclusively on strengths (Climie & Henley, 2016). Some of these were in the form of checklists of potential strengths (e.g. Lyons et al, 2000); others were standardised assessments which would allow a young person's strengths to be compared with those of other CYP (e.g. Epstein & Sharma, 1998). These assessments drew from diverse theoretical roots including positive psychology and resiliency theory.

The role of context

Psychology as a whole has sometimes been criticised for taking a too individualised approach to its subject matter, neglecting the importance of different environments on human functioning (Kagan et al., 2011; Orford, 1992; Vygotsky, 1980; Bronfenbrenner,

1977). However, some strands within the literature on strength-based assessment/ practice have discussed the importance of context in fully understanding the meaning of human strengths. For example, suggesting that strengths can be seen as phenomena which grow out of the opportunities provided by supportive contexts (Jimerson et al., 2004; Rhee et al., 2001, p.10). As Saleebey (1992, p.9) put it “Western stereotypes notwithstanding, an individual rarely discovers and employs strengths and gains a perceived sense of power in isolation.” The goal of the strength-based practitioner should be not only to learn about client strengths but also to understand something about the contexts which allow them to be present – which, in turn, provides ideas for how intervention might create better contexts for someone (Saleebey, 1992; De Jong & Miller, 1995). Nevertheless, despite this call for strength-based assessment to be contextualised, published approaches have tended to foreground the assessment of individual strengths without much attention being paid to the contexts where they are expressed.

This is true of several assessments which have come from the positive psychology movement. One of the most famous of these being the Values in Action Inventory for Youth (VIA-Y) (Park & Peterson, 2006) which requires young people to check for the presence of 24 character strengths (e.g. kindness, authenticity, creativity, etc.). Further positive psychology measures have been developed to check for personal qualities such as optimism, hope or gratitude (Lopez & Snyder, 2003).

From a resiliency theory view-point, strengths have been equated with protective factors – those qualities which help children to cope with adversity. Resiliency theory has identified both internal and external forms of protective factors (Benard, 2004), but strength-based assessment tools have sometimes restricted themselves to an examination of the internal variety only, ignoring the influence of context. This is the case with the Devereux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA) (LeBuffe & Naglieri, 1999), the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA) (LeBuffe, Shapiro & Naglieri, 2009) and the Social-Emotional Assets and Resilience Scales (SEARS) (Merrell et al., 2011). For example, the teacher version of the SEARS groups strengths under the headings: responsibility, social competence, empathy and self-regulation.

One should not be too critical of these measures because an assessment of internal strengths can be useful when supplemented by data from other aspects of the ecology around a child or young person, but there is a risk when the focus of assessment remains overly focused at the individual level. Checking for the presence or absence of personal strengths can lead practitioners towards a similar position to that taken by a deficit approach – where the main goal becomes helping the individual to change through developing their strengths or acquiring new ones (Wilding & Griffey, 2015). The danger is that important contextual influences on strength development (or lack of it) are overlooked. The outcome of careful assessment may then simply lead to recommendations for how an individual may be coached to make better use of their strengths, rather than considering how the context might be changed. In the extreme case, clients can even be positioned as blameworthy if they haven't taken opportunities to develop their strengths more fully (Held, 2004; Friedli & Stearn, 2015).

Some strength-based assessments have been designed to check for the presence of strengths beyond the individual. Often inspired by resiliency theory's notion of external protective factors, these assessments have also looked for evidence of strengths at the level of peer, family, school or community levels. Within the Child and Adolescent Strength Assessment (CASA) (Lyons et al., 2000) items are grouped under ecological headings, and sometimes worded in ways which go beyond personal skills and indicate strengths within the context, such as the availability of supportive peers or positive relationships within the wider family. The Assets Interview (Morrison et al., 2006) includes questions like, 'What are the rules and procedures in class? How do the rules help him/her to learn?', and, 'What activities does the school offer for students? How does X participate in these activities?'. These questions can be useful in highlighting aspects of the context which may be working well or could work better to support a pupil.

Other assessments continue to focus on strengths expressed as personal statements, but allow these to be associated with categories that suggest ecological contexts where they may be more likely to be used. This is the case with the Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale (Version 2) (BERS 2) (Buckley & Epstein, 2004) which consists of 52 items which a young person, parent, or teacher completes and can be grouped into the categories:

intrapersonal strengths; interpersonal strengths; affective functioning; family involvement; and school functioning. The Developmental Assets Profile (DAP) (Scales, 2011; Search Institute, 2005) uses this kind of terminology. It is made up of 58 strength items, each of which is also assigned to a particular form of context: personal, social, family, school, and community.

