Surpassing Sisyphus: The Tenacious and Promising Struggle to Push and Support a Strengths-Based Ideology and Practice in Education

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I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain. One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well . . . The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.
~Albert Camus (1942)

Yes, yes, yes. That is my quick response to the three questions posed by Lorraine Kasprisin, editor of The Journal of Educational Controversy to authors seeking to contribute to the 2014 fall issue embracing the theme, *Challenging the Deficit Model and the Pathologizing of Children: Envisioning Alternative Models*. "Has this deficit model begun to surreptitiously creep into our educational discourse for all children?" Yes. "Have we become too focused on needs and deficiencies and forgotten that children also have capacities and strengths?" Yes. "Does the current emphasis on accountability and standardized testing contribute to the pathologizing of children?" Yes. Knowing that such pithy answers to such important questions won't help shift the dialogue, I invite the reader to indulge me as I first expound on why, although not happy that I can, I am able to answer such questions so succinctly and with such conviction; and second, why I am optimistic and hopeful that my answers to these questions, from a resounding *yes* to a definitive *no*, are not only beginning to change for some educational institutions, systems, and practices but also can and will change for many more.

I begin this article by defining terms and concepts including *deficit-based ideology*. I then shift from a focus on deficit-based ideology to a strengths-based ideology and discuss the foundations of a strength-based ideology expounding on the concepts of resilience, beliefs, and their relationship. I then delve deeper into the role that semantics and *blame* play in the context of supporting a shift from a deficit-based ideology and practice to a strengths-based ideology and practice.

The balance of the article moves the discussion from ideology to action. It provides examples of how a strengths-based ideology can be aligned and incorporated into organizational design and development in education as well as aligned and integrated into professional development and preservice education. Embracing function and form, and speaking from my heart, I conclude the article with optimism and hope as we continue to confront a struggle in education that rivals the one faced by Sisyphus.

In an effort to provide more understanding of my positionality in my work, I write this article from the perspective of having worked in education policy, practice, and research. With respect to policy, I was formerly the Legislative Analyst for Education in the New York State Senate and later appointed by New York Governor Mario Cuomo as Special Assistant to the New York State Secretary of State. It was during this time that someone brought to my attention how a piece of legislation that I helped to develop while

in the legislature was being implemented in a school. The particular piece of legislation they were referring to was written with the intent, like with most legislation, that it would be implemented in a manner that would contribute to the greater good. Unfortunately the implementation was being bastardized, and it did not look at all like what we thought it would when we developed the legislation. (I found a parallel in this situation when the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 [No Child Left Behind, 2002] was passed, and the unintended consequences of that legislation became quite evident.) It was at that moment that I recognized that in education what truly matters is who is on the front lines with the students. That same day, I left my appointment as Special Assistant to the New York State Secretary of State, made plans to move to California to go back to school to acquire my teaching credential, and ultimately taught in the classroom for over 15 years. A number of years, later I worked as a Research Associate at a national education development and research organization and engaged in research and dissemination of information focused on resilience and strengths-based practices.

In all of these experiences—policy, practice, and research—I found myself engaging in my own cognitive dissonance as someone who was generally optimistic and strengths-based yet immersed in deficit-based systems grounded in a deficit ideology. It was this cognitive dissonance that led me to the study of resilience and to develop a deeper understanding of a strengths-based ideology versus a deficit-based ideology.

Defining Terms and Concepts

Deficit Based Ideology

Paul Gorski (2010, p.3) refers to ideology as being "based upon a set of assumed truths about the world and the sociopolitical relationships that occur in it." He defines a deficit ideology as one that "justif[ies] existing social conditions by identifying the problem of inequality as *located within*, rather than as *pressing upon*, disenfranchised communities" (p.3). Gorski discusses deficit ideology in a historical context as having evolved over time as a result of beliefs and behaviors that, while perhaps not intentionally or consciously motivated to maintain it, effectively create a culture of complacency that perpetuates the ideology. Over time, systems, social processes, perspectives, and models that evolve within a culture of deficit ideology become microcosms reflecting such ideology. Education is one of these microcosms.

