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Realizing the potential of a strengths-based approach in family support with young people and their parents

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Abstract

This paper on a strengths-based approach (SBA) to practice is based on empirical research with stakeholders involved in an intensive support programme for young people at risk and their parents in Ireland. The Youth Advocate Programme (YAP) model provides wraparound support to respond to their needs by focusing on their competencies and their coping skills and building networks of community-based supports. The model includes parents or carers in the suite of support offered by advocates. An SBA to practice has been discussed for some time in academic literature and practice guidance. However, it tends to be considered primarily in relation to social work practice, and there is ongoing ambiguity as to what it actually involves in day-to-day engagement with individual family members. Insightful, rich accounts of SBAs as part of routine practice provided by young people, parents and practitioners form the basis to this paper and detail how these approaches support the development of hope-inspiring relationships and promote positive change. Relevant literature and research situates the debate on the experience of using SBA, the wider challenges faced by families, the impact of SBA in practice on those receiving the support service and its potential for use in the wider continuum of children and family services.

KEYWORDS

family support service, parents, practice, realizing, strengths-based approaches, young people

1 | INTRODUCTION

A strengths-based approach (SBA) to practice is a concept that has featured in both the literature and the rhetoric on children and family services for some time (Bertolino, 2014; Early & Glenmave, 2000; Rapp et al., 2006; Saleebey, 1996, 2008; Toros & Falch-Eriksen, 2021). A strengths perspective seeks to assess the strengths and resources that are present in an individual, family and community and to build on these strengths and resources in order to prevent or resolve problems or difficulties (Oliver & Charles, 2015; Saleebey, 2008; Teater &

Baldwin, 2012). However, while there is general agreement that this is a worthwhile endeavour, it can be difficult to characterize what this means in everyday practice with family members (Lietz, 2011; Lietz & Rounds, 2009; Oliver & Charles, 2015; Staudt et al., 2001). It has been described as 'a way of thinking ... a distinctive lens' (Saleebey, 2002, p. 20) and as a value stance (Staudt et al., 2001) and therefore can be a somewhat elusive concept in terms of what it entails in ongoing supportive interventions. Although there has been some recent research on SBA in child welfare and protection services (Gray, 2011; Lietz, 2011; Oliver & Charles, 2015; Roose et al., 2014;

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Williams, 2019), there is an ongoing need to detail how SBA is incorporated into routine practice and what this means for those in receipt of services (Lietz, 2011; Toros & Falch-Eriksen, 2021).

This paper based on research on a community-based intensive support programme for young people and their families provides a rich and detailed account of implementing SBA. The Family Support Programme delivered by the Youth Advocate Programme (YAP) in Ireland is offered to young people experiencing difficulties at home, in education, with peer groups and in their community and are at high risk of placement in care or custody. This paper considers how SBA is operationalized by practitioners working with these young people and their parents. The literature on SBA is first presented followed by a brief description of the YAP model. This is followed by an outline of the research design. The findings on implementing an SBA are then presented and discussed with reference to the current context and the relevant literature. The paper concludes with reflections and consideration for future strengths-based practice in children and family services.

2 | STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACHES (SBAs)

SBAs developed as an alternative to deficit-based models of social practice that target difficulties experienced by individuals and families. It is a tangible approach to problem-solving that uses aspects of an individual or his or her environment as a feature of the intervention itself (Lietz, 2011; Saleebey, 2006). The core premise is that people possess the necessary resources to change and to grow, that they are experts in their own lives and know best what will work for them and that a professional relationship that focuses on strengths will encourage this change and empowerment (Lietz, 2011; Saleebey, 2006; Whalley, 2017). The SBA also aims to shift the balance of power with family members acknowledged as resourceful and knowledgeable about what will help them in their individual and unique struggle (Devaney, 2017). Relationship-based practice and an SBA are closely aligned. There is a growing acceptance of the importance of positive relationships on well-being, ability to cope, social connections and experiences of belonging. These relationships are even more significant when applied to practitioners and those they work with, particularly when there is adversity, isolation and marginalization (Prowle & Hodgkins, 2020). Ruch (2018) shows how the concept of relationship-based practice offers 'a joined-up way of thinking about relationships that acknowledge the visible and invisible, conscious and unconscious components that comprise all relationships and recognises the important connections between the intrapsychic, interpersonal and broader social contexts in which they are embedded' (p. 28). Relationship-based practice has become a critical factor in promoting the engagement of young people involved in support services (Izzo et al., 2020). SBAs have also been found to enhance individual well-being by encouraging greater awareness and understanding of strengths and capabilities and the development of hope. Of necessity, this relationship between practitioners and family members locates practitioners as agents of hope and support (Institute for Public Care, 2012; Park & Peterson, 2006).

