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A Social Justice Perspective on Strengths-based Approaches: Exploring Educators' Perspectives and Practices

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Abstract

What does it mean to engage in strengths-based (SB) approaches from a social justice perspective? In this paper we explore the accounts of educators who work with youth experiencing social and educational barriers to describe what it might mean to engage in SB practices from a social justice perspective. Using data generated from interviews, we draw on educators' perspectives and reported practices to inform our conceptual understanding of a SB social justice approach. We propose that a social justice perspective of SB educational work involves at least four interconnecting sets of practices: recognizing students-in-context, critically engaging strengths and positivity, nurturing democratic relations, and enacting creative and flexible pedagogies. We contend that these interrelated sets of practices are necessary for youth to engage more fully in schooling.

Key words: Social justice; strengths, youth, students deemed to be 'at risk', educator perspectives

Résumé

Que cela signifie-t-il de s'engager dans des approches basées sur les points forts du point de vue de la justice sociale ? Dans cet article, nous étudions les récits d'éducateurs qui travaillent avec des jeunes et qui se confrontent à des barrières sociales et éducatives, pour décrire ce que pourrait signifier de s'engager dans des pratiques basées sur les point forts dans une perspective de justice sociale. En utilisant les données générées à partir d'entrevues, nous nous appuyons sur les perspectives de ces éducateurs et faisons état des pratiques pour renseigner notre compréhension conceptuelle d'une approche basée sur les points forts du point de vue de la justice sociale. Nous proposons que dans une perspective de justice sociale tout travail éducatif basé sur les points forts implique au moins quatre ensembles de pratiques interconnectés : la reconnaissance des élèves en contexte, l'engagement critique du potentiel et de la positivité, le

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maintien de relations démocratiques, et la promulgation de pédagogies créatives et flexibles. Nous soutenons que ces ensembles interdépendants de pratiques sont nécessaires pour que les jeunes s'engagent pleinement dans leur scolarité.

Mots-clés : La justice sociale, les points forts, les jeunes, les élèves considérés comme «à risque», les perspectives des éducateurs.

A Social Justice Perspective on Strengths-based Approaches: Exploring Educators' Perspectives and Practices

Introduction

In Canada and elsewhere, a movement towards social justice in education that emphasizes equitable and inclusive learning opportunities for all students is being advocated (Ayers, Quinn & Stovall, 2008; Curcic, 2009; Macrine, McLaren & Hill, 2009). Within this movement, challenging deficit-based perspectives and enacting equitable schooling practices towards students experiencing social and educational marginalization are central (Kamler & Comber 2005; Nichols & Cormack 2009; Thomson 2002). Within this social justice landscape, we explore what it is to engage the strengths of youth facing educational and social barriers from a social justice perspective. While we contend that educators' strengths-based (SB) perspectives and practices towards youth facing such obstacles can offer an important facet of social justice engagement, we are mindful that SB educational approaches may constrain social justice work in schools. For instance, an educator's SB practice may highlight a student's learning strength (e.g. asking questions), making it possible for this student to engage in classroom discussions, yet ignore deficit discourses (e.g. academic streaming), which create inequitable access to learning opportunities for this youth.

Educators play an important role in constructing and investigating SB approaches from a social justice perspective. Using interview transcript data from ten educators, we explore how they engaged SB work from a social justice perspective. Through our analysis, we propose that a social justice perspective of SB engagement involves at least four intersecting sets of educational practices: recognizing students-in-context, critically engaging strengths and positivity, nurturing democratic relations, and enacting creative and flexible pedagogies. We suggest that these interrelated SB social justice practices enable youth to engage more fully in their learning. These findings support the notion that SB work includes the premise of social change (Kana'iaupuni, 2005) and extends current discussions on educational equity and democratic practices.