Education today has evolved into a system and model where deficit-based outcomes have become all too common. Disproportionate numbers of youth of color are being placed in special education; high rates of disenfranchised youth are being pushed out (as opposed to dropping out) of the school system; and the opportunity gap (what some refer to as the achievement gap) continues to exist. Irizarry (2009, p.2) tells us that Valenzuela (1999) refers to these and other school outcomes of an education system founded upon a deficit ideology a "subtractive" experience for many youth. Unfortunately, being immersed in a system and model based upon a deficit ideology over time does not always allow those immersed in such to clearly identify and question their own beliefs, behaviors, norms, values, and processes that, not willfully but often

unconsciously, perpetuate such deficit ideology. As Gorski (2010) states, it all begins by "see[ing] that which we are socialized not to see" (p.20).

As mentioned earlier, getting a strong dose of cognitive dissonance on a very personal level equipped me with the initiative and motivation to further explore how beliefs are influenced and constructed from ideology. It also made me want to understand and further explore how our current culture, mired in a deficit-based ideology, has contributed to the development and support of deficit-based practices within the context of education. I ended up landing and concentrating on two concepts: resilience and beliefs—*resilience* because moving from a deficit-based ideology to a strengths-based ideology is at the core of resilience; and *beliefs* because resilience begins with beliefs.

Resilience

As discussed in my book, *Resilience Begins with Beliefs: Building on Student Strengths for Success in School* (Truebridge, 2014), I define resilience as the dynamic and negotiated process within individuals (internal) and between individuals and their environments (external) for the resources and supports to adapt and define themselves as healthy amid adversity, threat, trauma, and/or everyday stress. Although to many, resilience may seem to be the word *du jour*, it is actually a concept situated in over 50 years of developmental longitudinal research. Bonnie Benard, in her book *Resiliency: What We Have Learned* (Benard, 2004), drew upon the work in resilience research and developed a theory of resilience.

The theory of resilience recognizes that all individuals— children, youth, and adults—have basic human needs, which include but are not limited to the needs for safety, love, belonging, meaning, and accomplishment (Maslow, 1943). Resilience research consistently finds that three interrelated protective factors (the developmental supports and opportunities that mitigate and buffer the negative effect that trauma, adversity, and/or stress may have on an individual), together in any single environment— home, school, community, or peer group—play a role in whether these needs are met. The three protective factors are as follows: (1) developing caring relationships, (2) maintaining high expectations, and (3) providing meaningful opportunities for participation and contribution. Once again, when these three protective factors are present together in any one environment—home, school, community, or peer group—the climate in that environment becomes one that is optimal for nurturing the resilience of a child, youth, or any individual. Having one protective factor in one environment and another protective factor in a different environment may be helpful, but Benard's theory of resilience stresses that all three protective factors need to be present, together, in one of the environments to be able to maximize the tapping and fostering of resilience. Furthermore, having all three protective factors together in just one environment, such as in school, will compensate for the fact that some of the protective factors may not be present in other environments, such as the family, community, or peer group.

The theory of resilience further finds that the protective factors contribute to the healthy and successful emergence of an individual's personal developmental

competencies and strengths. These include strengths such as social competence (social skills involving relationships, responsiveness, flexibility, empathy, caring, communication, compassion, altruism, and forgiveness); the ability to problem-solve (cognitive skills such as planning, flexibility, critical thinking, insight, and resourcefulness); autonomy (emotional skills fostering one's sense of self, including positive identity, internal locus of control, self-efficacy, initiative, self-awareness, and adaptive distancing); and sense of purpose and future (goal direction and moral and spiritual aspects, including sense of meaning, optimism, hope, imagination, creativity, motivation, educational aspirations, persistence, spiritual connectedness, and faith).

It is when these come together that an individual's strengths and outcomes will contribute to a reduction in health risks and/or unhealthy behaviors and a continued increase in healthy development, positive well-being, educational success, and life success. In addition to the positive outcomes that an individual may experience, it is important to note that an individual's strengths and positive outcomes also contribute collectively to an increase in successful community and societal outcomes. A good example of this would be if students, teachers, staff, and parents in a school are supported in their own resilience. Then the school itself, as a community, has the capacity to manifest its resilience in a time of difficulty or crisis.

The process of fostering resilience and being able to consistently provide the protective factors (caring relationships, high expectations, opportunities to participate and contribute) in any environment (home, school, community, or peer group), for ourselves or others, begins by believing that all individuals have the capacity for resilience (Benard, 2004; Werner & Smith, 1992). Resilience begins with beliefs.

