SUPPORT DOCUMENT

Working from strengths literature: A review of supporting research

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This document was produced by the author(s) based on their research for the guide *Working from strengths: Venturing towards strength-based adult education* and is an added resource for further information. The report is available on NCVER's website: <http://www.ncver.edu.au>

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Literature review

This literature review fills out the background to the resource *Working from Strength*s (Virgona & Waterhouse 2007). It explains the drivers that set us on the track to look for new models for teacher-learner interaction that would yield greater learner autonomy and the realisation of self directed goals. The literature review provides an overview of the academic and community thinking that have provided the moment for re-evaluating our current practices and seeking new inspiration.

Introduction

Triggered by concerns such as those put forward by the National Adult Literacy Forum of 2004 (Ithaca Group 2005), we began looking for a more comprehensive response to current thinking about literacy and the individual in the vocational education system.

> …a new approach is needed to satisfactorily incorporate the new ideas about literacy as a tool for making meaning and to broaden the focus to include the development of skills that allow individuals to participate effectively in all aspects of life (Ithaca Group 2005)

The Ithaca Group concluded 'current literacy policy and practice have yet to catch up with the most recent developments in adult literacy theory'.

Lonsdale and McCurry (2004) also outline the points of disjuncture, where researchers' understandings about multi-literacies, new literacies, and literacy as social practice, are in conflict with the more traditional functional economic approaches to literacy reflected in policy. Premised upon relatively simplistic definitions of autonomous skill-based literacy (Street 1984), functional economic models still appear to direct the thinking of current governments. On the ground, however, the adult literacy and basic education field continues to become more complex. Recent studies have identified new literacies (Farrell 2003, Farrell & Holkner 2004, Snyder et al. 2005) and another has reflected upon the literacies displayed by those who do not have traditional script-based literacy (Waterhouse and Virgona 2005). ALBE practitioners however are required to provide outcomes within the prevailing functional economic model in response to the funding and reporting arrangements (Foley 2005, Belatti et al. 2006, Black 2004).

We were seeking direction for a closer match between theory, policy and practice by reflecting upon the professional activity of a related field of endeavour. Like the literacy field, health and welfare professionals have been seeking ways of recognising and valuing differences and individuality in clients in an environment where the dominant thinking values standardised classifications and coded solutions (Boston 2000). As in literacy, much of the new thinking in the human relationships field springs from post-modern world views which engage with the complexities and differences between contexts, communities and individuals. There is general community acceptance of the ideas emerging from personal construct theory (Kelly 1955) and a discomfort with universal theories of human behaviour which fail to accommodate constructivism sufficiently.

> Human problems are of such complexity that all people have different explanations that harmonize with their own particular frames of reference, beliefs and models of the world. Different explanations demand different measures   (Mahlberg and Sjoblom 2002, p.31)

The field of counselling and social work has been wrestling to find consistency with many of the same philosophical and ideological principles that challenge educationalists and has lighted upon

strength based approaches. By contrast, adult literacy teaching practice has not integrated post-modern principles into a clear methodology or set of practices. Mission and value statements have not been formulated into a set of practices embraced by the field. The Adult Literacy field has been preoccupied with demands for vocational accountabilities and achieving a voice in the mainstream debates (Black 2002, McIntyre 1999, Suda 2002). The disquiet reported by the Ithaca Group can be interpreted as a concern for the insufficient transfer of post modern perspectives into policy and practice.

Post Modernism

In recent times, post-modernism has become pervasive:

> Post modernism is a term that is omnipresent in the media, academic circles and
> contemporary culture.   (Boston 2000)

Under the influence of Foucault (1972), Derrida (1979) and Lyotard (1984) constructivism has largely overtaken the way we read our world. Constructivism places the individual as the author of meaning and significance in his/her own life. According to this world view, there is no objective, impermeable truth for individuals to discover. There are only disconnected, meaningless things and events. The way we link them is the essence of meaning-making and being human. How individuals respond to their experience, how they are motivated, the values they hold and the source of their striving are personally constructed. We talk and feel things out with ourselves, and with others, hence we 'make meaning'.

