

## **The Glass Really is Half Full: Supporting Students Through the Asset Mapping and Resiliency Planning Process**

### **Abstract:**

The theme of equity is explored in this article, with narratives describing action research done in a pilot project of the Asset Mapping and Resiliency Planning (AMRP) process. The AMRP process aims to create an inventory of student assets that can be used to develop a resiliency plan. The plan identifies which assets could be mobilized to increase the student's levels of engagement at school, at home and in the community. How do we more effectively support students who have experienced difficulty functioning in the school environment emotionally or academically in order to facilitate their own ability? The components of the Asset Mapping and Resiliency Planning process, the shift in thinking to achieve this process, as well as outcomes are detailed.

### **Key Words:**

assets, asset mapping, equity, inclusive Schools, resiliency, resiliency tools, Special Education Resource Teacher, supporting students, Vision Services

**Note:** A pseudonym is used for the student in this article.

*Background: Exploring the Asset Mapping and Resiliency Planning Process with York Region District School Board Secondary School.*

As a member of the Inclusive Schools and Community Services in the York Region District School Board, Scott Milne began working with a secondary school in the winter of 2013. He was approached by the school's Principal to see if the tools he was using to map out assets in students could be used to explore hidden student potential.

Bonnie Benard's research champions this process of supporting students to reveal their underlying assets in the article "The Foundations of the Resiliency Framework" (1). As such, for marginalized students, the road to improved academic success starts with increased school engagement. One way to increase school engagement among students is to reframe the way they experience schools: specifically, finding ways for those students to utilize their inherent strengths (i.e. assets) at school.

Resiliency research...provides a powerful rationale for moving our narrow focus in the social and behavioral sciences from a risk, deficit, and pathology focus to an examination of the strengths youths, their families, their schools, and their communities have brought to bear in promoting healing and health.

After conducting risk and resiliency workshops with staff and parents, Milne was invited to sit in on some of the discussions of students being facilitated by the school's Student Success Team. After attending a few meetings, Milne proposed that he lead a small group of staff through an asset mapping process for one of the students for whom they had the greatest concerns and questions. The Student Success Team agreed and he

began working with one of the school's Special Education Resource Teachers and a teacher from the Vision Services Team. The teachers' reflections on the process follow.

### *A Paradigm Shift to Examining Student's Assets*

"Instead of looking at what is wrong with a student, let's look at what the student has going for them. What about examining their assets?" The principal introduced staff to the idea of the Asset Mapping and Resiliency Planning process by inviting Scott to a staff meeting. He led staff to choose an individual student and to note their positive characteristics. It seemed that since students were often viewed through a deficit lens that a mindset flip was required to focus on their strengths. This was the beginning of changing the paradigm of how students were supported. It did not happen right away as there were many questions. However, the seed was planted. When Henry, a student whose teachers were challenged to engage, was on the list to be discussed at a monthly Student Success meeting, Scott was invited to come and work with the school based team.

Henry came to our school in Grade 9; a head taller than most of his peers, legally blind, with a zest for learning and a winning sense of humor. Although tasks took him twice as long as his classmates to complete, he persevered with determination. His intense interest in his subjects was a joy to see. When working on a business class assignment, he provided his teacher with regular updates on Samsung and how it was faring, saying "Do you know that Samsung is a world leader?" In Drama, his strong social conscience was piqued. He talked about the play *Skins* and how human rights are fragile.

Unfortunately, this was not to continue into Grade 11. Henry was disengaged in his classes, physically present, but absent in spirit. His teachers confirmed that Henry was not progressing. He was sleeping through much of his classes and his marks were taking a nosedive. Later, when asked, "How are those strategies going that we talked about?" Slightly irritated Henry said, "Yes I am eating breakfast. No, I am not online at night. Yes, I will take a break and do a lap in the hall." The shift in his disposition led the team to wonder if they needed to revisit the supports currently in place and to consider doing an asset mapping exercise to leverage Henry's hidden and buried assets toward his re-engagement with school.

### *Connecting with Vision Services*

In a first meeting, Henry's Orientation and Mobility Specialist from the Vision Services Team and Special Education Resource Teacher brainstormed thoughts about Henry while Scott organized the discussion into a "map" of assets and risks with further categories of home, community and school. The map, projected on the screen, served as a vehicle to facilitate discussion. It gave a structure to the broader exploration of the student and provided a visual representation of risks, the variety and abundance of assets, and opportunities to explore. The potential to mine the assets in the form of "engagement pathways" became apparent as the map was developed.

Prior to this meeting, Henry and his Orientation and Mobility Specialist had completed 15 lessons in travel skills that involved learning how to make travel to and from school independently, and included the use of public transportation. Henry had little experience making street crossings. Over time, his confidence built and his social circles expanded. Connections were made with the family, in their home and with community partners. As a result, a greater insight into the whole student became evident which led to focussing on building assets.

