A Future of Strength: The Strengths Perspective and Developing Social Workers

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INTRODUCTION

In the 30 years since the birth of the strengths perspective, it has experienced continued celebration and been marked as a pivotal approach for promoting effective engagement with people in a variety of contexts. From parenting to leadership, human resources to education, and therapy to case management; the strengths perspective has been studied and incorporated into professional practices both within and outside of the social work discipline (Aguinis, Gottfredson, & Joo, 2012; Lopez & Louis, 2009; Marty, Rapp, & Carlson, 2001; Sheely-Moore & Bratton, 2010). However, social workers initiated the genesis of the perspective (Rapp, 1998; Weick, Rapp, Sullivan, & Kisthardt, 1989) and, therefore, bear the mantle of the legacy, institutionalization, and continuation of practicing strengths-based work. Despite widespread adoption of the ideology of the strengths perspective, attention is needed to ensure its ongoing use and relevant application to social work.

In 2018, more than 700,000 social workers were employed in the United States (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). Job growth is steady for the profession and projected to increase by 11 percent by 2028 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). As the number of social work professionals increases, understanding and meeting the needs of developing social workers is paramount to the sustainment of strengths-based social work. The projected expansion of the profession also suggests that the methods and strategies for incorporating the strengths perspective into the education and

practice of developing social work students may need rethinking. Strengths-based work is not business as usual. Saleebey (2013) explained that it is a direct departure from traditional social work practices, such as those that focus on psychopathology and deficit-driven treatment. Likewise, ensuring the passing of the torch may require a direct departure from traditional social work education. In aligning with the strengths perspective, social work professionals and educators have a responsibility to consciously collaborate in their efforts to assist developing social workers in establishing competencies, capabilities and confidence that will enable them to build their career upon a strengths-based foundation.

THE STRENGTHS PERSPECTIVE IN THE EDUCATION OF RISING SOCIAL WORKERS

Many developing social workers will initially be exposed to the strengths perspective in the classroom. While substantial literature exists on the topic, teaching the strengths perspective must move beyond reading about it into the space of the application. Words must be coupled with action. Students will be maximally supported in knowing how to apply the principles of the strengths perspective when educators can invigorate and model strengths-based work in the classroom and field. The perspective comes alive when each interaction within the educator/student relationship actively incorporates strengths-based principles.

For some, strengths-based work has become little more than simply identifying what a client is good at and the resources they have available to assist with overcoming challenges (Saleebey, 2013). The strengths perspective is a filter through which social workers view their clients. It shapes how a client is perceived and moves the motivation for intervention from fixing clients to honoring their inherent worth and capacity (Saleebey, 2013). Social work educators who embrace the strengths-based work must view and engage students in ways that align with this perspective.

APPLYING STRENGTHS PERSPECTIVE PRINCIPLES TO SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

Saleebey (2013) identified six guiding principles of the strengths perspective. In this chapter, the authors apply these six principles to social work education. For the purposes of this chapter, social work education is defined as the formal education received in classroom and field practicum settings. The term “social work educator” refers to instructors both in the classroom and field. Additionally, this chapter identifies the parallel process that occurs between how social work educators engage their students and how social work students then engage their clients. Traditionally, parallel process literature has focused on the relationship between supervisors and supervisees, and supervisees and clients (Mothersole, 1999). However, these principles can also be applied to the student and teacher relationship (Barretti, 2007; Elson, 1989).

Principle one. Saleebey (2013) explained the first principle of the strengths perspective in social work is an understanding that, "Every individual, group, family and community has strengths" (p.17). Likewise, as applied to social work education, every student has strengths and social work educators hold the primary responsibility of identifying and building upon them. As educators orient themselves towards students' strengths, students are assisted in learning to orient themselves to the strengths of their clients. Strengths oriented educators are on the side of their students and their success. Educators open the way to learning, growth and change when they believe in their students and actively demonstrate this through words of encouragement, thinking *with* rather than *for* students, and allowing students the right to genuine wonder and curiosity (Denial, 2019; Fisher, 2000; Magnet et al., 2014).

