

# Identifying and Working with “At-Risk” Youth

Nova Scotia School Counsellors Association  
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# Who is Robert Wright?

- A registered SW Private Practitioner with endorsements in direct practice and forensics
- Former Ex. Dir. Child & Youth Strategy
- Former Race Relations Coordinator of the Dartmouth District School Board
- Member, Racial Equity Committee, NSBS
- PhD Student in Sociology – Race, Identity, Power

# “At-Risk” . . . A Conceptual Definition

- Traditional definition focused on deficits, symptoms, behaviour:
  - Violence
  - Aggression
  - Truancy
  - Non-compliance
  - Non-achievement
  - Substance use and trafficking

# The Problems with “At-risk” Concept

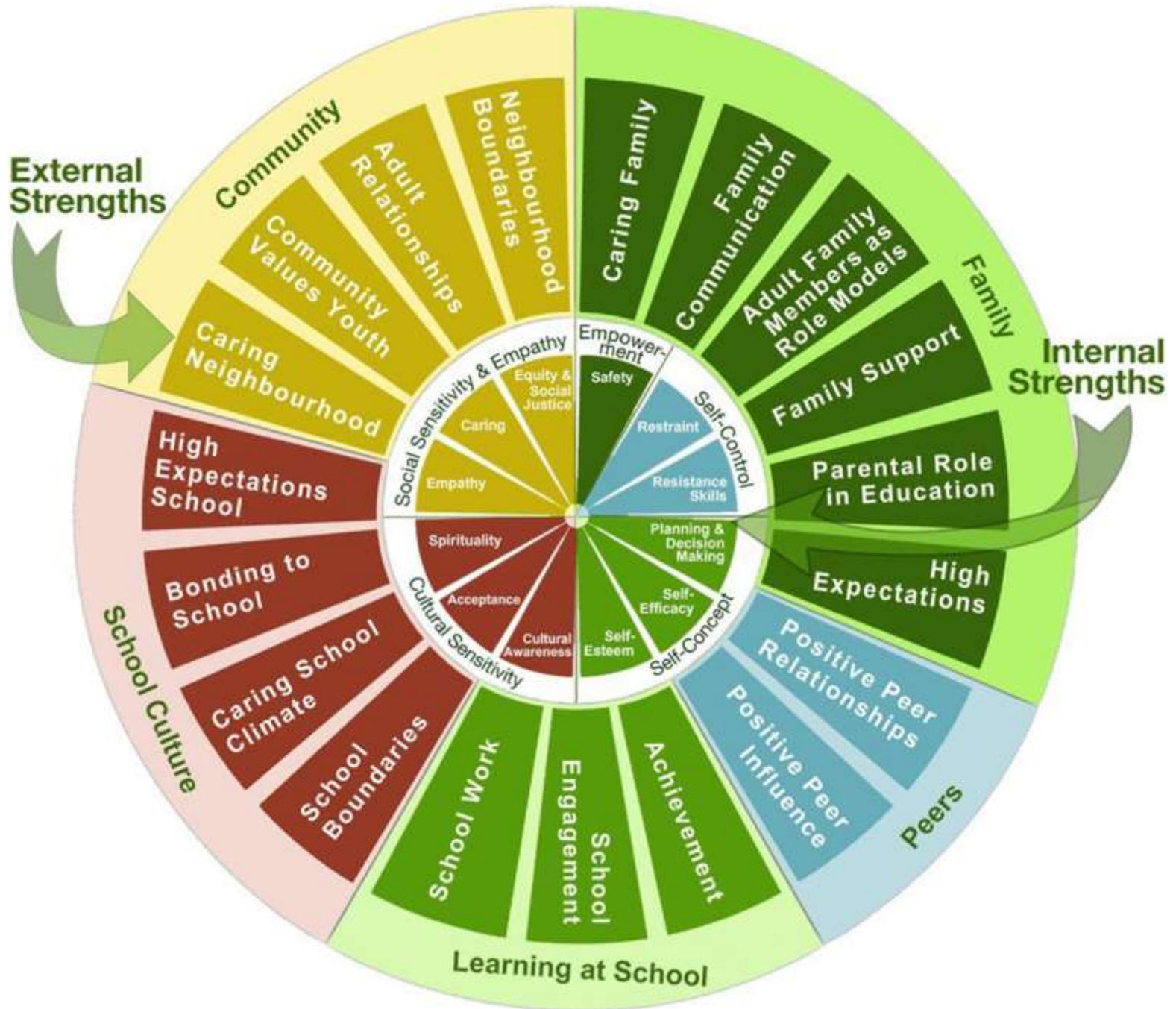
- Definition has several deficits:
  - Focuses disproportionately on intrinsic factors – what’s wrong with the youth
  - Leads to interventions which target symptoms and ignores strengths
  - Ignores the constructivist nature/socio-cultural aspects of student mal-achievement

# Towards a Better Working Model

- A better working model would:
  - Include both intrinsic and extrinsic
  - Focus on known health determinants/strengths
  - Provide guidance for holistic interventions
  - Respect that student mal-achievement has a larger socio-cultural context

# Resilience . . . A Definition

- . . . resiliency – the capability of individuals and systems (families, groups and communities) to cope with significant adversity or stress in ways that are not only effective, but tend to result in an increased ability to constructively respond to future adversity. . . . it is an innate “self-righting mechanism”.
- The following model for understanding resilience is taken from Resiliency Initiatives (formerly Resiliency Canada)



# Supporting Student Resilience

- The teacher who would support student resilience should:
  - Be a competent and professional teacher
  - Understand the complex construction of student non-achievement
  - Measure success in the broader context of student resilience
  - Understand the critical role of relationship in the helping role (particularly with field dependent students)
  - Understand the critical role of relevance when engaging students
  - Cooperate with and accommodate a broad range of interventions



# Relationship & Relevance

- Those who measure the impact of various helping services have observed that 83% of change that people make in a helping relationship is attributable to two factors:
  - A caring, supporting relationship between helper and client, and
  - the degree to which the “help” was directed to issues of relevance to the client.

# Rules for Building Relationships

- Be approachable, accepting and non-judgemental
- Seek to understand. Adopt an attitude of learning towards students' lives and experiences
- Express affection genuinely
- Meet student needs effectively
- Reflect students' feelings effectively
- Make connections from curriculum to students' aspirations and experience
- Understand what is happening in the lives of your students

# Reflections on Herbert Kohl

- “Not-learning tends to take place when someone has to deal with unavoidable challenges to [their] personal and family loyalties, integrity, and identity.
- “Conscious, willed refusal of schooling for political or cultural reasons is not acknowledged as an appropriate response to oppressive education. Since students have no way to legitimately criticize the schooling they are subjected to or the people they are required to learn from, resistance and rebellion are stigmatized.
- “. . . The only sane alternative to not-learning is the acknowledgement and direct confrontation of oppression.”

# Q & A

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- Discussion of Implications

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