Rapp et al. (2008) usefully offer six practical standards to determine what constitutes an SBA. These include the following: SBAs are goal oriented; the primary focus is not on problems or deficits but on the individuals who are supported to identify their inherent resources that they can use to offset difficulties; resources from the environment are identified and used; explicit techniques are used for identifying individual and environmental strengths to realize objectives; the relationship encourages and promotes hope; and, lastly, family members are given consequential choice. More recently, Prowle and Hodgkins (2020) similarly identified ways practitioners can incorporate SBA into their routine work. These methods include supportive strategies that build confidence and self-esteem, help family members to identify things that are going well and can be built upon, realize the strengths and assets that have around them, encourage self-care, appreciate their contribution, provide information, facilitate peer support and community involvement and ensure meaningful participation in decision-making (p. 21). These strategies and techniques collectively suggest a proactive, positive approach by practitioners in their everyday engagement with family members, which is supportive.

3 | STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACHES WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

In a similar vein and moving away from the traditional position of engaging young people with a problem orientation and risk focus, an SBA to practice with young people aims to promote their well-being through positive engagement in support services (Liang et al., 2013). This has been seen in relation to more comprehensive assessment processes (Tedeschi & Kilmer, 2005), increased levels of involvement (Jimerson et al., 2004; Tierney et al., 2022) and promoting awareness of their capabilities including their problem-solving abilities (Roebuck & Roebuck, 2016). It concerns itself predominantly with the quality of the relationship between the young person and the practitioners providing support. Practitioners are encouraged to avoid preconceived notions or stereotypes and to support the young person to consider their own goals and pathways to achieving these (Saleebey, 2006; Teater & Baldwin, 2012). Of note, the key features of strengths-based practice such as recognition of an individual's psychological need for autonomy, a sense of aptitude and a connection to others (Krabbenborg et al., 2017) mirror the developmental stages of youth and adolescence (Coleman, 2011). Furthermore, encouraging young people to identify, use and/or develop their own strengths promotes motivation, a positive self-concept and resilience when experiencing trials and adversity (Roebuck & Roebuck, 2016).

4 | CRITIQUING STRENGTH-BASED APPROACHES

Critics of SBA however argue that it is naïve, ignores presenting problems and can at times reframe serious situations in a simplistic manner

(Brun & Rapp, 2001; Graybeal, 2001). Oliver and Charles have queried its compatibility with statutory child protection work, while Kisthardt (2012) suggests that there is a concern about risk and harm going unnoticed when using SBA. Gray (2011) and Keddell (2012) note that while the rhetoric associated with SBA is about social justice and empowerment, in practice, the emphasis tends to be on individual responsibility. The aim of SBA to achieve a more balanced relationship between practitioners and family members has also been questioned with the reality of under-resourced, bureaucratic environments with high caseloads, a risk-averse culture and unrealistic media-driven public expectations in which many practitioners work not accounted for (Connolly & Doolan, 2007; Gray & Mubangizi, 2010).

Others have highlighted how the approach pays little attention to the wider context in which people live and the structural inequalities that they are faced with such as poverty, mental illness, race and class (Bywaters et al., 2018; Keddell, 2014; Saleebey, 2012; Staudt et al., 2001). We are reminded that social services and social work are concerned with both the actions of individuals and the social context within which these actions occur (Hyslop & Keddell, 2018). Furthermore, there is an increasing body of rigorous evidence and an associated call for understanding on the relationship between structural inequality, adversity and poor outcomes (Bywaters et al., 2018; Gupta et al., 2018; Keddell, 2014).