Rawana & Brownlee (2009) have done something similar by aligning strengths into domains or 'areas of functioning that a child engages in on a regular basis' (p.257). These are categorised as contextual domains (peer, family/home, school, employment, community) or developmental domains (personality, personal and physical care, spirituality and cultural, leisure and recreation). In their work with children and families, part of the assessment process involved grouping identified strengths – elicited through interview and the use of checklists – within these domains. The authors comment that this process created the opportunity to have further conversations about why strengths appeared in some areas of functioning but not others.

These are interesting developments in which the role of context is perhaps becoming a little more prominent in strength-based assessment, although there are ways in which such work could be extended. The representation of contexts as general categories, such as 'school' or 'family/ home' lacks information about the *specific* school or family situations, for example, in which strengths are displayed. There could also be more systematic analysis of these particular situations to understand how they are structured and *how* they provide opportunities for strengths to be expressed or present. This more specific information could suggest ways in which other social environments could be better organised for a child or young person.

The study reported in this paper attempted to extend the contextualised approach to strength-based assessment, by providing children and young people with a method for explicitly linking strengths to particular situations, the characteristics of which could then be explored with follow-up questions.

Method

Development of the Context of Strength Finder (CSF)

A new form of strength-based assessment was created called the Context of Strength Finder (CSF) (Bozic, in preparation). The purpose of this assessment tool was to gain information about the social situations or contexts which supported the strengths of a young person. It was decided that the CSF would be used directly with CYP so as to maintain the increased engagement and positivity that is often noted as a feature of strength-based assessment (McCammon, 2012). This meant it would be a form of self-report giving the young person's subjective view of the assessment domain.

In all, 24 items were created to represent strengths at different levels of ecology from individual to relational, school and community (see Table 1). These strengths were taken from the findings of resiliency theory and corresponded to well-known protective factors (Benard, 2004). For each category, space was left for CYP to identify unique strengths of their own which were not included in the 24 pre-selected ones.