Feedback from instructors to students can provide the basis for how students learn to provide strengths-based feedback in their social work practice. Aguinis and colleagues (2012) suggested strengths-based feedback is a mechanism for improving performance by specifically linking strengths, skills, and successes to areas for growth without an overt focus on weakness or correction. A key to using a strengths orientation in providing feedback requires that educators actively identify what students do well while honoring their agency. For example, rather than a classroom instructor directing students to change some components of a paper or presentation, a strengths-based social work educator may say something to the effect of, "You might consider adding x or y to this portion of your paper." Field instructors observing students as they engage with clients in practice may also make similar suggestions. For example, when students describe roadblocks with clients, field instructors may explore the student's observations of what hasn't worked and why. Rather than telling the student what to do next, field instructors may assist the student in brainstorming with questions such as, "What solutions have worked in the past for the client?" and "When is the client at their best?" Field instructors may offer suggestions and ask the student, "How do you think the client would respond if you tried x?"

When providing feedback, strengths-oriented educators may draw specific attention to when students are noticeably learning and improving. This process becomes a way of identifying the demonstration of their capacities and abilities for growth and change. Providing suggestions rather than dictating directions about what a student should or should not do gives the student the power to determine their own course of action. Educators may also lead with open-ended questions, rather than directives, that can promote students' development of critical thinking and self-reflection skills. Additionally, these strategies position students as capable thinkers and instills the sense that their educators have confidence in them, and in turn, bolsters students' confidence in themselves. Indeed, strengths-based education prioritizes both competence and confidence as equally important outcomes of the educational process, recognizing that confidence is critical to competent practice.

When social work educators are able to view classroom and field interactions as mirrors that reflect back what they are teaching, they can assess how well they themselves model the strengths perspective. Educators' self-assessment of student engagement serves an important function for revealing and understanding their own instructional strengths and capacities (Lopez & Louis, 2009). A strengths-based social work educator may ask themselves, "How are students demonstrating that I have effectively taught and incorporated the strengths perspective?" To assess this, educators may facilitate opportunities for students to participate in peer reviews of assignments, team-based projects, presentations, role-plays, and field interactions. These activities provide students with opportunities to practice strengths-based work in addition to allowing the instructor to assess how adequately the strengths perspective is being taught and applied.

Principle two. Saleebey (2013) taught that "Trauma and abuse, illness and struggle may be injurious, but they may also be sources of challenge and opportunity" (p. 18). Mental health professionals, including social workers, report higher rates of childhood trauma histories than people in other professions (Black, Jeffreys, & Hartley, 1993; Rompf & Royse, 1994). Social work education often focuses on the importance of boundaries and avoiding countertransference to support social workers with their own trauma histories and life challenges from allowing these to interfere with their relationships with clients in negative ways (Raines, 1996; Urdang, 2010). Beyond a focus on healthy boundaries, it may be important for social work educators to allow room for students to embrace their life experiences and consider how, if harnessed and used with wisdom and discernment, they may be sources for increased empathy, rapport, and strengths-engagement. As described above, educators may call on the parallel process as a highly relevant feature of teaching and learning. Specifically, social workers can identify the strengths and resilience developed from their own life experiences, which may facilitate their capacity for also acknowledging and honoring the strengths and resilience their clients have acquired through their adversities and challenges.

Related to the idea of using difficult life experiences as a catalyst for acknowledging resilience, scholars have advanced the concept of self-reflection. Applegate (2004) posited that in an effort to meet practice standards, the focus of social work education has shifted away from social work students' inner life and critical thinking and towards being skill-based and performance-oriented. Urdang (2010) explained that critical and analytical skills include self-reflection skills, and that self-reflection should be taught and encouraged in social work education. Self-reflection comprises examination of one's own thought processes and life experiences to consider how the two are linked. Self-awareness and self-reflection are the basis for how social work students develop professional self and may protect students from boundary violations and ethics violations (Urdang, 2010).

Principle three. Saleebey (2013) encouraged social workers to, "Assume that you do not know the upper limits of the capacity to grow and change and take individual,

group and community aspirations seriously" (p.18). Social work educators come to the classroom with their own expectations for students and preconceived ideas of how students should engage with the course. These expectations may translate to judgments of students based on how well they perform in relation to instructor, course and field standards. What is perceived as poor or average performance may lead to poor or average expectations of what students are capable of achieving? Saleebey (2013) wrote, "The central dynamic of the strengths perspective is precisely the rousing of hope, of tapping into the visions and dreams of the individual, family or community" (p. 8). Strengths-oriented educators see students as people who are malleable and full of potential and possibility.