Engaging the strengths of youth

In their everyday work educators confront the challenge of youth who are marginalized by schooling practices (De Broucker, 2005; Manning & Baruth, 1995; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001). We understand that there are an array of factors that can contribute to students' experiences of marginalization in school including, for instance, social location (e.g., race, class, sexual orientation), educational access, curriculum programming, pedagogies, school culture, student out of school responsibilities, educational policy and student health issues (Chudga & Luschei, 2009; Davies & Maldonado, 2009; Oakes, 2005). How educators engage youth related to these and other factors (e.g., in deficit or strengths-based ways) is important. Youth can disengage from school if they experience being viewed negatively by educators (Fine, 1991; Herr & Anderson, 1997; Smyth & Hattam, 2001).

Challenging deficit perspectives and engaging youths' strengths

Deficit discourses and inequities faced by youth highlight the importance of investigating what it means to engage students' strengths from a social justice perspective. Deficit discourses which label, pathologize, blame, and over-emphasize youth vulnerabilities limit opportunities for students to engage strengths-based subjectivities in school. Labeling youth as trouble-makers, deficient, anti-social, low achievers or untrustworthy operates as a form of overt and hidden

curriculum in educational contexts (Edwards, Mumford & Serra-Roldan, 2007; Herr & Anderson, 1997; Smyth & Hattam, 2001; Wagner & Watkins, 2005; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001;). Some hold that "at risk learners pose outright dangers to other learners, provide inappropriate role models and negative peer pressure" and "add a bad element to the overall educational environment" (Manning & Baruth, 1995, p. 33). These deficit discourses are often discursively produced and reproduced (Drewery & Winslade, 1997), negatively impacting youth. As Saleebey (2006) outlines, "By emphasizing and assigning social status to a person's deficiencies, differences, and defects is to rob them of some of their inherent powers and motivations" (p. 280).

Lopez and Louis (2009) define SB education "as a philosophical stance and daily practice that shapes how an individual engages the teaching and learning process" (p.1). They indicate that it "emphasize[s] the positive aspects of student effort and achievement, as well as human strengths" (p. 1). SB educational orientations are not new. Lopez and Louis cite educators' SB work from the 18th and 19th centuries that highlighted student talents, skills and best qualities. Current understandings of strengths and SB education vary. Strengths can be viewed as intrinsic, enduring qualities (Anderson, 2004) or seen as constructed and shifting related to context (Saleebey, 2006). Some views position strengths as a discrete category of specific items/qualities (Hodges & Clifton, 2004), while other perspectives place no boundaries to what constitutes strengths (Saleebey, 2006). SB approaches can focus on classification and measurement (Hodges & Clifton, 2004) while others highlight values and principles (Lopez & Louis, 2009; Saleebey, 2006). Some identify a step-based practice (Anderson, 2004); others propose a range of strategies (Metcalf, 2008). While some SB perspectives aim to foster individual excellence and high performance (Anderson, 2004), others focus on helping individuals better adjust to their contexts (Saleebey, 2006).

Numerous fields have linked their strengths-related work to students and school contexts and educators have drawn from these arenas to engage student strengths and challenge deficit perspectives. Some examples include positive psychology (Snyder & Lopez, 2002), positive youth development (Scales, 2005), youth resiliency (Masten et al., 2008), solution-focused and narrative counselling (Metcalf, 2008; Windslade & Monk, 1999), strengths-based school counselling (Galassi & Akos, 2007), the strengths perspective in social work (Saleebey, 2006), asset-based community development (Kretzmann, 1991) and certain socio-cultural approaches (González, Moll & Amanti, 2005). These arenas are relevant for educators working with youth experiencing social and educational barriers and may be particularly evident when educators are collaborating with professionals (e.g., social workers, community workers) in their engagement with youth. In its different orientations and fields of study, SB work offers educators a potentially rich and varied landscape from which to engage the strengths of youth.

Youths' strengths within the context of social justice and sociocultural perspectives

A number of educational approaches highlight students' strengths within the context of social justice and sociocultural perspectives including, "funds of knowledge" (González, Moll & Amanti, 2005), "virtual school bags" (Thomson, 2002), "turn-around pedagogies" (Comber & Kamler, 2004; 2005), youth participatory action research (Cammarota & Fine, 2008), and youth engagement in educational change (Ginwright, Noguera & Cammarota, 2006).