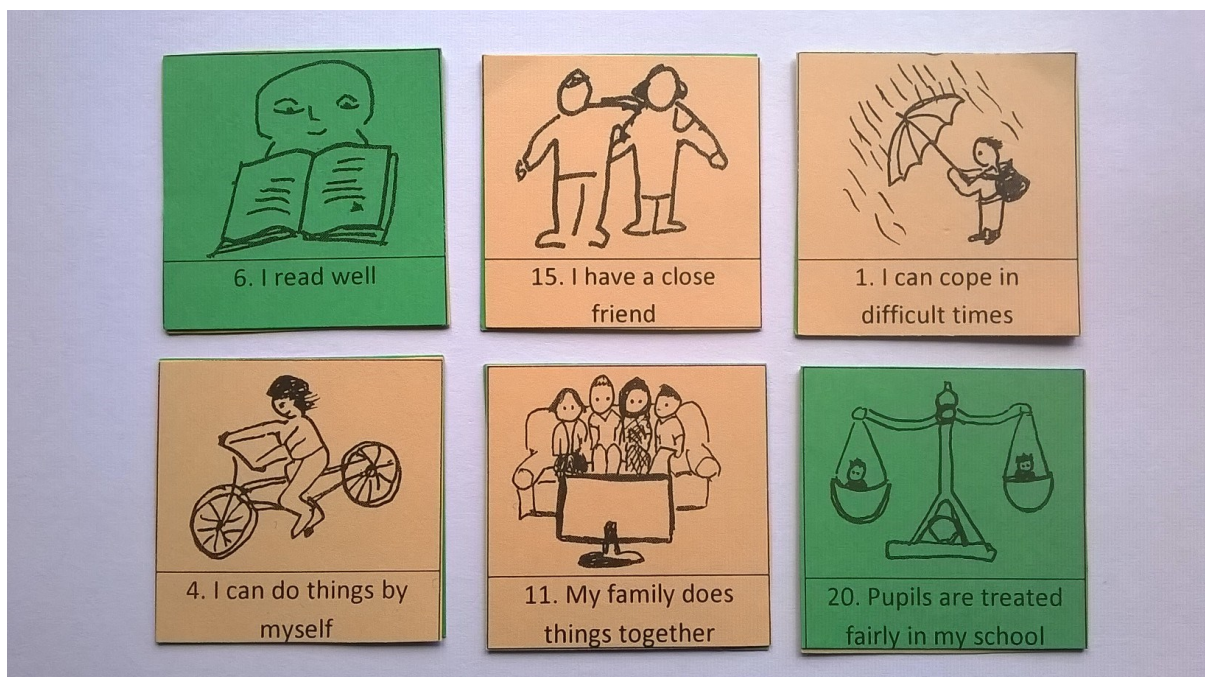
Table 1. CSF Strength items

Psychological strengths 1. I can cope in difficult times 2. I have a sense of humour 3. I solve problems 4. I can do things by myself	Peer strengths 13. Other children/ young people like me 14. I enjoy doing things with other children / young people 15. I have a close friend 16. Other kids think I'm cool
Academic/ vocational strengths 5. I write well 6. I read well 7. I speak well 8. I can make things	School strengths 17. There is a teacher who cares about me 18. I have done special things at school 19. Teachers believe I can do well 20. Pupils are treated fairly in my school

Family strengths	Community strengths
9. I get on well with my mum/ dad	21. I take part in sports
10. My family listen to me	22. I belong to a youth club
11. My family does things together	23. I go to a church/ mosque/ temple
12. I get on with my brother/ sister	24. I help people in my community

The CSF was designed to allow identified strengths to be selected and grouped together to represent a particular context. This was done by taking the items out of the traditional checklist format and making them into a set of cards – each representing a different strength. Cards were produced in two colours: green for a definite strength and orange for a partial strength. They were illustrated to allow their meaning to be clearer (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Cards from the CSF



Once a young person had identified a set of strengths which they felt they possessed, these could be represented on the table top by a selection of cards of the appropriate colour. Then cards could be grouped together by the CYP to show how strengths combined in

particular situations. A schedule of questions was developed to analyse identified situations or contexts. The questions were drawn from situated learning theory (Hand & Gresalfi, 2015; Wenger, 1998) an approach which assumes that all social contexts are sites of learning (Lave, 1996). The questions were designed to elicit: who participated in the situation, whether it was something that was well established, what the activity entailed, what level of accountability existed in the situation, and whether there were special artefacts or ways of doing things. The language used was kept as clear and accessible as possible (See Table 2).

Table 2. Follow-up questions to analyse an identified situation

1. Who belongs in this situation? Who does not belong?
2. How long have you been doing this together?
3. Describe a typical occasion when you have done this together.
4. What can you do in this situation? What can x do in this situation?
5. Would there be a way of behaving that wasn't right in this situation?
6. Are there special pieces of equipment that you use together?
7. In this situation do you use any special words or have any special ways of doing things

The CSF was piloted with two young people during October 2015.

Research study

Research aim and question

The research aim of the study was to trial the use of the CSF and examine how it worked within the practice of an educational psychologist (EP). Two more specific research questions were:

What is gained in using the CSF to learn about the context in which strengths are present in a child or young person's life?

What is problematic in using the CSF to learn about the context in which strengths are present in a child or young person's life?

Case Study Design

A multiple case study design was used for this research. Yin (2009) describes case study as a form of empirical inquiry that seeks to understand a phenomenon "within its real life context". This way of conducting research differs markedly from more reductionist approaches, which aim to derive understanding by removing things from their context and breaking them down into their constituent elements. Instead case study can be seen as offering the opportunity for a holistic representation and analysis of phenomena.

Thomas (2010, 2011) argues that a case study's "validation comes through the connections and insights it offers between another's experience and one's own." (Thomas, 2010, p.579) Rather than making claims of generalizability, the best that can be obtained is to identify patterns within contextualised practical knowledge – something which Thomas refers to as phronesis.

Fully describing the context of each case helps the reader to appreciate the phenomenon that is being reported. To this should be added the notion of reflexivity which refers to the manner in which the researcher's own position and experience influences the study. In the case of this research, the EP involved was also the principal researcher. Rather than attempting to conceal this, it was important to make the self-interpretations of the researcher explicit within the data gathering and analysis phases which follow.

Participants

The participants in this study were a selection of CYP referred to the attention of an urban local authority educational psychology team (EPT) between November 2015 and April 2016. Referrals came from two sources: as requests for EP involvement from schools who purchased traded time from the EPT; and from the Local Authority, when a statutory assessment was requested and the local authority needed to have written psychological advice from an EP.

The CSF was only chosen for use with a child or young person if its use had some kind of rationale and it seemed likely that the individual concerned would be able to comprehend the assessment process. It was attempted with twelve CYP, two did not want to take part and for two others there were problems gaining consent for their data to be used within this paper. Therefore the final sample comprised eight CYP, all were male and ranging in age from 6.9 to 19.2 years. The ethnicity of participants was as follows: British - White (2); British - Asian (5); British – Black (1).