> Reality is created through language in an ongoing interactional and relational process.
> Discourse about the world is not a reflection or a map of reality, but an artefact of
> communal interchange.   (Boston 2000, p.2)

Cultures and ideologies develop belief systems by placing significance on things and events and building relationships between them. Those who subscribe to a culture and ideology are bound together by shared values and world views – what Gee (1990, 1992) and others (Fairclough 1989, 1992, Bourdieu 1991) have called a 'discourse'. Post modernism tells us that discourses are all constructed and none have veracity outside the group's purview.

Post Modernism and Literacy

Likewise, current theories of literacy have abandoned fixed definitions wedded to static forms of reading and writing. Literacy is a way of recording and communicating meaning. Without interpretation, it is no more than scribble or sound. If literacy is a way of communicating meaning, then it extends far beyond the words themselves. It involves how words are received by particular groups and how the words are put together. It is also tone, body language, medium, physical environment, visual impact … all of which have some influence upon the meaning an individual may draw from the communication (Gumperz 1982, Gee et al 1995). Text has been redefined (Fairclough 1992). Furthermore, how one individual interprets the meaning may be very different to another because meaning is relational – it depends upon what each of us brings to the communication (Sarangi 1994).

Definitions of literacy are dependent upon context and purpose so that to be literate in one community is to take up the specialised literacy practices of that community (Roberts & Sarangi 1995, Farrell 1998, 2000, Cook-Gumperz 1986). Literacy is viewed as a fluid, cluster of practices and symbols reshaped by each cultural group which make up its idiosyncratic rules for communicating (Gergen 1985, Gee 2000, OECD 2000). Those who belong to the group, practice

the literacy. These notions of literacy have been stated frequently (Street 1993, 1995, 1999, Castleton 2000) and are largely accepted by the field:

Under the influence of postmodern philosophies, old ways of thinking have been substantially challenged. Language is now seen as arbitrary and indeterminate.

> Concepts like reality, sexuality, morality and truth are no longer seen in absolute terms but as relative and interrelated. Literacy thus becomes a social construction, rather than an autonomous and universal given. (Lonsdale and Mc Curry 2004, p.6)

Hence we have now accepted notions of multi-literacies (Waterhouse 2005a, New London Group 1996) and 'spiky profiles' (Ithaca Group 2005) where individuals subscribe to a unique set of literacies.

Literacy programs reflect aspects of post-modernist interpretation of human communication in adopting specialist language and literacy courses adapted for different industries and community interest groups. Context has established pre-eminence as the arbiter of relevance and appropriacy (Waterhouse and Virgona 2005). Interest in the idiosyncrasies of workplace cultures have been studied (Gowan 1992, Jackson 2000, Payne 2000, Bell 2002, Stevenson 1994, Barton et al 1998) Literacy researchers and professionals have considered the judgements that are made around exclusion and inclusion of particular groups (Lankshear 1997, Crowther et al 2001, Roberts et al 1992). Communication practices have been studied and teaching activities have been devised particularly to teach speaking and writing genres of particular groups whom the clients aspire to join (Barton et al 1998; DEST 2007)

Post Modernism and the Health and Welfare Field

Other fields and disciplines have similarly been restructured to accommodate post-modern world views. The counselling world however has followed a different track through the mire of post-modernism when compared to education. Parts of the health and welfare sector have been influenced by Positive Peer Culture and self help 12 step programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous (Quigley 2003). These programs demonstrate the capacities of groups and individuals to find their own solutions to their problems. Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider and Srivastve 1987 Cooperrider et al 1991) and Positive Deviance (Sternin 2000) have also influenced some streams of welfare thinking. Deficit models of behaviour change have been challenged. Among case workers and counselling professions, emphasis on the individual's view of the world has become important, particularly for adherents to Strength Based Practice. Strength Based Practice encompasses a cluster of therapies that acknowledge the authority of the client as author of their own world construction. The link with post modernism is evident in this definition of strength:

> Strengths are not absolute and cannot be conceptualised in isolation from the situation in which they are expressed. What represents strength in one context may constitute weakness in another and vice versa (McQuade and Ehrenreich1997, p.203)

Hence deviant behaviour may reflect a strength, depending on the way the client frames his/her behaviour. According to Perkins (1999), one of its primary principles is:

> Meeting the client at his or her model of the world. The way the client makes sense of her life is very important to her. What she does helps her life hold together and make sense.
> (Perkins 1999, p.2)

Framing & Reframing

A key concept in post-modern thinking is that of frames. Uncovering and naming the frames used by educators and strength-based practitioners has been central to our thinking in researching this project.