Moll, Amanti, Neff & González (1992) describe "funds of knowledge" as the "social, economic, and productive activities of people in a local region" (p. 139). Engaging students' "funds of knowledge" positions students as competent and knowledgeable individuals (Moll,

Amanti, Neff & González, 1992). Teachers can use this knowledge to inform teaching and learning processes by making this knowledge "pedagogically viable" (González & Moll, 2002, p. 278; Hattam and Prosser, 2008). Thomson's (2002) metaphor "virtual schoolbag" suggests that every student comes to school with a virtual backpack that includes various resources such as their life experiences, but that some students are never able to use these resources in school. Thomson's study shows that when teachers look closely at students' strengths and resources, this knowledge can become a valuable asset in the school curriculum (Kamler & Comber, 2005; Nichols & Cormack, 2009).

Kamler and Comber (2005) use the phrase "turn-around pedagogies" to describe what happened when teachers inquired into their work with those students who were deemed 'at-risk.' They found that when teachers changed their literacy curriculum by drawing on students' interest in technology and popular culture, their perceptions of students also changed. Rather than viewing these students and their families from a deficit lens, these teachers gained new insights into the capacities of students, which opened up new possibilities for teaching and learning. Researchers have documented students' engagement as participatory action, as well as youths' strengths and abilities of critical analysis, knowledge construction, mobilization of educational change, and sense of agency, voice and authority in educational contexts (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Torre & Fine, 2006). These approaches position students as competent, active agents who possess important skills and knowledge, thereby supporting educators' SB engagement with youth. In doing so, teachers are learning how to connect the curriculum and pedagogy to student worlds, capabilities, knowledge and interests.

Research Design

This qualitative study was broadly informed by hermeneutic, critical, and post-structural perspectives. Within this framework, educators' experiences are understood to develop through their lived experiences and shaped by the discourses informing their practices (Smith, 1991). Hermeneutics enables us to attend to the meanings educators gave to their experiences; this involves seeking to understand "the world as the participants have come to understand it" and "attempts to create new realities through communicative processes such as dialogue" (Friedman & Rogers, 2009, p. 33). We engaged in a dynamic analytic process through active dialogue with participants during interviews and on-going reflection of participants' transcribed texts (Smith, 1991).

Meaning-making was extended to include a critical interpretative layer to support our conceptual development of SB work from a social justice perspective. Exploring how educators engaged youth in SB ways was meant to acknowledge how "lives are mediated by systems of inequity" (Lather, 1992, p. 87). A critical lens supported attending to taken-for-granted assumptions and discourses, processes, and structures of power that hindered and supported educators' in their efforts. This lens furthered our understanding of how educators' described their engagement with youth and supported critical engagement of our own assumptions of students and educators. Drawing from post-structural theories of language and subjectivities (Weedon, 1997), we also examined educators' use of language and its relationship to issues of power and knowledge.

Participants

Ten educators from the eastern region in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador participated in this research. Participants were solicited through our professional contacts via e-

mails, telephone conversations, and face-to-face contacts. We recruited educators who expressed interest in sharing and reflecting on their SB perspectives and experiences related to their work with youth who experience social and educational barriers. All participants had substantial experience working with youth facing educational challenges. Six females and four males ranging in age from 34 and 60 years participated in this study. The majority of participants had worked with youth in different educational roles and in various educational contexts. Importantly, when asked to share and explore their SB perspectives and experiences, participants actively drew from their range of educational experiences, something we had not fully anticipated as researchers when we began the interviews. This enabled us to examine SB perspectives and practices within and across diverse roles and contexts. The four SB social justice themes presented in our findings were evident across participants' roles, responsibilities and work contexts; some educational roles and contexts were more enabling to the enactment of these SB social justice themes.