Ethics

Several ethical issues were addressed using published guidance from the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2010) and the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011). Issues included how to adequately explain to participants that declining to take part in the research project would not affect the service they received from the educational psychologist. Carefully worded information sheets were developed with pictorial support. For participants under the age of 16 parental consent was also obtained. As part of the measures taken to protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to each participant. Ethical approval was gained from Manchester Metropolitan University's ethics committee.

Procedure

When using the CSF with a child or young person the following procedure was adopted:

- a. The EP made notes on a diary sheet about the reason for involvement and the rationale for using strength-based assessment.
- b. The participant was interviewed in a quiet room away from other people.

c. The participant rated the extent to which strengths from the CSF were true for them and added unique strengths that were not on the list. During this process the EP asked the participant to expand a little about strengths they mentioned.

d. Cards representing the participant's strengths were laid out on the table top – green cards for definite strengths and orange cards for partial strengths.

e. The participant was asked to recall a situation where two or more strengths were simultaneously present and move the corresponding cards into a group. When a situation was identified seven follow-up questions were asked (see Table 2 above). If time allowed this was done for a second situation/ context.

f. Following the session the EP made contemporaneous notes about what had happened on the diary sheet. Information gained from the assessment was used in on-going EP work with the child or young person. At a later date, for the purposes of the research project the following analytical process was undertaken.

Analytical approach

At the end of the data collection period, in April 2016, for each case, all the original data gathered using the diary sheets and records sheets were displayed in the form of a storyboard (Thomas, 2011). This enabled a holistic understanding of the case to emerge; post-it notes were written and stuck on the storyboard to represent additional 'noticings' (Thomas, 2011, p.185) about what was gained or problematic about the contextualised assessment. Finally, following Flyvberg (2006) a narrative was constructed to give an account of each case.

Narratives were constructed in two main sections: the first describing the reasons for the work and what happened during the session – based on contemporaneous notes; the second considering the outcomes from the later analytical stage when the researcher purposely focused on what was gained/ problematic about the elicitation of contextual information.

This division of the narrative for each case was made to enhance the study's internal validity – that is the ability to demonstrate how the findings were related to empirical data collected

earlier (Cohen et al., 2011). Case study theorists argue that it is the continual need to account for empirical data which acts as a 'corrective force' to preconceptions about phenomena (Flyvberg, 2006).

Findings and Analysis

All eight CYP were able to link identified strengths with particular situations where these were present in their lives. Below narrative accounts of two of these are selected to exemplify different issues. The narratives are written in the first person by the EP who carried out the assessments (first author). Within these accounts the subjective experience of the EP concerned is made clear so that it can be understood as part of the narrative.

Example 1: Cemal

(1) Cemal was a sixteen year old boy (ethnicity: British Asian) in Year 11 at a mainstream secondary school. Recently there had been some conflict between the school SENCO and Cemal's family over whether or not he had been diagnosed with dyslexia earlier in his school career. I suggested that by applying the LA's Dyslexia Guidance we could gather information to help us determine the nature and severity of Cemal's difficulties. I met Cemal twice and carried out a range of literacy assessments which showed he did have major problems at the word level in reading and spelling. I then used the CSF to gain his view of his strengths.

Cemal rated the presence of the 24 pre-selected strengths and added two unique strengths to the list, which were 'I can mentor children' and 'I can advise friends about problems'. In elaborating about the strength 'My family does things together', Cemal said:

"A lot. My mum's brothers and sisters are very close. We all have lived in grandma's house at one point. We eat together on Saturday."

It was this family situation that Cemal identified when I asked him to think of a context where his strengths were apparent. He described playing monopoly or cards with brothers, male cousins and uncles on Saturdays. It was on these occasions he said, that four strengths

were apparent – including strength 10, ‘My family listens to me’. He described this situation as one where we can “talk brother to brother stuff”.

(2) In reflecting on this assessment I felt the CSF had allowed me to get a closer understanding about what was important to Cemal. I could see the situation he described seemed to fit with the unique strengths he has identified earlier. He saw himself as an empathetic person who could help others and be supported by them. However I felt a degree of tension moving away from the specific brief I had to investigate Cemal’s literacy skills. In the immediate aftermath of the assessment I even wondered if it would have been better to have got Cemal to think about situations where he used his strengths in literacy-related tasks, but I realised that if I had done this I would have failed to gain a broader view of him.