Robustly and authentically supporting all students, not just those that excel at course assignments and who are compliant with educator expectations, in identifying and pursuing their aspirations demonstrates to developing social workers ways to honor the capacities and aspirations of compliant and non-compliant clients alike. Educators who maintain hope for students model how to engage the strengths perspective in spite of deficit-oriented systems. Social work students will be taught ideals, values, and perspectives that may rub against the reality of their work and the systems in which they engage from time-to-time (Saleebey, 2013; Weick, 1983)

Social work students who find themselves in practicums where deficit identification is the norm may struggle to reconcile the strengths-perspective with their field experiences. This friction should be acknowledged, and educators should actively engage students in discussion about how this incongruence between their guiding principles and field realities impacts their abilities for doing strengths-based work. Additionally, the traditional education system, like many other systems in which developing social workers engage, can lack a strengths orientation. This provides an opportunity for instructors to create dialogue and model strategies for implementing and sustaining strengths-based work while interacting with systems that are structurally built upon a focus of what's wrong rather than what's right. Classrooms and field experiences can be transformed into spaces where students' strengths are the focal point of their educational experiences. While educators must function within the limits of university policies and grading systems, they can model how to transcend deficit-oriented systems. First, an educator may simply acknowledge the limits of the systems within which they instruct and identify a commitment to be strengths-oriented in the classroom or field practicum despite these constraints. Secondly, in their commitment to support and assist students to grow and develop, social work educators can create space for conversations, activities, and assignments that support and encourage their students to identify and pursue their own hopes and aspirations for themselves as social work professionals.

Principle four. Saleebey (2013) taught, "We best serve clients by collaborating with them" (p. 19). Social work students are best served through a collaborative relationship with their educators. Freire (1970) advocated for an egalitarian education system where instructors and students act both as learners and teachers. Freire (1970)

criticized what he called the piggy bank method of education in which instructors act as depositors who continually install education into passive, inanimate students. In a piggy bank method of education, students are expected to do nothing more than receive information from the expert in the room. From Freire's (1970) perspective, education should be a co-created experience in which students and teachers learn and teach together. Freire saw collaborative education as an intentional and intense departure from the status quo mirroring how strengths perspective pioneers envisioned strengths-based work as a divergence from traditional social work norms (Freire, 1970; Saleebey, 2013).

Both Freire's work and early strengths perspective writings indicate a need for a more equal relationship between educators and students. Freire further explained that without breaking down the traditional power structures of piggy bank education, teachers move into the role of an oppressor. Social work instructors have the potential to liberate or oppress the minds of their students. Weick (1994) wrote, "At the heart of oppression is a profound alienation from one's own power which leads to a too ready acceptance of the power of others" (p. 219). Strengths-oriented social work educators' direct students to connect with their own power rather than to privilege the power of the instructor. Rather than alienating students from their own power and capacity, strengths-oriented educators honor it and turn students towards it. Although power differentials are inherent within educator/student relationships, just as they are in the social worker/client relationship, consistent collaboration between educators and students serves as a buffer against oppression and teaches students collaborative strategies for working with clients.

To create power-sharing opportunities, instructors may seek regular feedback on the course and their teaching with informal methods. They can then use the feedback to make mid-course corrections that were driven by students' ideas. Other tactics may include collaborating with students by engaging them in rubric development or making grading a collaborative experience where the instructor and student discuss together what grade they feel the student should be assigned (Denial, 2019). Freire (1970) believed creating a dialogue between learners was the key to critical thinking and dismantling the oppressive use of power in education. Where critical thinking ends, oppression begins (Freire, 1970). Strengths-oriented educators actively co-create spaces with their students where they are encouraged to think and discuss together. Educators can acknowledge and highlight the insight and expertise revealed by students through questioning and sharing their perspectives.

Educators can powerfully demonstrate collaboration by acknowledging when they make a mistake or experience a struggle within the teaching and learning interchange. Likewise, they can allow students latitude to make mistakes and model for the understanding and patience in these circumstances. Magnet, Mason and Trevenen (2014) explained when educators accommodate student mistakes, such as missing an exam or turning an assignment in late, it is important to encourage the student to be mindful to extend similar generosity to others when the students

find themselves in positions of power in the future. This is a particularly significant lesson for social work students who will likely find themselves working with people in especially vulnerable situations. Remembering the generosity once given to them can assist social workers in extending flexibility, understanding, and grace when they have clients who potentially relapse, or miss a visit with a child in foster care or fail to pay a bill.