In recounting the diversity of educational roles held by participants, nine educators had experience as classroom teachers; four as administrators; four as special education teachers; five as school counsellors or educational psychologists; and five as specialists or itinerants at the District or Department. Their educational contexts also varied. Eight participants had experience working in the regular school setting and five had experience in community-based educational programs. These community-led programs were voluntary; one offered youth classes to complete high school credits (following the provincial curriculum standards), the other offered a school readiness program for youth not yet ready to begin the provincial high school curriculum or adult basic education (ABE) program. Three of the 10 participants had experience working in both regular and community-based educational settings. In terms of which settings comprised the majority of educators' working experience, seven participants have spent the majority of their educational careers in regular school settings and three in community-based educational settings. The work of four participants occurred solely in urban settings while six participants had experience working in urban and rural contexts.

Data Collection

Individual semi-structured open-ended interviews were conducted with 10 educators. The interviews ranged in length from 90 minutes to two hours and were audio-taped and transcribed. Some interviews were held in participants' classrooms or office settings, while others took place at participant homes, or in public spaces such as a coffee shop. The interview questions reflected our research goals to invite participants to reflect on and explore their understandings and practices of SB work in relation to youth who experience educational barriers. Guiding interview prompts included: What meaning(s) does the term SB have for you in relation to your work with youth? Describe working with youth from a SB perspective? What is your vision of SB work? These questions supported educators to stay focused on their own perceptions, experiences, and narratives (Chase, 1995). The interview process afforded participants opportunities to reflect, explore, and to frame and (re)frame what SB work with youth meant to them. As researchers, we took care not to define SB perspectives or practices for participants, instead staying centred on the elicitation of their perspectives. In asking these kinds of questions, our intent was not to obtain academic definitions of SB education found in the literature, nor was it to suggest to participants that the only way to describe their practice was in relation to SB practices. Rather, the intent of the interview questions was to generate understandings of educators' SB perspectives and practices.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was on-going and guided by a range of analytical strategies. Initially we individually read through each of the 10 interview transcripts to obtain a general sense of participants' accounts. Next, we read through each transcript several times, both individually and together, and generated preliminary categories as they emerged from the data. In particular, we highlighted and made margin notes pertaining to key words, repeated phrases and ideas, and our initial thoughts. We wrote individual summaries for each participant's transcript as a way to represent the ideas talked about by each educator. Analysing the data with our research objectives in mind, we examined the accounts of their SB perspectives, practices, and experiences. We compared our initial thoughts and reflected on commonalities, differences, and possible themes. This process led us to naming central categories generated across all the interview transcripts and their varied educational roles and contexts. We coded the transcript data, which enabled us to triangulate the evidence across participants' accounts (Creswell, 2009). As we coded and extracted certain excerpts, we clustered these into separate word documents labelled for a particular category. We engaged in code-checking as we continuously compared how we each coded certain excerpts (Creswell, 2009).

We also engaged in closer readings of selected excerpts by employing tools of critical discourse analysis (CDA) to further interrogate the language used by educators (Fairclough, 1989). CDA involves examining how things are talked about in particular ways (Jennings & Graham, 1996). Drawing on Fairclough (1989) we examined certain linguistic features including the use of pronouns, binary opposites, subject positions, and metaphors. We were attentive to the language participants used to describe their SB perspectives and the ways in which youth were positioned within their descriptions. We shared our findings with eight participants in order to seek feedback and to engage in member-checking to ensure the authenticity of our findings (Creswell, 2009). Each participant confirmed that our interpretations reflected their views and experiences.

Findings

Our analysis revealed four sets of SB social justice practices: recognizing students-in-context, critically engaging strengths and positivity, nurturing democratic relations, and enacting creative and flexible pedagogies. These practices are interconnected in the contexts of the educators' lived experiences. Here we discuss each set of practices to build our conceptual understanding of SB social justice engagement.