Beliefs

Beliefs are socially constructed and often personal assumptions, judgments, generalizations, opinions, inferences, conceptions, conclusions, evaluations, and the like that we make about ourselves and the people, places, and things around us (Yero, 2002). Much of the research on beliefs focuses on understanding how beliefs affect and influence an individual's behavior (e.g., Behar, Pajares, & George, 1996; Guskey, 1986; Hollingsworth, 1989; Munby, 1982; Ullucci, 2007). Research across disciplines informs us that differences in attitudes, attributions, and beliefs affect and influence not only educators, but also social workers, medical practitioners, and police officers (Norgaard, 2005). The attitudes, attributions, and beliefs of these practitioners can negatively or positively affect their decisions for interventions and practices that ultimately affect their clients' and students' outcomes.

Similar to belief researchers, researchers studying attribution theory and mindsets (Dweck, 2006; Hong, Chiu, Dweck, Lin, & Wan, 1999; Weiner, 1990) focus on understanding how one's cognitive schema affects and influences practice. Attribution theorists suggest that individuals striving to make sense of the world make inferences based upon their own internal (personal) and external (situational) factors. J. Michael Norgaard (2005) cautions:

The problem that can arise from the use of these preconceived attributions is that they may leave an individual less open to change or consideration of other perspectives. Once this occurs, a risk of becoming locked into outdated belief systems that become self-perpetuating through their repeated application to events in the environment develops. (p. 2)

How does this play out in education? Teachers and adults can often develop beliefs and base future expectations on information gathered without even interacting with a student, such as identifying that student with a sibling or family, or talking to another teacher who may have had a certain type of interaction with that student. Teachers and adults in a school can also develop beliefs based upon early and limited assessments, evaluations, and academic tests. Some beliefs come from our own personal experiences. In fact, many teachers, administrators, and policymakers in education revert to their own memories and the personal school experiences they had in their youth as a primary source of what they believe about education today, regardless of how many years have transpired or how much science has advanced since they were students. While some beliefs are attributed to memories, still other beliefs are taken for granted or developed by chance.

Foundations of a Strengths-Based Ideology

Resilience Begins with Beliefs

Although today resilience is widely understood as a process—the interaction of resources and supports within an individual and external to the individual such as family, school, community, and peer group—it hasn't always been clearly defined or understood as such. Early resilience studies focused on the personal qualities of resilient children (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). As a result, resilience was seen by many to be a trait. Resilience researcher Suniya Luthar and colleagues (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000) discuss the negative repercussions that can result from this interpretation. To say that resilience is a trait is in essence to say "that some individuals simply do not 'have what it takes' to over-come adversity" (p. 546). This perspective was not embraced or universally demonstrated in resilience research. Again, resilience is a process, not a trait.

The following scenario in education poignantly conveys the dangers and repercussions of wrongly perceiving resilience as a trait and not understanding that our beliefs affect our behaviors. Let's say you are a 6th-grade teacher and it is the morning of the first day of school. You ask all your students to line up against the wall. You then slowly walk to the first person in line and point at her declaring, "Becky, you're resilient. Please take a giant step forward." Then you proceed to slowly work your way down the line and as you do, you point to each student and identify whether he or she is resilient or not. "Linda, you're resilient. Please step forward." "Don, you're resilient. Step forward." "Merwan, you're resilient. You too, can take a step forward." Then you hesitate when you arrive at Debby, and state loud enough for all to hear, "Debby, you're *not* resilient. Please stay back—against the wall." You then continue on: "Julio, you're resilient. Step

forward." "Isabel, you're resilient. You can step forward." "Oops, Cameron. Sorry, but you're *not* resilient. Please stay there against the wall."

After going through the whole class of 27 students, you end up identifying the majority of your students as resilient. However, seven of them receive the label *not resilient*. Those seven are now standing against the wall one giant step behind the other 20 you just labeled *resilient*. That probably took 10 minutes, but the repercussions of what you did in those 10 minutes will be felt by those students for a lifetime.

By doing what you just did, you have sent a signal to the majority of your students and to yourself that they can look forward to an exciting year of caring, high expectations, and opportunities to participate and contribute in a host of activities and discussions—but what about the other seven? What signal did you send to them? The signal they received was that they are broken—no matter what they do, they may now feel that they will not meet with success; no matter how hard they try or whatever opportunities are made available to them, they still will not meet with success. The signal that you have sent to yourself is that they are broken—these seven students may never be able to spring back from whatever adversity you perceive they are living amid now or have encountered in their past. Furthermore, you may conclude that to continue investing your time and energy in working with these students is a waste of your time. No matter how hard you or they try, or whatever attempts you or they make, the students' destinies have already been determined and sealed—they are *not* resilient.