Principle five. Saleebey's (2013) fifth principle of strengths-based social work was the belief that, **"**Every environment is full of resources" (p. 20). In environments where social workers, instructors, and students often feel strapped for resources it can be challenging to make the conscious effort to apply the strengths-perspective. Moving from a mindset of scarcity to a strengths-oriented mindset neutralizes power. Weick (1994) illuminated the relationship between maintaining power and making it seem that resources are scarce. When environments are seen as lacking resources, they are perceived as less powerful. Using the strengths perspective to distinguish what resources an environment possesses shifts the viewpoint from one of lack to one of abundance. Importantly, social work educators fully embrace the strengths perspective when they can acknowledge and teach the strengths perspective as applying to micro-interactions within a traditional social worker to client relationship as well as to mezzo and macro work.

By purposely inviting students to consider practice concepts that apply to both micro and macro contexts, instructors can illustrate tools that are consistent with strengths-based work. In the classroom, students and teachers can use case vignettes or practicum examples to conduct strengths assessments of organizations, communities, and systems. Other macro-level techniques that can readily center a strengths perspective are community mapping and service array analysis. Rather than assessing only the gaps and barriers within systems and policies, instructors can lead students to identify and more fully understand systems' resources and capacities, which may reveal themselves in various forms, such as personnel, expertise, technology, financial assets, vision, and leadership. Similar to direct practice with individuals and families, strength-based work that considers systems, may uncover significant leverage points for creating positive change.

Principle six. Saleebey (2013) stressed the importance of **"**Caring, caretaking and context" in strengths-based social work practice (p.20). Care is at the core of what the social work profession does and has been since its beginning (Weick, 2000). Caring begins in the classroom and follows into the field. Relationships foster growth and change. Indeed, social support and resilience are connected to the psychological well-being of students (Malcok & Yalcin, 2015). Positive relationships between students and instructors can influence grades even in challenging courses (Micari & Pazos, 2012). The art and act of caring is built on relational concepts such as human connection and kindness (De La Bellacasa, 2012; Magnet et al., 2014).

While techniques to demonstrate care might seem simple, their importance should not be minimized. Caring takes conscious effort, time, and emotional resources. In other words, caring education translates to very real labor on the part of educators and this should be acknowledged not devalued in the academy (Magnet et al., 2014). Denial (2019) articulated, "To extend kindness means recognizing that our students possess innate humanity, which directly undermines the transactional educational model to which too many of our institutions lean, if not cleave" (n.p.). Not only does kindness breakdown oppressive practices, it also opens the way to curiosity which, in turn, opens the way to deep, meaningful learning (Fisher, 2000; Magnet et al., 2014).

Caring in educational settings looks like a genuine interest in students' lives and their development; actively building trust and developing relationships with them to ensure an environment is created where optimal learning can occur (Denial, 2019; Magnet et al., 2014). It looks like reflecting on what syllabi communicate about who educators are, who they believe students to be, and how they will support students in achieving their academic and professional goals. It looks like making the "classroom accessible to everyone" (n.p., Denial, 2019). Caring does not mean being overly lenient or boundary-less relationships (Denial, 2019; Magnet et al., 2014). On the contrary, honest, authentic conversations, challenge educators and students in ways that allow them to grow (Denial, 2019). Conversations that encourage growth can be difficult to have and can involve communicating information that may be difficult to hear. Practices of "calling-in" rather than "calling-out" and in addressing concerns privately may best support students in change (Magnet et al., 2014). When students know they are cared for, the relationship supports them in receiving this information.

One strategy for taking a caring stance towards students may be to include a statement about student wellness in syllabi. These statements may acknowledge the many demands in students' lives both within and outside of the classroom setting. Student wellness statements encourage students to prioritize their self-care and well-being and can provide a space to connect students to mental health and other services should they be needed. Additionally, they can communicate that the instructor is available to problem solve if challenging circumstances arise that make it difficult for the student to meet the demands of the course for any reason.

CONCLUSION

Building on the work of strengths-perspectives' scholars and pioneers, educators in the social work discipline must deviate from traditional views of education by positioning students' potential, possibility, and power at the center of their learning experiences. Strengths-oriented educators move from an evaluative role where their primary responsibility is to critique and assess students toward an encouraging and facilitating role where they uplift and assist students to maximize their capacities and achieve their aspirations. Incorporating the strengths-perspective into

social work education enables educators to honor the process of growth and change continually occurring in the minds and lives of their students. Each interaction between educators and students provides an opportunity for continuing to enliven the legacy of the strengths perspective. Ultimately, developing social work students will shape the future of strengths-based social work. They will determine the reality of the practice and one day have their own opportunities to share the power of their strengths perspective knowledge and skills.

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