

REVIEW ESSAY: Resiliency And Capacity Building In Inner-City Learning Communities By Dawn Sutherland And Laura Sokal Joan Thoms

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A recent Canadian release, Sutherland and Sokal's new book, Resiliency and Capacity Building in Inner-City Learning Communities, speaks to the struggle to provide high quality and successful learning experiences to all children in high-needs communities. It outlines a relationship built between the pre-service teacher education program at the University of Winnipeg and key community leaders in the city. Some of the community contacts have contributed articles for the book, including an educational researcher, professors, an instructor/advisor, principals, a teacher activist, a childcare advocate, a psychologist, and an academic advisor.

Two common themes occur throughout the text. The first emphasizes relationship building. In the Foreword to the book, Annabelle Mays, Dean of Education at the University of Winnipeg describes the partnership between various faculties at the university and connections to other community stakeholders. Mays argues that the term inner-city is often limited to the city core. Instead, the term should include any neighbourhood that features poverty, ethnic diversity, single-parent families, and a migrating population of students. Sutherland and Sokal describe relationships as community building between groups and individuals. These relationships can be genetic, as with students and their immediate or extended families, or established through sharing common interests, knowledge and experience. In this project, the school was the main focal point and all involved came together to support learning as a community. Barriers were identified and systematically eliminated through strategies including generations of families

writing stories together, pot luck dinners, respecting Aboriginal culture, establishing a family resource centre, and recognizing past school traumas, in particular those associated with the residential schools.

The second theme emphasized in this book is the importance of all participants to head into projects of this type with positive and high expectations. The authors describe a need for participants to recognize existing good features of a school and community, including the diversity of its population, its energy and creativity, and then work to turn around the less positive ones, thus building its strength. In the chapter entitled, “Needing to Belong,” Laura Sokal explains how important it is that educators care about their students. Caring, along with fostering a positive attitude, is the first step in developing resiliency and capacity building. A great deal of discussion is focused on the concept of at-risk children—those who, for a variety of factors, may not be able to reach their potential.

Some of the risk factors identified by the authors are interrelated and include poverty, single-parent families, large families, overcrowding, marital conflict and divorce, parental alcoholism, school changes, and others (p.18). Sokal does not recommend that teachers and schools attempt to compensate for these risk factors as that would quickly lead to teacher burn-out. Instead, Sokal recommends that teachers attempt to draw the family into the school community. She suggests hiring parents to work at the school, hiring a home/school coordinator, or exploring other methods to bring family members into school:

When parents are welcomed into the school community and are valued as important people in their children’s lives, the same process of resilience relationships occurs in the parents’ lives as in that of their children. The school becomes the community and the community becomes the school. The seam between us and them blurs, and caring finds its place. (p. 28)

In a consideration of capacity building in the inner-city, Dawn Sutherland reviews the theories of writers such as Freire, DeBoer, Fensham, and others. Her conclusions, with respect to teaching science, take into account the ethnic diversity and resulting languages of a communities’ demographic make-up and form linkages between what students know in their own culture and how this might relate to the particular concept at hand. Students, she argues, need to learn what other views exist around the world on school subjects like science. She also recommends that students have input into the learning process, and that teachers and students work together to create meaningful and empowering pedagogical relationships.

Sutherland reminds readers that, in order to build positive and strong relationships, pre-service teachers need to question their own biases and learn to respect alternative viewpoints. An argument for the authenticity of teachers would be to develop their ability to be flexible and open-minded to the needs and interests of the class. Often this requires a revision of original goals and expectations and exercising a degree of humility. In addition to developing a more inclusive and respectful classroom, this flexibility also builds a stronger teacher and administration component in a school.

It is interesting to note that the text opens with the description of a similar project that took place in the same city thirty years ago. The Youth Action Project (YAP) was designed to deal with the

problem of school truancy and is written by a former teacher at the school. YAP was seen by its students as a positive and safe place to be. Despite successful efforts to deal with truancy including going to the students' homes and waking them up, this Winnipeg school eventually closed. Reasons for this included staff exhaustion as well pre-existing problems in the homes, community and school systems. This article serves as a warning for any innovations to follow, that in order to be successful and sustainable, a project needs cooperation and participation from all those involved.

An interesting contribution to this text was the discussion of Early Childhood Education, and the ongoing efforts to obtain adequate funding for quality, non-profit childcare programs in Canada. In this chapter, connections are drawn to the same risk factors that could negatively impact on the early years of a child. Eleoussa Polyzoi and Debra Mayer discuss various research studies affecting public policy, including the National Children's Agenda, and prepare a number of recommendations for children, especially for those considered to be at-risk. The recommendations include developing effective programs to be administered by trained professionals. Polyzoi and Mayer argue that it is important that any staff or parent involved in effective programs be trained in brain research along with "science-based research of early language and reading development" (p. 59). The authors reinforce the commonly-held belief that the first few years of a child's life are the most important place at which to begin a child's education.

Catherine Taylor's chapter, "Building Community Through Anti-Homophobia Education", deals with a serious barrier to equality, perhaps most noticeable in junior and senior high schools, but certainly observable in elementary grades. Inappropriate and hurtful language and behaviour can affect the success of all students. Taylor, from the University of Winnipeg, argues that western culture's heterosexism has created a built-in bias towards certain forms of sexuality that can be debilitating and discriminatory. Suggestions on how to address this inequity include anti-homophobia workshop sessions for staff and students, and a school-wide program supporting diversity. Taylor says that, because this topic may be considered controversial by some, it requires progressive and supportive administration. Teachers may not be comfortable dealing with this topic for one or more reasons, including religious conflicts. Others are simply not comfortable teaching sexuality, for example Family Life. Some school boards prohibit teachers from speaking about homosexuality. In these work locations, Taylor recommends that educators intervene in individual cases of aggression, but otherwise take a low-key approach. At the very least, schools are required to provide an atmosphere of respect. One way that a local high school used creativity to deal with the issue was a Gender Bender day. Student Council Organizers encouraged male students to dress as females and vice versa. Because the leaders took a progressive stand, there were no recorded homophobic comments and everyone had a good time.

As a side note of direct relevance to Canadian educators, "The Missing Perspective," a joint project between the Calgary Board of Education and the Calgary and District Labour Council, contains classroom materials on Homophobia and Sexual Harassment and is available in Alberta schools. The Alberta Teachers' Association, in a recent publication, encourages schools to develop anti-homophobia programs such as the gay/straight alliance (GSA) support groups found in secondary schools in British Columbia. A number of potential classroom resource materials are listed at the conclusion of Taylor's article.

The diverse chapters in Resiliency and Capacity Building should attract a variety of readers. The chapters are relatively brief. Although readability would naturally be expected in a book that promotes accessibility and inclusion, this text does contain a few chapters that are written in a more challenging academic style. These chapters may be considered difficult to access by some readers and a plain language approach may have been more appropriate. Most chapters include bold-type quotes from significant participants (i.e., parents, students, and faculty) that are visually appealing and effective. The quotations act as graphic organizers, providing clear indications about what to expect in that particular section, and they also act to minimize the effect of the minor flaw regarding accessible language. Each chapter provides references on the last page, which is an effective way to organize and provide this information to the reader. Overall, the twelve chapters work together in this book to provide a multi-dimensional portrait of the project. The dedication and sincerity of all participants is clear, and their intent to positively impact the education of children a worthy one. I would strongly recommend this book to anyone who wishes to learn more about community education in multicultural settings.

Author Note

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