This scenario is highly exaggerated, and I can hardly imagine that anyone would deliberately and blatantly engage in such an activity. Yet this type of activity often happens subliminally when we engage in some common educational practices. It happens in the fall as some teachers read the cumulative files of their incoming students. It happens as teachers share conversations in the staff room. It happens as teachers read a child's name and then reflect upon his/her sibling, parents, or family. So what? The big *so what* is that what you believe about these students will most likely be reflected in your behaviors and actions in the classroom.

Let's go back to the seven students in the scenario where a teacher embraced *resilient* as a trait and identified and labeled them *not resilient*. How might a teacher's behavior be affected—what might this look like? As the teacher, you might not give these seven students as much attention as you would the other students; you might not care as much about how your time was spent working with them. Or perhaps you find that you don't expect as much from your seven *not resilient* students as you do from the others you labeled *resilient*. Perhaps, and truly without consciously knowing, you may not call on them as much to contribute to class discussions or select them as often to participate in activities. Yes, it is true: Our beliefs affect our behaviors. Furthermore, research has shown that teachers' beliefs and perceptions about education, teaching, learning, and student achievement affect not only their pedagogical practices but also student efficacy and success (e.g., Akey, 2006; Bamburg, 1994; Obiakor, 2000; Ryan & Patrick, 2001). This is very powerful, especially since a teacher's beliefs and perceptions about a

particular student's achievement can be developed without regard to prior knowledge about, or experience with, that particular student's ability.

As mentioned, resilience research recognizes that protective factors become integrated in a dynamic relationship whereby they are no longer just identified and recognized as static external environmental supports. The study of resilience has researchers looking beyond just identifying whether the protective factors are present. The study of resilience is a quest to dig deeper; it is a quest to understand *how* the protective factors work and contribute to the protective processes that tap one's resilience; to identify some of the underlying cognitive, social, emotional, and neurological processes or mechanisms that occur. For instance, how do we explain and discuss the protective processes or mechanisms that take place to ultimately achieve the positive outcomes that eventually will occur when a student senses that there is a teacher who authentically cares about him or her? What is actually happening inside that student's head, heart, and brain?

Rutter (2006) identifies the study of resilience as a two-step process. He points out that to understand resilience, first one must recognize that individuals interpret experiences differently; and second, one must recognize that resilience implies interactions embedded in a dynamic process. In another two-step definition of resilience, Luthar and Cicchetti (2000) assert that the first step is the empirical identification of the vulnerability and protective factors. The second step, which distinguishes resilience as a unique construct, is the attempt "to understand the mechanisms that might explain the effects of salient vulnerability or protective factors" (p. 859). Thus, saying that there are three protective factors that have been demonstrated to improve young people's educational experience is not enough. In an educational context, student success is not dependent alone upon the presence of caring relationships, high expectations, and opportunities to participate and contribute. Resilience is a construct that focuses on the internal in relation to the external; it is not just the fact that these protective factors exist. The study of resilience focuses on how an individual interprets, internalizes, and makes meaning out of external factors. In many ways the complexities of the psychological and neurological processes that occur within each individual exposed to the protective factors are what make it necessary to distinguish resilience as a construct and not just a different way of talking about caring relationships, high expectations, and opportunities to participate and contribute. It is not about the *what* of the three protective factors, but rather the *how*.

Understanding and focusing on resilience does not mean donning rose-colored glasses and denying adversities and risks. Adversities, challenges, and risks are part of life. Having a strengths-based perspective is all about validating what someone is experiencing. Yet it is also about reframing and discovering, supporting, respecting, and honoring people in what they already have done to engage their resilience so that they can continue to move forward in their lives on a positive trajectory. Focusing on resilience in education means that, rather than creating a deficit-based model borne out of a deficit ideology,where our lens is focused on risk factors and how adversity leads to unhealthy development and unsuccessful educational and life outcomes, we create a

strengths-based model and turn our lens to focus on protective factors: the personal strengths of individuals, the developmental supports and opportunities, and the environmental conditions and characteristics of families, schools, communities, and peer groups that mitigate and buffer adversity and promote healthy development and successful learning. It is acknowledging that with life come challenges and setbacks, sometimes small and sometimes big. Yet through them all, a resilience lens means identifying ourselves as survivors, not as victims.