Recognizing students-in-context

When educators shared their perspectives of SB education, they talked extensively about the importance of getting to know students and using this knowledge to inform their practice. They noted how drawing from students' economic, familial, community, and cultural contexts was a significant part of their educational work. They shared stories about how they changed curriculum to connect with students' contexts. Getting to know students holistically was central to educators' SB work that aimed to expand educational equity for students who experienced marginalization in school. In this section we draw from transcript data to illuminate how these educators viewed students-in-context.

Educators talked about how they strived to put students first within curricular and pedagogical processes. Our intent here is not to suggest a narrow de-contextualized view of curriculum whereby educators simply deliver the official curriculum to students. Rather, we

understand curriculum to be a complex interactive process in which educators take up various aspects in a range of ways depending on their educational backgrounds, experiences and situational contexts. Curriculum can be viewed as a continuum with varying possibilities from the "intended" curriculum on one end (official government version) to the "enacted" curriculum on the other, as experienced by students (Nichols and Cormack, 2001, p. 6). Our intent here, and in subsequent sections, is to illuminate how the educators we interviewed enacted the curriculum in creative and flexible ways in the interests of students. Importantly, this meant getting to know students and using this knowledge to guide classroom practice. As one educator stated, "It's about the individual and the relationship you have with them that is absolutely key." Another educator echoes this priority of getting to know students indicating:

> [G]etting to know a person is the first thing. Like how do you really engage in curriculum if you don't know the person? You've got to take the whole person, so you can't separate what's their home life from their school life, from their whatever, it all has to be considered.

Here there seems to be an understanding about the interconnectedness between students' lives, both in and outside of school and the need for this to be prioritized. The word "person" instead of student, is interesting in that SB approaches are viewed as ones which go beyond the doors of the classroom to include the complexities of students' lives. For these educators, knowing students and their context is seen as central to their practice.

> I mean we got some kids now who are, you know, living on their own, independent living arrangements, they're working part-time, you know, they've got very complicated lives.

Here students are positioned as capable and resourceful individuals. In using words like "independent," "on their own," and "working," there is an acknowledgement that students live multifaceted lives and often carry significant responsibilities in addition to their schooling. This educator is taking up issues of social justice by asserting that SB education involves seeing the whole student-in-context and acknowledging the effects this has on schooling engagement.

> I know that there are pockets of youth who have poverty issues, addictions issues, academic issues, challenges because they just didn't fit in that 'round hole' or 'square peg' in our regular school system.

These educators work with youth who experience educational barriers and often talked about how their work involved striving to (re)contextualize teaching in order to meet students where they are. One teacher talked about the need to challenge top-down, externally driven assessments which offer decontextualized views of students' ways of knowing.

> But I don't know if it's fair to say [how] they describe what intelligence is, which is a horrendous thing, that I don't know if we fully understand it to this day, but to broaden that, to broaden what we look at as smart.

Each of the 10 educators articulated the importance of making meaningful and relevant connections with students. They emphasized the significance of students' complex lives and consideration was given to their life contexts. The excerpts above speak to both the importance

of recognizing students-in-contexts and to addressing the educational inequities which occur when schools are decontextualized from students' lives.

Critically engaging in strengths and positivity

Educators' reported practices included capitalizing on students' internal and external strengths and using these to create positive learning environments. Here strengths and positivity are not viewed neutrally; rather, they are understood as embedded in power relations to be negotiated. Three ways educators engaged in strengths and positivity from a social justice perspective include viewing students as experts in their learning, being critical of narrow understandings of strengths, and being committed to using strengths and positivity to inform their practices.

Viewing students as knowledge producers and active partners in their learning is powerfully communicated by one educator:

> We always refer to youth as the future but in fact they are everything now too, in this moment they are also our teachers. A youth can change the world now as much as any adult. They are the experts in their own lives and learning. I work with students as the navigators or captains of their own learning, which is central to how I understand what it means to be strengths-based as a teacher. This means students are their own authority. I am not their authority.