I struggled with how to relay this expanded view of Cemal back to the SENCO. I was worried she might perceive that I had strayed from my brief, especially bearing in mind the tension between home and school. The compromise I came to was to integrate some of what I had learnt about Cemal from the CSF into the Dyslexia Guidance report I had to write. In that report I wrote:

“A strength-based assessment, which I carried out at the same time as assessing Cemal’s literacy skills, revealed a number of strengths. In particular, Cemal reported that he finds fulfilment in mentoring other children and advising his friends about problems. Solving problems through talk seemed to be an important part of Cemal’s identity and may be something which he could pursue in future work. It could also be the case that this interest in interaction could be harnessed to help Cemal improve his literacy skills, for example by being part of a mutual support group.”

Example 2: Ethan

(1) In this second case example I was asked to carry out a statutory assessment of a fourteen year old boy (ethnicity: British White) who went to a mainstream secondary school in a neighbouring local authority (but lived within the authority where I worked). Ethan had

had a diagnosis of autism when he was younger and when his file arrived I could see there were a large number of reports from professionals detailing his difficulties in learning, language understanding and social interaction. I decided that rather than add to this extensive cataloguing of his difficulties I would carry out a strength-based assessment using the CSF.

When I visited the school to see Ethan I was presented with a number of teachers and teaching assistants who had worked with him and wanted to tell me all about his problems and how much he needed an Education, Health and Care Plan. I made careful notes about what they said but persevered with my plan to use the CSF. The SENCO said that she thought it would be best if she stayed in the room because Ethan might be anxious about talking with a stranger.

Despite the SENCO's worries, Ethan responded well to the CSF assessment. He described two contexts where strengths were present, both of them situations that occurred within school: Friday football practice sessions and writing in English lessons. In both cases, Ethan cited strength 4, 'I can do things by myself'. He provided some interesting details when I asked him to describe what the teacher did in each context. For example, in football practice, "the teacher shows you how to do it. How to do the low dive and the high dive [goal keeping skills]." In English, to get you started on a piece of writing, the teacher "puts starter sentences on the board."

(2) Asking Ethan follow-up questions to explore these situations seemed to highlight some interesting pedagogic features. The quoted examples (above) are strategies that might help him get started on tasks and feel a sense of 'doing things by himself'. I began to think of various strength-based hypotheses: the modelling of skills could be important, because Ethan's language understanding is a little limited; the predictable format of these activities may help him to feel less anxious (football sessions always begin by putting the cones out and doing some dribbling practice).

After the assessment the SENCO said she had been surprised and pleased by how much Ethan had said. She had noted that Ethan had not said anything about a teaching assistant who was meant to help him in English lessons. I thought it would have been interesting to

do some further observation of the situations that Ethan had mentioned to check some of the hypotheses that had occurred to me and see if there were other elements to each context – although the immediate priority was to complete the written psychological advice.

Discussion

The CSF was successful in allowing the CYP in this sample to identify situations in which strengths were present. It was able to draw attention to specific contexts which CYP associated with the expression of strengths. Existing strength-based assessments such as the DAP (Scales, 2011; Search Institute, 2005) or BERS 2 (Buckley & Epstein, 2004) might relate strengths to broader categories such as ‘school functioning’ or ‘interpersonal skills’ but not to particular activities. Overly general statements of context can leave much unknown, as Brazeau et al. (2012, p.385) point out:

“An additional challenge arises in explaining assessment results to clients and their families. Relaying to a client that they have strengths in the area of ‘interpersonal strengths’ may not be particularly useful without elaboration on the context within which this strength becomes apparent.”

Follow-up questions within the CSF were designed to gain more detailed information about the strength-based situations that CYP identified. Sometimes, as in the case of Ethan above, the information that was gathered related to specific lessons or activities that happened at particular times. Sometimes it related to the way that such contexts might be structured in terms of the roles that pupils took, the kind of tasks carried out, or the way that staff would interact with students. This kind of information could stimulate interesting hypotheses about the kinds of social arrangements and pedagogic strategies that might suit an individual with often quite complex needs. It begins to answer the call to consider the interactions between strengths and the environments which CYP inhabit (Wilding & Griffey, 2015). Such hypotheses tended to be strength-based, focusing on how success was attained, rather than charting how dimensions of a problem might combine to explain difficulties.