Survivor vs. Victim

All too often the word *victim* is used as the label for individuals who have met with trauma, adversity, and stress. Victim, however, is a deficit-based word. Having a strengths-based and resilience perspective means that, instead of identifying and labeling individuals who have met with trauma, adversity, and stress as victims, they are identified as survivors. Resilience researchers Sybil Wolin and Steven J. Wolin (1999) refer to individuals who have overcome adversity as "successful survivors," as those individuals who have earned and possess a deep sense of "survivor's pride," which the Wolins define as

> the well-deserved feeling of accomplishment that results from withstanding the pressures of hardship and prevailing in ways both large and small. It is a bitter-sweet mix of pain and triumph that is usually under the surface, but sometimes readily visible, in many children and adults struggling with the troubles in their lives. This pride, developed over time in the course of a struggle, typically goes unnoticed in professional and lay circles that are more apt to document the deficits in children than their strengths. It is not a rare feeling, nor is it limited to those with dazzling successes. Subsequent to our study, our work with youth turned up traces of survivor's pride even in young people whose struggles continued and whose hold on gratifying lives was far from sure. (p. 1)

Richard R. Valencia in the Introduction to his edited book, *The Evolution of Deficit Thinking: Educational Thought and Practice* (Valencia, 1997) also touches upon the term *victim* as he provides a "condensed meaning" to the construct "deficit thinking." He states, "Deficit thinking is tantamount to the process of blaming the victim. It is a model founded on imputation not documentation" (p. 10). Perhaps one of the most unfortunate and consistent consequences of the deficit model in education is the attribution of blame.

Beyond Blaming and Fixing

Merriam-Webster (2014) defines blame as "1. responsibility for wrongdoing or failure . . . 2. the state of being held as the cause of something that needs to be set right." The act of blaming, is itself, embedded in a deficit paradigm. All too often in education we see the student and his/her family and culture being blamed as the root cause for not meeting with success in school. This denigrates students, families, and cultures as things

that need to be fixed. Bartolomé (1994) goes one step further by stating that separating students from "their culture, language, history, and values," reduces students "to the status of subhumans who need to be rescued from their 'savage' selves" (p. 176).

Curt Dudley-Marling (2007) addresses the consequence of holding a "deficit gaze" and further expands on how this has not only seeped into education but also co-opted education legislation, policies and practices that continue to perpetuate a deficit model where blaming has become the norm. He specifically unpacks and challenges the popular research of Ruby Payne (2005) and Hart and Risley (1995), both of whom have received much traction in education and have influenced the development of legislation, policies and practices. He further expounds on how the family literacy movement and No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002) also reside in a deficit model.

Ruby Payne's (2005) work on the culture of poverty and hidden rules theory "portrays the lives of the poor as pathological, deficient in the cognitive, emotional, linguistic, and spiritual resources needed to escape poverty and move into the middle class" (Dudley-Marling, 2007). With respect to Hart and Risley's (1995) research on the vocabulary development of children, Dudley-Marling (2007) states that Hart and Risley "theorized that children living in poverty learn the vocabulary they need to get along in their families and communities but not the vocabulary required for success in school" (p.6). While acknowledging the body of research that supports the efficacy of some family literacy initiatives (e.g., Darling, 1992; Gamse, Conger, Elson, & McCarthy, 1997; Lesar, Espinosa, & Diaz, 1997; Neuman, 1996; Pelligrini, 1991; Shanahan, Mulhern, & Rodriquez-Brown, 1995), Dudley-Martin recognizes, "like Hart and Risley and Ruby Payne, the family literacy movement pathologizes poor families while situating high levels of school failure among poor and minority children in their heads, homes, and communities" (p.8). He further talks about how NCLB has perpetuated a public discourse focused on deficits, which has led to stop-gap and delusional fixes that emphasize and promote standardizing curriculum and high stakes testing. Unfortunately, these fixes are in lieu of recognizing their unintended consequences and delving deeper into systemic causes that have us challenging, holding accountable, and addressing the role that such underlying structural inequities as poverty, discrimination, funding, deteriorating facilities, and lack of opportunities have on teaching and learning.