Our frames of thinking define our perceptions - what is relevant or irrelevant, significant or dismissible, cause for action or concern. Whether we see the glass as half-full or half empty, whether we see opportunities or problems, is determined by our frames. As Schön (1987) noted,

> When a practitioner sets a problem he chooses and names the things he will notice. …Through complementary acts of naming and framing, the practitioner selects things for attention and organises them, guided by an appreciation of the situation … So problem setting is an ontological process … a form of world making. (Schön 1987, p.4)

Elsewhere Argyris and Schön (1978) highlighted the extent to which these framing and re-framing processes may be largely unconscious. We are not always aware of the way we are using language and framing issues. Lakoff also reminds us that,

> Every word evokes a frame …Words defined within a frame evoke the frame … Negating a frame evokes the frame … Evoking a frame reinforces that frame … Every frame is realized in the brain by neural circuitry. Every time a neural circuit is activated, it is strengthened. (Lakoff 2006).

Hence, advertising agents build an image of a product as racey and contemporary or domestic and cosy. Likewise educators may frame themselves as helpers, facilitators, knowers, instructors, consultants and so on.

> Language always comes with what is called 'framing'. Every word is defined relative to a conceptual framework … That's a frame. (Lakoff, cited in, Azab Powell, 2003)

Most critically, Lakoff and Fergusson (2006) stress that

> These linguistic expressions are anything but neutral. Each framing defines the problem in its own way, and hence constrains the solutions needed to address that problem. (Lakoff & Fergusson, 2006)

Our everyday language provides frames which categorise client or learner behaviour; perhaps as 'dependent' and 'needy' or as 'resourceful' and 'creative'. In the Contradicting the Stereotype project (Waterhouse & Virgona 2005), we saw how some individuals were able to 're-frame' their understandings, and their circumstances, and, in the process, empower themselves. The principles of appreciative enquiry and strength-based practice are based on an understanding of these framing and re-framing processes.

An important aspect of developing an appreciative spirit is learning to move out of using deficit language into an appreciation of what works well by reframing, words, issues or situations … We have been amazed by the potency of 'reframing'. (Goh, Simpson & Martin 2003, p.2)

In this project we were interested in analysing the frame cast around the meeting of client and professional and observe how it shaped the nature of the task and the terms of the relationship. The frame is fashioned by the institution and professional identity of the practitioners and exercises formative influence over the power differential, the decision-making roles and the values enacted in the interchanges.

Strength Based Practices

Strength-based practitioners find their way into their client's experience through narrative which exposes their personal constructs of reality.

> The ascendant interest in narrative perspectives is inextricably linked with the impact of post modernism, which is as ubiquitous as it is difficult to define. (Roberts 2000)

Narrative therapies challenge the traditional evidence-based medical model:

> the evidence of testimony or opinion has been identified as dirt on the lens of science, which EBM (Evidence Based Medicine) has been created to remove and the methods are such as to eliminate the complexity of individual variation.   (Roberts 2000)

Roberts cautions that narrative therapies are not a replacement for evidence based medicine. They can be used as a complement to other therapeutic approaches, although Strength Based therapies claim to be treatments in their own right (Iveson 2002). Narratives however take account of the client's subjective and interpreted experience.

> An individual's identity is embodied in a personal narrative that includes different versions of the self.   (Boston 2000, p.4)

Notions of multiple selves arrived with post-modernism.

> Post modernist contributions to the concept of self relate to the transience and malleability of definitions   (Boston 2000, p.6)

Hence we may hold contradictory positions or take up different identities in different situations.