While using the CSF with CYP could invite one to zoom-in and explore more thoroughly what was happening in a situation, at times it seemed profitable to 'zoom-out' and consider what a context might be saying in relation to other aspects of a CYP's life. This happened in the interpretation of the situation offered by Cemal (above), where the meaning of playing games with his family was deepened by thinking about how it related to other strengths that he had mentioned earlier in the assessment. In other cases, zooming out allowed a context of strength to be compared to other contexts that a young person encountered – suggesting its significance in the overall life trajectory of the young person. For example, a 19 year old young man who was having a statutory assessment, recalled a situation where he had received positive attention at school years before and this seemed to contrast poignantly with difficulties he had experienced in life since that time. Zooming-out became one of the interpretive techniques that helped to make sense of contexts in CYP's lives – although such interpretations would need further checking and verification before they could be relied upon.

For all eight cases in this study, the initial information at referral was dominated by the difficulties a child or young person was experiencing at school or elsewhere. This can be seen in both the illustrative cases above. With Cemal, EP involvement was directed towards his literacy problems and whether these were sufficient grounds to warrant the identification of dyslexia and the case as a whole was influenced by the tension that existed between home and school. With Ethan, again the initial focus was on his difficulties at school, staff were understandably concerned to emphasise why he needed the support of an EHCP. Deliberately altering the focus of assessment to look for strengths felt risky: staff may not appreciate the reason for this approach; they might feel that it ignored the reason they requested EP involvement in the first place. There were certainly times when the EP concerned could feel this tension, especially in cases where staff were feeling very stressed about the way a pupil was behaving at school. Nevertheless, the CSF was able to identify contexts at school (and elsewhere) which seemed to be working and in that sense highlighted positives in existing practice which could be built upon. A contextualised understanding of the child's strengths, tempered by an awareness of the concerns of teaching staff, did lead to a new kind of awareness and action on the part of the EP.

Research reminds us of the powerful way discourse in school can construct the meaning of a pupil's actions and mark them out as different or deviant (Orsati & Causton-Theoharis, 2013; Goodley & Lawthom, 2013; Maclure et al., 2012). There have been concerns about the potential connotation of negative labels if these are internalised by an individual and influence the way they see themselves (Harwood & Allan, 2014; Hargreaves et al., 1975). It has been suggested that professionals become more conscious of the consequences of different constructions and consider how to avoid pathologizing CYP (Billington, 2012), for example, by taking a multi-level perspective (Wicks, 2013), looking at alternative ways of talking about behaviour (Pearson, 2016) or otherwise re-framing its meaning (Harwood & Allan, 2014). Strength-based assessment, and in particular a form which is context-sensitive, might offer a further way of changing the way that a pupil is viewed. If there is concern that negative labels may be internalised, locating contexts in which CYP can occupy more positive identities would seem to be a priority.

Limitations

Some issues and cautions remain over the contexts identified by the CYP in this study. The level of status which should be accorded to these contexts was unclear. How significant were they?

The reports of CYP may be influenced by a degree of social desirability bias. Being interviewed by a sympathetic professional might encourage a young person to present themselves in a more positive light. Although the assessment tool was designed to capture the subjective views of CYP, the meaning of these views could be placed within a larger context with additional evidence from separate sources, whether this is through follow-up observation or discussion with others.

A second issue concerns how far an elicited context represents something significant about a child or young person's life. It might simply be the first thing that occurred to them when they were interviewed. Once again there is no real way of knowing, except through doing a little more work observing the individual in these situations or talking to others who knew them well.

In addition, it may be possible to understand elicited contexts as temporary points in the child or young person's developmental or educational trajectory. Some of the contexts that were mentioned were not necessarily ones that would always be seen as ideal ways of catering for an individual. One seven year old child, in this study, described a situation of shared intimacy, reading at home with his mother. Although something which he valued highly at that time, it may represent a form of social interaction from which educators will seek to build, rather than see as an end-point. Similarly the situation which Cemal described, playing games with his brothers and cousins, rather than being replicated in the classroom would most likely provide ideas for the structure of future activities.

Open questions such as these, invite a next phase of action in which ideas from the CSF become shared and discussed with parents and teachers, as ways of arranging contexts to best support a child or young person's strengths are jointly explored.

Conclusion

This study trialled the use of a novel method for carrying out strength-based assessment with CYP. Participants were able to link their strengths to particular contexts using representations and interaction rather than a checklist approach. Further analysis provided some interesting ideas about the kinds of social activity and interpersonal interaction that took place in these contexts. This kind of assessment invites further investigation to explore how such structures may contribute to the expression of strengths.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Katherine Mee for her illustrations on the CSF cards.

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