SBA's focus on community is also cautioned against with a reminder that communities are not always forces for good and can result in exclusion, marginalization, and the perpetuation of crime and deviance (Gray & Mubangizi, 2010). Jordan (2008) also emphasizes how this focus on communities and social networks removes responsibility from government departments and statutory authorities to local support services, practitioners who work in them and to those who are in need of such supports.

However, advocates highlight that the approach does not disregard risk but instead is founded on a positive position that emphasizes individual strengths as starting point in a supportive programme of work or intervention, which are then used as a springboard to achieve wider positive change (Roebuck & Roebuck, 2016). Related to these criticisms, commentators have highlighted a need for further research on its effectiveness (Pattoni, 2012; Staudt et al., 2001). However, a number of research studies on SBA have found positive outcomes. Smock et al. (2010) report on empirical research that maintains that strengths-based interventions have a positive psychological impact, particularly, in enhancing individual well-being through development of hope. Indeed, a focus on enhancing awareness and understanding of strengths and capabilities has been shown to promote an increased feeling of well-being (Park & Peterson, 2009). Other research has indicated high levels of success in achieving goals, overall satisfaction with services and higher rates of individual well-being (Donovan & Nickerson, 2007; Siegal et al., 1995). Research has also found that recipients of services using SBAs were more likely to attain employment or vocational training, increase social support and income, enhance tolerance for stress, change life skills, reduce rates of hospitalization and generally have better outcomes (Donovan & Nickerson, 2007; Macias et al., 1997).

In terms of the wider context including the extended family unit, SBAs have been found to assist families in identifying resources for coping, which has contributed to achievement of goals (MacLeod & Nelson, 2000). McKeown et al. (2003) highlighted an SBA as a key factor in the highlighted an SBA as a key factor in the success of a family support initiative in Ireland, while Ghate and Hazel (2002) reported on the effect of building on the strengths of parents in need of support when managing a number of adversities. Devaney et al. (2019) present a strengths-based family-centred model of practice (the Meitheal model) and highlight how this approach is based on a premise that people have strengths and want to succeed in life. This approach adopts a concrete and realistic orientation focusing on what is possible in day-to-day reality in order to promote success. Significantly, it also normalizes the concept of help-seeking to encourage family members to partake in the model.

5 | THE YOUTH ADVOCATE PROGRAMME IN IRELAND

The YAP is an internationally recognized, non-profit organization that provides integrated, family- and community-based programmes of support for young people in need or at risk and their families. The YAP Ireland model is a unique way of providing intensive, focused support through the development of a trusting relationship between a supportive, trained and skilled adult advocate, the young person and their family. The young people and families that are involved in YAP Ireland typically experience a wide range of adversities including poverty, neglect and abuse, community violence, involvement in the criminal justice system and mental and behavioural health concerns (Brady et al., 2020). Specifically in the Irish context, the YAP model supports young people with a range of needs that include young people at risk of care or custody, young people with mild learning difficulties or mental-health or substance misuse issues and those in custody moving to independent living. Consequently, young people and their families are involved with a wide range of agencies offering a variety of supports and services, and the aim of a YAP Ireland intervention is to build a network of both formal and informal supports (Youth Advocate Programmes Ireland, 2013, 2018). The core components upon which the model is based include *rigorously selected and trained supportive practitioners who are carefully matched with the young person and provide intensive individualized support based on a needs-led wraparound model using resources within the local community*. The intervention is *time limited* (15 hours per week for a 6-month period with an option of an additional 6 months if required) and focuses on developing competencies, improving coping skills and *building networks of informal sustainable support*. This approach *involves young people* in all aspects of the support plan and *focuses on their strengths* based on the belief that each young person and his or her family have the capacity to grow and evolve when protective factors including social supports are activated and skills and abilities that promote personal development are developed (Silva et al., 2020). The programme provides ongoing supervision and support to advocates and conducts regular process and outcome evaluations (Bruns et al., 2011).