The growing respect for narrative in medical science makes space for the literary perspective of writers and social commentators such as Thomas King, who writes:

> The truth about stories is that that's all we are. The Nigerian storyteller Ben Okri says that … 'we live by stories, we also live in them. One way or other we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted - knowingly or unknowingly - in ourselves. We live stories that either give our lives meaning or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives.   (King 2003, p.153)

The central place of narrative in forming and sustaining identity has become well integrated in the dominant discourses of our community. Costello, a clergyman, writes about narrative in the construction of self in a text written for a popular audience:

> Inevitably we live out of stories, whether they add up or not, whether they are recognised or implicit … The moral question is which story do we choose to make sense of our living and why do we chose it   (Costello 1999)

If stories play such an important role in our identity, then those engaged in working with people cannot afford to ignore them.

This would appear to be an important point of intersection between the health and welfare field and that of adult literacy education. It raises questions of how we, as adult literacy educators, listen to personal narratives and how we use them in our work. Some educators and researchers have engaged with this orientation to their practice (Waterhouse 2005a &b). However strength-based practitioners elevate narrative as the pivotal tool for insight and change.

Closely related to narrative is the link with language that ties the two fields together. Narratives are expressed through language. It is not just the story but how it is told that is of critical interest.

Strength-based practitioners use the language of the client to explore the client's narrative and to find the resources the individual already has to remake their narrative into a solution oriented story of success. Strength-based counsellors and case workers are attuned to the words, imagery and relationships the client constructs in the 'languaging' of their narrative (Maturana and Varela 1987). Seiler (2003) working as a personal life coach, puts great emphasis on the colour, tone and imagery the client uses in creating and living their narrative:

> The essential power of language is that it generates meaning   (Seiler 2003, p.82)

Seiler discusses language in its broader dimensions which include not only what is audible but the internal dialogue of both the coach and the coachee. The internal language of the coach determines how they will hear the coachee. The role of the coach is to be non-judgemental, highly respectful and open to experience of the coachee. Seiler is working within a strength based, post modern paradigm.

Strength-based practitioners put aside their world view to immerse themselves in the meaning that makes up the reality for the client. Hence for these case workers, human relationships are about seeing different, highly individualised views of the world. This is not dissimilar to the teaching and learning relationships described by Waterhouse as

> 'the interaction of personal constructs…thus for teachers to engage with learners they need to understand their own and their learners' world view and personal constructs' (Waterhouse1999, p.17)

As Kelly noted, more than half a century ago,

> To the extent that one person construes the construction process of another, they play a role in a social process involving the other person … if we cannot understand people, that is we cannot construe their construction, then we do things to them but we cannot relate to them.   (Kelly 1955, p.18)

Strength-based practitioners are working to assist clients to realise and transform their identity using holistic methodologies. Seiler works with the client's breathing, stance, image and feelings as well as language. He addresses issues of identity directly.

Literacy researchers and theoreticians talk about language and identity. Post modern theory recognises identity as the essential base of adult literacy work (Farrell 1998, 2000, Roberts et al 1992). Issues of identity recur in the literature and research in the field but educators have very limited opportunity to directly address identity within the current reporting and accountability frameworks (Sanguinetti 2001, Foley 2005).

As with adult literacy educators, strength-based practitioners reject deficit thinking. Unlike adult literacy educators, strength-based practitioners have built a methodology to guide proponents towards enacting positive thinking.

> Clients come to therapy with a 'problem-saturated' narrative that has become internalised as the primary description of self.   (Boston 2000)

Practitioners work with the problem narrative to achieve a solution narrative.

> Strength Based practice emphasises the presence and application of strengths to the resolution of problems and people's ability to be their own agents of change. (McCashen 2001)

This approach is similar to the way Seiler describes his work. As a coach, he straddles both fields, that of education and counselling. Perhaps coaches may throw light upon the ways in which principles of identity, individuality and difference may be better addressed. Some adult literacy educators have already drawn links between their work and that of coaches (Gunn, 2005).