A deficit model of education is what also drives many of the practices incorporated into the development of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) as legislated and reauthorized under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004. In order for a student to be eligible for special services, a student needs to don a label. As education teams invest their resources on identifying many student attributes in terms of deficits, they simultaneously attribute such deficits to compromising that particular student's ability to learn. The result of most IEPs is that they once again end up blaming the student for his/her learning—or lack thereof. IEPs are just another example of how a deficit ideology has permeated education legislation, policies, and practices. Another prime example of how a deficit ideology and model has crept into education is by examining how we use our words.

Words Matter

Education is a system where, all too often, personal strengths get labeled in negative ways. Take, for instance, the student who may be curious and yet gets labeled distractible. Or how about the student who is passionate yet gets labeled explosive? Or the risk-taker who gets labeled rebellious? How about the introspective student who gets labeled withdrawn? Or the student with promising leadership skills who gets labeled bossy? I often say that labels belong on soup cans, not students. When students begin to hear deficit-based labels, they not only feel bad about themselves, but also the phenomena of the self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton, 1968) and the Pygmalion effect (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968) can be triggered. Unfortunately, we can either continue taking our students down this deficit-based path, or we can guide them up a healthier path.

All individuals with an interest in moving from a deficit-based model in education to a strengths-based model can begin to do this right away by reflecting upon the words we use and engage in the practice of reframing. One of my personal missions in education is to have the term *high-risk student* removed from the lexicon. It is time to recognize that students themselves are not high-risk; rather, the elements in environments from which they come from are. Thus I reframe the common term of *high-risk students* to *students from high-risk environments*. It may be a subtle distinction in terminology, but to students, it is a huge distinction in how they are labeled, how they perceive themselves, and ultimately how they engage in their education.

Common language and normalization of terms in education such as *at risk*, *remedial*, *culturally deprived*, and *disadvantaged*, continue to perpetuate an education model that is grounded in a deficit ideology (Gorski, 2010). "Like most repressive dispositions, the deficit perspective is a symptom of larger sociopolitical conditions and ideologies borne out of complex socialization processes" (Gorski, 2010, p.2).

It's Beginning

As I said at the outset of this article, although I can readily say "*yes* and affirm that the deficit model has not only begun to surreptitiously creep into our educational discourse for all children but also has co-opted much of it, I am optimistic and hopeful that we are on the cusp of change. Sometimes we may feel like Sisyphus pushing a strengths-based boulder up the education mountain. But push we must. Yes, I truly believe that we are on the brink of change. There is an earnest push by parents, educators, and stakeholders in education for child-focused, developmentally appropriate, and strengths-based resources that support children in becoming successful, independent, loving, compassionate, cooperative, happy, balanced, and contributing members of our world. As an education consultant to policymakers, schools, and districts, and as the education consultant to the film, *Race To Nowhere* (Abeles, 2009), I have had the privilege of working with many stakeholders in education who are discarding a deficit-based ideology and moving towards adopting a strengths-based ideology that translates into strengths-based legislation, policy, and practices. I have engaged in strengths-based

IEPs where strengths inventories became a regular component of the IEP; I know of schools that have done away with standardized testing (FairTest, 2014); I have seen educators develop an awareness and understanding of resilience and how their beliefs influence their practices and behaviors (Truebridge, 2010), I have heard educators reframe language from using deficit-based words to strengths-based words, and I have watched how understanding and nurturing resilience in our students, families, teachers, and schools contributes to positive education outcomes and success in life for all (Truebridge, 2010).

From Ideology to Action

Organizational Design and Development

Another major step in moving education from a deficit-based model to a strengths-base model is using Appreciative Inquiry as the tool to facilitate change. Appreciative Inquiry was developed by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivasta in 1980 (Appreciative Inquiry Commons, 2014; Watkins & Mohr, 2001). Rather than a traditional problem-based strategy that focuses on failures of systems, where one identifies a problem, does a diagnosis, and finds a solution, Appreciative Inquiry is based on the premise that organizations and systems such as education and schools should be built around what works—leveraging the positive aspects of our lives to correct the negative (Hammond, 1998; Stetson & Miller, 2003; White, 1996).

Engaging stakeholders in appreciating what is best in themselves and their situations and systems leads to the identification of what is positive and creates a positive and energetic atmosphere of collaboration among all stakeholders in finding ways to get there. Unfortunately, individuals and processes that focus on problems continue in a vortex of negative thinking that ultimately keeps individuals and organizations in a place of dysfunction.