6 | RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS: SBA IN THE YAP MODEL

This paper is based on a qualitative research study that explored each component of the YAP model (as detailed above) and the programme overall from the perspectives of key stakeholders: young people, their parents or guardians, staff members and referrers. A case study approach was used with 10 YAP Ireland cases selected for in-depth analysis. The first 10 cases closing to the programme during a defined 2-week period were selected for inclusion in the study and approached to ask if they wished to take part. Where young people or their families declined to participate in the research, the next case that was due to close was approached until a quota of 10 cases was reached. This approach ensured that the sample of cases studied was mixed in terms of gender, geographical location, age and so forth and was not biased towards cases with positive outcomes. This paper is based on the data collected on SBAs in practice from interviews with all stakeholders involved in the case studies (young people, parents, advocates, team leaders and referrers, $n = 50$) and focus groups ($n = 85$) with a wider sample of stakeholders involved in the YAP programme. The eight focus groups included young people ($n = 12$), parents ($n = 15$), advocates ($n = 30$), team leaders ($n = 10$), social workers who referred to YAP ($n = 8$), and staff and board members ($n = 10$). Participatory techniques were used in the young people's focus groups to ensure their views were heard. Each respondent was asked about their experience of the YAP Ireland programme, perceived outcomes, if any, and their views on the various components of the programme. Components were listed and described using accessible language, with each one then considered individually. Participants were asked to discuss their value, how they experienced them being applied in practice and the impact of each component on their experience with YAP. All interviews and focus groups were transcribed in full and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This paper focuses in particular on their views on SBA in practice, acknowledging that this is based on a self-reported account based on participants' subjective perspectives.

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University of Galway's Research Ethics Committee (REC) and by Tusla – Child and Family Agency's REC. Ethical safeguards implemented included participant consent, right to withdraw without consequence, anonymity and duty of care. Attention was paid by the research team to the care and support needs of the young people and family members participating in the study.

6.1 | A strengths-based approach in practice

In all strands of the research, respondents strongly indicated that an SBA was a fundamental component of the YAP model, which informs and underpins the routine interactions between advocates, young people and their family members. This approach was seen to build trust between young people, family members and YAP staff and to inspire confidence in their ability to develop and progress in a positive

way. The staff team and advocates in particular focus on the positives and strengths of the young person and their family. In doing so, the talents and abilities of the young person and their family are identified and built upon, and the development of their resilience and self-esteem is prioritized. Linked to this, YAP operates a 'no reject, no eject' policy, whereby they do not discontinue their involvement with the young person and their family in any circumstance.

All advocates ($n = 40$), team leaders ($n = 20$) and referrers (18) highlighted why an SBA is important as an overall orientation in YAP Ireland. They also noted that this approach is not typically used by all services involved with young people:

The focus on strengths is key, as it changes the dynamic of the relationship from the beginning. It also means that we do not give up, but continue to frame issues with a 'Well, that was a mistake, or a bad thing happened, but let us pick ourselves up and learn and get on with the goals we have'. There are no magic wands, but it is important to have a strengths-based perspective so that we can model how even when things are hard or do not work out, you can control how you respond to situations and can take something positive out of it. Hope is very important. (Team leader, Case Study 1)

What you find is that families have all these supports around them, professional supports around them, and everybody is focusing on the negatives. So, it's really refreshing for somebody like us to come in and just focus on positives. And there are positives, but they cannot see them; they are in such a dark place that they just need someone to kind of bring them out of that. (Advocate, Case Study 9)

I do think it's really important. So many of the families that I've referred into YAP Ireland, you know, there is serious stuff going on there. There is a lot of worries, and, you know, it's important to focus on strengths because we know that that will actually give probably a better outcome, and it would last longer, and they'll have more positive and meaningful relationships with people. (Referrer, Case Study 5)

6.2 | A strengths-based approach with young people

In terms of an SBA with young people, all practitioner participants highlighted how young people and their families can encounter a lot of negativity in their lives and 'experience blame and judgement as the norm' (Referrer, Case Study 10). Young people in particular were noted to receive a lot of critical feedback about their behaviour. All respondents felt however that the SBA can counteract this level of disapproval and promote a positive constructive relationship between

the young person and the staff members. Advocates and team leaders also provided examples of how the SBA was put into practice in a tangible and constructive way with young people. Examples provided included reframing negative perspectives, identifying and emphasizing aspects of life and relationships that were going well, highlighting and building on skills and abilities, celebrating uniqueness and positive examples of decision-making, responsibility taking, and independence.