Respect for the client's 'dignity, uniqueness and right' are pivotal values for strength-based practitioners. Those rights include the right of the client to determine who they are and the way they wish to live within basic social constraints. A concept often found in the literature is 'the client is the expert'. Such values are borne out in statements such as those found on the DASSI (Disability Attendant Support Service Inc) web-site:

> DASSI supports the right of people with a disability to live according to their own values and standards; respects the right to privacy, confidentiality and dignity; and the right to an individual and effective service.   (DASSI 2006)

As a client-managed business, the DASSI web-site states:

> DASSI's clients are able to manage their own attendant support, have the final say in the employment of their attendants, manage their rosters, participate in training of workers and specify the terms and conditions of their support contracts.   (DASSI 2006)

This interpretation of post modern values transforms the positions of the client from that of welfare dependent to the customer of a service delivery agency. It marks a significant departure from therapies that have gone before. Narratives have always been used in health and welfare service delivery. However more traditional services and service providers have assumed an authority over the client's story. Their work has been to make professional judgements about the client's dysfunction and to transform the behaviour patterns that hold sway over the individual's decision making and thought processes. Traditional practitioners ascribe a diagnosis based on linking the client's behaviour with predefined diseases and conditions that operate independent of the individual (Boston 2000). The clinician makes clear the world that eludes the client. They assume the authority to diagnose the problems, ascribe motivation and direct the corrective activity to solve the problem. Post-modernist therapies challenge this approach to problem solving. Strength based practitioners work within the world view of the client which they assist to expand and change:

> Professionals using diagnostic categories and treatment protocols run the risk of 'losing the person' they are seeing, under the weight of their professional knowledge and expertise
> (Turnell and Lipchik 1999)

More traditional practitioners have accused post-modernists of violating scientific values of objectivity:

> Evidence based medicine (EBM) has been founded on the aspiration to produce 'a coherent and comprehensive approach to allow clinicians to base their practice on the best available evidence.   (Roberts 2000, p.1)

In response to the demands of traditional science Iveson notes,

> In science, words are used to describe and delineate 'reality' and for something to be regarded as 'real' it must be possible to replicate it. The theoretical underpinnings of solution-focused brief therapy are to be found more within the realms of philosophy. It is based on language and dialogue as creative processes   (Iveson 2002, p.9)

Nonetheless, Strength-based Practice recognises the value of proven outcomes and the need for quality controls (Quigley 2003). It is seeking to accumulate a body of evidence-based research. In the meantime, practitioners celebrate their therapeutic achievements in instigating change and solutions in minimal time and with a kitbag of minimal techniques. One variation of the approach is also known as Brief Therapy because it produces long lasting results after only a few sessions (Iveson 2002, Waller 2001).

So what for Adult Literacy?

The health and welfare sector does not have a monopoly on strength based approaches. They have made their way into many fields (Mahlberg and Sjoblom 2002). It is present in the practices of many social organisations even though it is not named as such. Its influence is clearly discernible in education, particularly adult literacy education, although little has been written under the banner of strength based education. Some American educators have published on the topic and Educational Horizons devoted an edition to it in 2005. Mahlberg and Sjoblom were amongst the first to directly apply the principles however their activities are in school education. Strength-based approaches have also been used by school counsellors and advised as a behaviour management tool for some years (Metcalf 1995, 1997, Rhodes and Ajmal 1995, Sklare 1997).

This exploration of ideology and practice among strength-based practitioners throws into relief values and questions that may enrich the field of adult basic education. Strength-based practice embraces the values that underpin the following questions. Is it appropriate and applicable for adult literacy education to travel further down the road of strength-based practice and delve further into questions such as:

✧ What authority do our learners have over the type of competence they are seeking or how they will achieve it?

✧ What credibility is given to learners' judgements about their competence?

✧ Are we open to our learners' own solutions to their literacy problems?

✧ Do we give credibility to communication strengths across a full range of literacies or are we fixed on a traditional print-based literacy?

✧ Do we pay attention to emotional intelligence?

✧ Do we tolerate assistive technologies?

✧ Is our feedback and problem analysis framed around building learner strengths and autonomy?

