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# Investing in Children, Youth, Families, and Communities: Strengths-Based Research and Policy, edited by Kenneth I. Maton, Cynthia J. Schellenbach, Bonnie J. Leadbetter & Andrea L. Solarz

James M. Frabutt

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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.

*J. Christian Beretta, OSFS, is the principal at Bishop Verot High School in Fort Myers, Florida.*

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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

policy. 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 colleagues and now promoted by organizations such as Search Institute and the Youth Policy Forum. The positive youth development model outlines internal and external support factors, also known as developmental assets, for youth. Internal assets focus on positive values, social competencies, positive 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 personal 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 community development.

*James M. Frabutt, Ph.D., is the deputy director of the Center for Youth, Family, and Community Partnerships at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.*