The creation of a ***Student Asset and Engagement Map*** (see template) led to uncovering core avenues and resources which could provide Henry with a positive foundation to be able to succeed. Henry, who was initially reluctant to meet, became receptive to these ideas and more after discussion. For example, it was noted that Henry is a very social person who loves to engage with people. It was suggested that he could join the Canadian National Institute for the Blind S.C.O.R.E. weekend programs as well as be assigned a volunteer peer buddy from the CNIB who would meet with him weekly. Henry had a passion for and interest in business which was the catalyst to change from studying science to business and psychology. For Henry, focussing on subjects of high interest proved to be essential to his degree of involvement. He had excelled in drama previously so decided to take drama the next semester. Henry started exercising in the weight room after school once a week. All of these changes, based on his assets, helped Henry to be more engaged in his program at school.

One of the outcomes of exploring Henry's assets is that he meets weekly with a peer mentor from CNIB. Henry is very animated as he talks about David, his mentor. He is intrigued by David's career in business and his family and enjoys telling stories about their meetings. Henry and his family had David and his wife for dinner recently. David is a young man who has become a friend, role model and confidant for Henry which is what he desperately needed. This has given him a new lease on life, which certainly is not easy for him.

Henry still has his struggles, but now has a new pool of resiliency to draw on, found by examining his assets and offering him tools to build his resilience capacity. There is a noticeable paradigm shift on behalf of the team members to focus on the assets of the student versus the risks. A similar mode of thinking is then translated to other forums such as In-School Team meetings. The difference between Assets Mapping meetings and other school based meetings is that there appears to be more proactive involvement on the part of each member so that one person doesn't take on too much. When it becomes clear that supporting a student to ensure success, is part of a shared responsibility, a student seems to naturally rise to the occasion.

### *Encouraging Results Lead to Broadening the Program of Asset Mapping and Resiliency Planning*

Approximately 75% of our students who are blind or have low vision in Canada and in the United States are unemployed after graduation from secondary and post-secondary

studies. Asset mapping and resiliency planning may be one of the keys to create change in the employment statistics specifically because of the connections that are made to community programs and businesses.

When the outcomes of the Asset Mapping and Resiliency Planning process were presented to the Student Success Team, other students who might benefit were identified. The original asset map we produced gave birth to what became the Asset Mapping and Resiliency Planning Pilot.

Revitalizing student engagement by focusing on student assets leading to a viable resiliency plan is a key approach that has yielded positive results for students. This pilot now operates in 14 YRDSB schools and several community agencies are exploring the possibility of having their own frontline staff trained in the process. The Student Asset and Engagement Map template below can be used to facilitate discussion for the process.

In her book, [Resiliency: What We Have Learned](#) (2), Bonnie Benard sums up the rationale for schools to become more than bystanders in the lives of students:

One of the most important and consistent findings in resilience research is the power of schools, especially of teachers, to turn a child's life from risk to resilience. While much of the recent research about effective schooling focuses on students' academic performance, the role of schools in young people's lives is clearly broader than pedagogy and more important than test scores. Especially in the absence of positive family relationships, schools can provide an alternative source of protective, nurturing support. On the other hand, when schools fail students, these young people could not be more at risk.

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1 Benard, Bonnie. *The Foundations of Resiliency Framework*. <https://www.resiliency.com/free-articles-resources/the-foundations-of-the-resiliency-framework/>

2 Benard, Bonnie. *Resiliency: What we have learned*. WestEd, 2004.

# Student Asset and Engagement Map

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**Purpose:** To create additional engagement pathways for the school in its support of the student. The pathways could be based on assets, which could include people, skill sets, areas of interests (past, present and future), as well as ambitions.

## Home

*Risks:*

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*Assets:*

<b>People:</b>
<b>Activities:</b>
<b>Interests:</b>
<b>Personality Traits/Skills:</b>
<b>Other:</b>

## Community

*Risks:*

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*Assets:*

<b>People:</b>
<b>Activities:</b>
<b>Interests:</b>
<b>Personality Traits/Skills:</b>
<b>Other:</b>

## School

*Risks:*

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*Assets:*

<b>People:</b>
<b>Activities:</b>
<b>Interests:</b>
<b>Learning Infrastructure:</b>
<b>Personal Traits/Skills:</b>
<b>Other:</b>

**Resiliency Plan:**

*Possible Follow-Up Actions based on student assets explored above (to be discussed with the student)*

**After staff develop a draft resiliency plan, the student then reviews the plan and directs actions:**

Red: Don't do

Yellow: Not now

Green: Please do

Purple: Additional actions

Burgundy: Questions