She had a lot of negativity, talking a lot about her family in negative ways, and I just had to remind her, you know, about the love that was surrounding her and all the good things she had in her life, whether it was her connection with animals, her skills in terms of her drawing and painting, being aware of everything around her, you know. She was focusing so much on the negativity; we really had to say, 'Right, let us list out the positive things you have in your life.' I remind her of them on a weekly basis. (Advocate, Case Study 3)

YP would abscond; she would stay out late ... So, for us we thought yeah, she's placing herself at risk, but there's obviously a level of streetwise maturity there, so that's a strength; go for that strength. So rather than treating her like a child, we went in and respected the fact that she wanted all this freedom. We opened her eyes to the risks that were attached to it, and we showed her a better way to use that maturity and streetwiseness. ... She completely finished interacting with those peers, and when she was attending school more, built a whole new peer group, and that was because we'd seen a strength where someone else had seen a negative. (Team leader, Case Study 7)

That was a big way to get [young person] to be confident ... [Advocate] was brilliant, she just had a great way of getting [young person] involved in the things she is good at. I think as well, it taught [young person] that distraction is a great way to handle her emotions. And she's cooking since; she was cooking pasta there this evening. (Parent, Case Study 10)

There are many opportunities to highlight strengths at all stages within YAP Ireland programme of support as it is integral to the service that they provide. Based on the inclusive assessment process, the suite of supports provided to the young person is planned with reference to their strengths and capabilities.

It would be impossible not to pay attention to their strengths because it is woven into the needs assessment, the ISP [individual support plan], the three reviews and the final meeting. (Team leader, Case Study 5)

Looking at his needs and going by his strengths. When we came in initially there was a lot of services telling us what they needed from [young person]. It wasn't about what he thought his strengths and needs were. So, we focussed on that and hearing it from him. (Advocate, Case Study 1)

Everything boils down to what's working ... we find little pieces of success in the day, the hour, the week ... whatever it takes and then we bounce from there. We emphasize that, we tease out how and why it worked and apply that same approach to other areas of their day. (Team leader, Case Study 4)

The avoidance of judgement and focus on the strengths of the young person emerged as a significant theme in interviews with most young people ($n = 15$):

I thought it was just going to be someone coming down and talking, telling me. But it was all about what you think will work. Like what kind of things have worked well in the past ... How you managed things before. It all revolved around you. (Young person, Case Study 2)

A number of young people reported feeling 'completely no judgement' from their advocates (Case Study 3) and suggested that they focus on and talk 'about positive things' (Case Study 7).

The activities young people engage in are also chosen to reflect their strengths and interests. Advocates and team leaders will suggest options that are then decided upon by the young people.

We give the young people a choice and options in what we are going to do. So TikTok karaoke could be one, a quiz could be another, or an art competition. We identify their strengths from where they have come before and we let them then say what does this let us say art competition look like, or whatever the activity is, how should it be judged, in what way? (Advocate, Case Study 10)

Participants, particularly parents ($n = 28$), advocates ($n = 35$) and team leaders ($n = 20$), also noted the impact on young people of using an SBA in practice and highlighted the perceived difference it made:

Young people open up very quickly when we use this strategy. Even things they consider their negatives we show them as strengths. Young people trust you quicker when they feel you are on their side and that you are not judging them. (Staff member, Case Study 3)

Focusing on the positives lights up [young person]. They receive so much negativity and bad news that they cannot see the good sides. An Advocate can take the time to do this with them. (Parent, Case Study 4)

Well [young person's] involvement with YAP it helped him build his confidence; he wasn't able to speak out and say much ... Since YAP was involved, it helped him to build his confidence and he would speak out. (Parent, Case Study 9)

6.3 | A strengths-based approach with parents

The YAP programme also provides a programme of support to the parents or guardians of the young people, with the advocates offering individualized supports. This is also strengths based, highlighting both what is working well for the parents and the young person while simultaneously structured in such a way as to keep the intervention focused primarily on the needs of the young people. The majority of participants ($n = 109$) described how this works in practice:

I would always ask the parent to be part of the process and I would always ask for their input into the meeting. If it gets into having a negative focus, I would ask them to stop, take a breath and ask them to think of some positives. Okay so [young person] did not go to school for two weeks, but he did an hour in school this week, that is amazing, that's a good start. So, we are reinforcing what is working well for them all the time. (Advocate, Case Study 3)

So, we ask the parents what is it that they would like. We try and do a bit of a road map of events say for a few months even or a few weeks, depending. So we try to concentrate on what has worked well in the past, have a good talk about even little things they managed to do successfully and then tease out what was the difference that time, what was it that made that work? Can we try that again and apply it to a different scenario? (Advocate, Case Study 5)

I got on very well to be honest. If I needed to talk, something about [young person], I would talk to her on her own. She would listen, we'd talk about what was going right as well as what was going wrong ... we'd make a plan. (Parent, Case Study 5)

Many of the referrers interviewed ($n = 12$) spoke of how encouraging parents to share their views and to hear their opinions with a focus on strengths motivated them to open up and describe their difficulties and to work on trying to turn things around for themselves and for their young people.

I think it works because the family does not feel intimidated, the advocates and team leaders listen, they ask them what they think, they ask parents to talk about the things that have worked well in the past or the good things they see in their young person. This sense of being involved and having a say in what's going on gives ownership, it motivates people. (Referrer, Case Study 3)

Participants working with YAP as well as referring social workers reported their view that parents seemed to respond to this approach, and it motivated them to put in the required effort to change the dynamic in the family relationships.

7 | DISCUSSION

The YAP Ireland programme facilitates the development of a supportive relationship between an advocate and a young person through the use of SBA in the routine interactions they engage in. This relationship then becomes the medium through which the practitioner can connect with the young person and their environment and intervene to support and help them (Munro, 2011; Ruch, 2005). As an approach, it is valued and experienced as supportive by all who are involved in the YAP programme. Critically, this includes the young people themselves and their parents. Recent research has emphasized that it is the *kind of relationship* between the service provider and those in receipt of it that matters (Ferguson et al., 2020). Practitioners, who work intensively in this way with young people and their families, as the YAP advocates and team leaders do, are ideally placed to develop supportive relationships through regular interactions and help identify strengths, talents and assets as part of a support plan and to use these as a key resource in managing difficulties (Prowle & Musgrave, 2018; Walsh, 2015). The flexibility demonstrated by YAP Ireland in developing these supportive relationships using SBA to identify even the smallest spark of positivity and resourcefulness allows advocates to tailor their approach to each young person and family ensuring they establish the kind of relationship that is required.

Linked with the participatory nature of the YAP Ireland model, Smith and Davis (2010) describe how an SBA promotes choice and participation and uses techniques or strategies that put young people's own solutions at the centre of programme of support. Prowle and Hodgkins (2020) present a triangle of positive approaches that enable families to take ownership and to create achievable plans. These approaches, engagement, empowerment and resilience can be seen in the work of the advocates in YAP Ireland. Many examples were given by respondents of applying an SBA in routine practice with the perceived positive effect this has on both the engagement of young people and their family and on the desired outcomes achieved noted. Many factors evident in the responses of participants: a listening approach, positive praise, identifying family strengths and encouraging family choice, echo those found in the literature on

strengths-based practice (e.g. Lietz, 2011; Pinkerton et al., 2016; Saleebey, 1996). Furthermore, the categorization of SBA in practice as presented by Dunst (1995), Rapp et al. (2008) and Prowle and Hodgkins (2020) is clearly evident in the work of YAP Ireland. The fundamental approach in YAP Ireland is to find positive aspects of the young person's behaviour or circumstances to focus on, and to access informal supports and resources with the local community and environment as much as possible.