Here students are named as "teachers," "experts," "navigators," and "captains." These naming practices position students as active participants in the teaching/learning process. They bring forth productive images of youth as capable of making decisions about their learning and suggest more egalitarian relationships between teachers and students.

Educators associated engaging student strengths by opening up of spaces where students could draw from and build on their knowledge and expertise.

> If we don't engage students as their own experts then we lead them to where we want them to go rather than have them discover where they need and want to go. The result is that they will do what they think they should, rather than learning from a place of their true knowing and strengths. We are limiting their perspective and learning and understanding of their strengths.

The implication is that harm may come to students if they are not actively engaged in their learning. A broad view of what constitutes strengths was a central theme across educators' accounts.

> Often we don't acknowledge student strengths based on life experience. For one youth getting to school may not be a big deal because they have support at home. Yet for another student, walking through the school doors may be the biggest accomplishment of their day. It may have required the use of many skills based on their life experience, such as the ability to get themselves up, their own financial resources to feed themselves and pay for transportation and deal with child care responsibilities or with major conflicts at home even before they leave for school.

For this educator, strengths are extended to include resources that students have from their own life situations. Acknowledging youths' complex lives outside of school can be left out of discourses of schooling. However, images of students as independent, reliable, resourceful, and resilient show how youth navigate their daily lives in order to do school.

Educators held broad views of strengths reflected in their use of language such as "multiple," "diversity," "holistic," and "life experience." They recognized that strengths are more than inherent traits or talents; strengths also stem from students' daily life experiences, ideas, resources and strategies developed in interaction with their school, home and community contexts. A social justice lens to SB work was apparent when educators expanded and critically engaged with conceptions of strengths and their associated practices. Some advocated the need to draw on students' "multiple intelligences," others spoke about "building on student capacity" and some talked about "accepting and embracing diversity." They referred to student "aptitudes, interests, abilities" and their "personal strengths, social strengths, academic strengths, personal experiences." In connecting educators' broad views of strengths to a social justice perspective, it is important that educators' actions extend beyond existing boundaries of strengths recognized in schools. It is these unrecognized strengths, shaped over time within a given context, which often reflected a form of SB social justice work.

Nurturing democratic relations

The educators we interviewed relayed their desires for more democratic relations with students. Here we explore how these educators nurtured democratic relations in their reported practices by highlighting how they fostered engagement of student voice, participation, leadership, and self-advocacy.

While recognizing the different roles and responsibilities that educators and students have within the school system, these educators were explicit about engaging students as active partners in the educational process. It is clear that their SB work involved fostering relations with students that were more informal, respectful, equal, and mutual. In articulating their perspectives of SB relations, they used terms and phrases such as "reciprocal" and "friends." One educator describes connecting with students as personal, indicating, "I know the students personally, like you become part of them, you can joke with them, they become your friends." There seems to be an effort to reduce hierarchical power knowledge relations embedded in traditional teacher-student relations by fostering a mutual relationship of trust where joking around seems commonplace.

> [D]espite our curriculum and stuff, to come from a more strengths-based place, like we're people on a journey and the student and the teacher, even though they have particular roles, there's equality in the person, there's not a superiority feeling over you know. There's a lot of freedom to be who you are as a person.

What stands out for us here is the stark contrast between the words "superiority" and "equality." It seems that in spite of traditional teacher-student roles — individuality, autonomy, and free will are important to this educator. Another educator put it this way:

> The learning relationship, it is about students and teachers having an equal voice and being heard. I see myself working in partnership with students where we both learn from each other.

Again fostering more egalitarian relations between students and teachers is privileged over hierarchical power-knowledge relations. We contend that SB social justice work involves disrupting traditional hierarchal structures characterized by themes of teacher authority.

> Teachers are too busy trying to be in control [and] this image of a teacher, I don't even consider that, and it doesn't have to be. That's just an idea we have, 'Oh, I have to be all knowing.' Well, what an illusion that is.