If we authentically and sincerely want to embrace a strengths-based perspective in education, then it is incumbent upon us to embrace and engage in a strengths-based strategy to facilitate change. Strengths-based processes such as Appreciative Inquiry support, produce, and above all, are aligned with strengths-based outcomes. Nancy Stetson and Charles Miller (2003) in their article, *Lead Change in Educational Organizations With Appreciative Inquiry*, provide an example of how Appreciative Inquire might be used in an educational organization:

> An example of a proposed problem to be solved might be declining enrollment. In the traditional approach, people studying the reason for declining enrollment would look for the "root causes" of the decline and work toward eliminating those causes. However, if people study increasing enrollment, they will inquire into the "root causes" of success or what's working. Once they've identified the "root causes" of success, they can deliberately set about creating more of those causes or supporting conditions. (n.p.)

Professional Development and Preservice Education

Thomas Guskey (1986) defines professional development as "a systematic attempt to bring about change—change in the classroom practices of teachers, change in their beliefs and attitudes, and change in the learning. Professional development and preservice education are two venues that need to include alignment with a strengths-based ideology. There are still too many times where preservice and veteran educators are put in situations where their teaching and learning practices have evolved from a deficit ideology. This model usually consists of someone of power relating prescribed information and tasks that, when replicated by teachers the same way, will lead to student success.

A strengths-based model of professional development and preservice education that has evolved from a strengths-based ideology incorporates thoughtful inquiry, narratives, storytelling, and reflective practices to enhance self-awareness and growth. Virginia Richardson expounds: "Reflective and collaborative staff development models . . . are not based on a deficit model of change. They assume that reflection and change are on-going processes of assessing beliefs, goals, and results. They are designed to help develop and support a change orientation" (Richardson, 1998).

Much research has already demonstrated that such strengths-based strategies as reflecting (Schon, 1991) and collaborating (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; HSenge, 1990; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002) in professional development and preservice programs have translated into pedagogical practices that enhance high-quality teaching and student success. (e.g., Barth, 2004; Cochran-Smith, 2000; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Johnson & Landers-Macrine, 1998; Posner, 2005; Richards, Gallo, & Renandya, 2001) My research (Truebridge, 2010) and my ongoing work in facilitating professional development continues to support the finding that one of the best ways to have people develop a deeper understanding of a concept such as resilience is by connecting to it. I found that one of the best ways to make such a connection is through the telling of personal stories. Thus I always try to invite participants in professional development to engage in some type of activity that promotes the telling of their personal stories. As continued research, documentation, and experiences of the benefits of such practices as reflection, collaboration, and storytelling are highlighted, I believe that such strengths-based practices will continue to be embraced and flourish.

Conclusion

So where are we in challenging the deficit model in education that has evolved from the pervasive deficit ideology historically embraced by our culture? I am hopeful and optimistic that we are on a path in education, albeit a slow one, towards shifting from a culture of deficits and blame—one that is focused on fixing—to a culture of strengths and collaboration—one that believes in and supports the resilience in all. Yet in order to do so, we must continue to be diligent in having all parties—researchers, policymakers, and practitioners—understand the role that sociopolitical processes play in our work; admit our action, or lack thereof, in contributing to a current culture of complacency;

embrace the will to make a change; and ultimately have the courage to commit ourselves to reflect and collaborate towards creating and being that change. We must also develop a better understanding of such powerful concepts as resilience and beliefs and the relationship that they have with each other in the context of promoting and supporting a strengths-based perspective and model in education.

Finally, as we continue pushing the strengths-based boulder up the education mountain, I encourage us not to limit ourselves by situating the dialogue of moving education from a deficit-based model to a strengths-based one in the context of education reform. As I said earlier, words matter. When we refer to making changes in education as education reform, we often are compelled to look at the parts of education that are believed to be in need of improvement. I contend that for us to successfully push the strengths-based boulder up the education mountain, we have to steadily, enduringly, and collectively—with conviction and purpose—push hard. A big push will come when we reframe the needs in education by altering the semantics by saying that the education system is not in need of reform but rather in need of transformation. With this perspective, teachers, administrators, policymakers, parents, and students may more readily embrace a theory of change in education where the change agent resides not *with the programs* incorporated in the system, but rather *within the individuals* creating and implementing the system.

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