The SBA is used directly with the young people who are the focus in the YAP Ireland model, but there is also evidence of a strong emphasis on support for parents and other family members to support them directly and thereby build on their capacity to support their young person. Recent research literature on the YAP model highlights the importance of supporting parents directly and indirectly as a way of improving children and young people's outcomes (Brady et al., 2020; Jackson et al., 2021). Join-Lambert (2016) and Williams and Segrott (2018) have highlighted how in recent decades support services tend to involve parents in the work that is done with their children and build on the strengths and competences of parents themselves to reinforce and develop their parenting roles. Dunst and Trivette (2009) identified that having a family focus, and not just focusing on the child as the unit of intervention, enables parents to acquire the knowledge and skills to be able to cope with daily living and improve their sense of mastery and control. The parents involved with YAP recognized and highlighted the SBA as a favoured approach of the practitioners working both with them and with their young person. This positivity can also have a reciprocal effect as it has been found that those in receipt of services recognize and appreciate when practitioners 'go the extra mile' for them, and similarly when parents 'buy-in' to services, practitioners are more likely to use an SBA (Dale, 2004). In Slettebø's (2013) study, social workers reported that their attitudes towards the parents changed as they realized that parents had strengths and capacities as well as challenges, and this shift in attitude supported better co-operation. Practitioners are also more likely to respond to a non-engaged parent negatively, consequently increasing levels of resistance (Mirick, 2014).

As noted earlier, SBA can be a somewhat abstract concept, and while practitioners see its merit and agree with its principles, they can struggle to realize it in practice. What this paper highlights is that opportunities to incorporate an SBA lie in the regular interactions with young people and parents and that if practitioners actively look for those fortes, they will find them, albeit difficult at times. This recognition and active use of this perspective repeated over time changes momentum and instils optimism and hope, and hope-inspiring relationships have the potential to promote change and to achieve the unachievable. Relational factors have become widely accepted as vital tools of change in most programmes and services for young people (Li & Julian, 2012) and have been shown to impact on achieved outcomes as well as levels of engagement (Roest et al., 2016). Studies have also highlighted young people's need for relationships with adults who provide individual care and advocacy and are able to provide both tangible and symbolic feelings of worth, belief, connection, warmth and empathy (Augsberger & Swenson, 2015). These characteristics mirror the approaches used in practice by YAP

Ireland advocates. Other strengths-based models of social care practice gaining popularity include Signs of Safety (Turnell & Edwards, 1999), Reclaiming Social Work (Cross et al., 2010) and the Meitheal model (Devaney et al., 2021). The growing adoption of these models indicates a welcomed increase in support for relationship-based approaches and SBAs as a norm in children and family services. This paper promotes this type of orientation and highlights exemplars at both strategic and operational levels of realizing it in practice. However, SBA is not a panacea and must not overlook or minimize the impact of adversity, disadvantage, harm and abuse in an effort to focus on what is working well. It is a resource for practitioners as they support and help but must be applied in the context of their wider training, knowledge and skill base. Further research and discussion is needed on applying SBA in practice and its impact particularly as experienced by children, young people and their families.

8 | CONCLUSION

This paper has exemplified the SBA approach with young people involved in an advocacy programme and their families. Young people and families are seen to respond very well to a shift in focus from the negative aspects of their behaviour or choices to more positive ones. The SBA is attributed to building trust and facilitating new and creative ways to approach difficult situations. The young people and their families who are supported by YAP Ireland experience multiple chronic stressors, including poverty, marginality, family problems and social isolation, and Jackson et al. (2020) reports a wide of positive outcomes as a result of their intervention. As such, it is imperative that young people and their families (often hard to engage in formal services) are encouraged and supported to participate in supportive initiatives such as this. The SBA is viewed by stakeholders as a critical factor in YAP Ireland's success in this regard, and there is important learning on how this approach could be replicated by other services working with a similar cohort of young people. As Dunst (1995) reminds us, the failure of a family to show competence and capability must be seen as a breakdown in the system to create openings for their abilities, skills and knowledge to be displayed or learned. This paper has highlighted the potential for practitioners working with families, right across the spectrum of children and family services to use an SBA to support them to build up their aspirations and capabilities, enabling them to take responsibility for their own lives, caring for and supporting each other in the present and in the future. Notably, this paper also reminds us that there is no secret formula to informing practice with SBA. What is required is an unwavering acceptance that there are fortes, abilities and competences present in us all and that the onus is on practitioners working in support services to help those who are experiencing challenges and difficulties to identify and activate these assets. Positive change can and does happen when this belief underpins and informs everyday conversations, attitudes and actions.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The anonymized data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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