In contrast to control-based relations, these educators seem to have a vision for greater mutual relations with students that involve the creation of non-judgmental, safe, and caring learning environments. A significant part of creating more democratic relations with students involves respecting rather than making judgments about them. Active engagement and democratic dialogue are also emphasized by these educators. These educators reported that they made strong attempts to engage students in the decision-making process by advocating for their involvement. Providing students with information about expectations and procedures is a socially just practice which affords students opportunities to speak for themselves.

> [Y]ou need to look at the strength of somebody being able to advocate for themselves, speak for themselves or just saying, 'I need help.' I never ever tried to have a meeting without the student, doesn't matter, even like the age. Everybody has an understanding of their life from their perspective. I mean, we wouldn't want anyone to make a plan without us involved!

Self-advocacy is viewed as a way forward by having students actively involved in decision-making. Creating openings to mutually construct and interrogate aspects of the learning process is essential to engaging in democratic practices. One educator states, "I've had some students facilitate things because they're better facilitators than me in this particular area, such as parenting." Explaining that she did not have children herself, this educator felt it was important for her student to offer her knowledge and experience as a young parent to the class. These educators seem to understand that democratic relations involve acknowledging students' experience and expertise and making sure they assume their rightful place in the classroom.

Another aspect of educators' SB democratic work involved actively naming and voicing how educational settings can fall short of engaging students in decision-making. One educator indicates that "in terms of students, they don't have a collective voice in any formal way." Similarly, another teacher asserts, "I think we should be getting more student input on and real participation in, I mean it comes down to the fact that we don't trust the students enough to think that they really know what's best for them."

While there are tensions involved in doing SB work from a social justice perspective, the educator accounts suggest that they are engaged in challenging schooling practices that disadvantage youth by failing to give youth an active voice within the educational process. We contend that informing students about how things work, engaging student voice, participation, and self-advocacy all comprise aspects of SB social justice engagement.

Enacting creative and flexible pedagogies

Educators become involved in another facet of SB social justice work by enacting creative and flexible pedagogies to engage student strengths and goals for learning. We use the term

pedagogies broadly to refer to the practices and "process of knowledge production" across various educational sites and contexts (Gore, 1993; 2002). Educators' accounts convey a commitment to being flexible and to doing whatever works in the interests of students. They shared stories about rethinking their approach to curriculum and using a broad range of pedagogical strategies. They spoke of working creatively within education programs. Educator accounts also illustrated how they maneuvered tensions and politics within the education system from both deficit and strengths-based perspectives. Through creativity and flexibility, educators engage SB social justice practice by working to create options and opportunities for students experiencing educational barriers so that schooling is more accessible and equitable for them.

> [We] try to work within a structure creatively to fit enough pieces, enough components together, so that ultimately you have something that you know people can fit into without having to manipulate the individual, where we're trying to manipulate programs and services to meet that need, you know, and that's never perfect, you know, because of all the different requirements of Governments and one thing or another, but hopefully, for the most part, there's enough flexibility to really work with the person.

While keenly aware of the realities of accountability, this educator attempts to create spaces that connect to students' interests and strengths. The importance of starting from where students are is seen as a way to engage students in the curriculum.

> He liked woodworking, certainly he had a lot of knowledge and skills in that area so he was able to make things and so when there was opportunity for that, then Billy was able to help out other students with those types of projects and share his knowledge and skills.

There also seems to be a common understanding among these educators that students learn in different ways — that one size does not fit all. They sometimes used clichés like "fit a square peg in a round hole" to emphasize the point that the students they work with cannot be forced to fit into school. Rather, they described creative approaches that enabled school to be responsive to students.

> You know, people learn by doing, seeing, hearing, all that kind of way, feeling and people teach in a certain way too and it's sort of like how do you match that up to make it a really good experience for young people which means you have to try a lot of different strategies.

These educators also described a range of practices that they used to engage diverse groups of learners.

> There's a variety of ways and there's a variety of strategies or theories that encompass, that you might use like cooperative learning, differentiated instruction, learning contracts, I mean the list goes on and on.

These statements reflect flexible pedagogies aimed at providing students with choice and variety in the ways they learn curriculum content. We found that enacting flexible pedagogies also involves navigating the tensions and constraints produced by normalized practices.

> There's purpose for assessment I know, but sometimes the negative piece of assessment being discussed and performances by groups or by schools, you can't make one draw upon and not have that ripple to everybody so then you got anxiety everywhere, don't you?

In an era of accountability, standardized assessments place increased pressures on educators for higher performances. Navigating the pressures to prepare students for public exams while trying to capitalize on students' strengths can be challenging. Educators' engagement and use of creative and flexible pedagogies worked to challenge homogenizing schooling practices.

Discussion

In this paper we have described educators' SB perspectives and practices that serve to illuminate SB work from a social justice perspective. We have conceptualized that SB approaches from a social justice lens include at least four interconnecting sets of practices: recognizing students-in-context, critically engaging in strengths and positivity, nurturing democratic relations, and enacting creative and flexible pedagogies. In our exploration of each theme, we described educators' perspectives and illustrated ways they enacted these perspectives within their reported practice. These themes depict educators' efforts to creatively and flexibly draw from the strengths of students' lived contexts, interests, and abilities. They highlight the importance of meaningful inclusion of students' voices and agency through the creation of more democratic partnerships and more egalitarian student-teacher power relations.

Importantly, educators drew from SB approaches while also critiquing and (re)shaping them through their interactions with youth. While their accounts recognize the priority given to students' academic and behavioral strengths, these educators engaged a more holistic view of strengths. This expanded notion serves to challenge inequities in schooling by recognizing that strengths are complex and shifting, are neither neutral nor simplistic, and need to be used to serve students' interests.

For these educators, being able to meaningfully draw from and build on students' resources and capacities meant working towards more equitable power relations with students. Educators' SB accounts highlighted the significance of positioning students as experts and knowers. They attended to building respectful, caring, democratic relationships with students. This SB social justice practice serves to shift youth facing marginality from being positioned as educational challenges to being viewed as educational partners.

Engaging SB practices from a social justice perspective involves challenging discourses, policies and practices that impede SB engagement. This includes challenging deficit-based discourses as witnessed in educators' accounts when they worked to engage students' strengths through practices of flexibility, democracy, critical consciousness, and attention to students' complex contexts. Our findings highlight that without educators' constant commitment to flexibility, their ability to engage SB social justice work would not have been possible. Whether striving to build more democratic mutual relations, working from the complexities of student contexts, incorporating unrecognized learner strengths, or navigating tensions in the education system, educators' on-going flexibility was vital.

The goals of student agency, empowerment, and educational change could be seen as a spoken and unspoken philosophy of SB social justice work. Such orientations contrast — but do not exclude — the inclusion of SB approaches aimed at individual excellence and high

performance (Anderson, 2004) or helping students cope within their context (Saleebey, 2006). SB social justice work involves asking, however, whether SB approaches are being engaged in students' best interests within a given context and whether there are possibilities to link to educational change within these projects. That being said, realistic facets of SB social justice engagement would include drawing from students' strengths to help them get through a standardized test needed for graduation, capitalizing on students' talents to get them to come to school, and affirming students' behavioural strengths (deemed necessary by the school's code of conduct) to reduce suspension and further student disengagement. Our research shows that it is educators' on-going ability and flexibility to strive to best serve students in a given situation that is particularly important. This stance also reflects a SB social justice approach that is dynamic and responsive within the limits and constraints of our educational contexts.

This paper offers educators expanded SB insights and practices for working with youth who confront educational barriers and social inequities. For future research, this paper makes evident the need for further exploration into the four interconnecting sets of SB social justice practices and their related educational contexts. While beyond the scope of this paper, more dialogue between these SB practices and educational literatures on democracy, youth voice/engagement, critical, post-modern and socio-cultural approaches would glean valuable insights to further the study of SB approaches from a social justice perspective. It is our hope that this paper may serve as a catalyst for such critical dialogue.

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