✧ Are our conversations about learner goals and their ways of achieving them or those of vocational benchmarks and reportable evidence of progress?

✧ How are we hearing our students? Are we only looking for the systemic patterns that categorise them according to the pre-ordained boxes already prepared for them?

✧ Do we work fully with factors that proscribe identity (such as posture or tone of voice) or are we restricted to words, or text?

✧ Are we solution oriented or problem focused and whose solutions are we promoting?

✧ Do we regard literacy as one of many tools for social and economic competence or is it an end in itself?

The post-modern perspective tells us that learning is about taking on new identities. Learners come to develop communication skills which empower them to relate in new ways and enter new roles in the workplace, the community or in society generally. Can educators enhance the way they mediate identity change?

A cursory review of literacy and language materials shows a concern for context in terms of local texts, vocabulary use, pronunciation and grammatical structure, but they rarely engage with issues of identity or personal evaluations of competence or reflection. The individual is not discernable

in the accountability frameworks and we are still required to measure outcomes as deficits against a generalised, nationally determined norm. Crowther et al (2001) discusses the negative connotations of deficit testing systems that measure what learners cannot do rather than what they can do, which excludes the individual and his/her goals from the equation. Others have remarked on the exclusion of the individual in Adult Community Education imperatives:

> Learning through ACE is no longer constructed through the 70's discourses of 'individual empowerment' but rather is now in line with the notion of education being an investment in 'human capital' which leads to greater economic returns (Buckingham, Aldred, & Clark, 2004).

Foley argues that community capacity is being constructed by government policy and funding frameworks to fit economic outcomes. Individual variation and diversity likewise do not mesh with economic values.

> ACE providers/practitioners working on the ground are feeling and hearing the policy discourse of community, however are experiencing some difficulty fitting their understandings of community into its current political context   (Foley 2005, p.5)

The cohort that Foley draws from is the Victorian community education providers who have set themselves apart from TAFE. There appears to be a tussle between, on the one hand, policy and funding structures whose sites are set on economic prosperity, national benchmarks and measured outcomes (which have implications for economic prosperity), and, on the other, notions of community, locality, identity, variation and individual responsiveness.

Foley argues that practices within the Adult Community Education sector are strength-based, varied and dynamic. They are also under threat. It would appear that they are sustained despite the system rather than because of it. Furthermore, McIntyre (1999) argues that the Adult Community Education sector has been hijacked into vocational training and has, as a result, compromised its equity commitment and its ability to provide a richly varied program that can respond to individual differences. The communitarian values of the Adult Community Education sector have been sidelined by vocational values focused on individual acquisition of skills and qualifications. He argues that the autonomy of the sector has been compromised forcing its practice down narrow streams of delivery.

However the Victorian *Ministerial Statement* of June 2004 reflects an understanding of adult literacy needs that are complex and flexible. It promises to alleviate the funding pressures that have been limiting the activities of neighbourhood houses. Settle (2004) found that as funding structures and accountability measures tighten, variation and responsiveness is no longer viable. The *Ministerial Statement* declares support for more diversified programs for specific target groups with special needs from older men to special youth groups. It promises a whole person approach and draws upon local partnerships for effective educational programs. It acknowledges an interest and responsibility to personal well-being beyond the vocational outcomes. However, at the same time the demand for stringent accountability and skill-based outcomes continues.

Similar values are reflected in the amendments to the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Programme of 2006 to 2008. The amendments will turn teacher attention to learning strategies displayed by learners. This allows conversations around individual strengths, developing learner autonomy and individual goal setting. Hargreaves, reporting on work undertaken by Balatti, Black and Falk (2006) notes:

> Adult literacy and numeracy teachers already realise that important interpersonal outcomes, for example gaining self-confidence, go unreported. Reporting on these outcomes may go some way towards providing a more complete picture of the benefits of literacy and numeracy courses. However, it is recognised that how this should be done is problematic. (Hargreaves, 2006 p.11)

There is evidence from adult educators that indicates an appreciation of the values of strength based practice. Recent research investigating pedagogy with Adult Community Education practitioners highlighted the importance of adult community educators (including literacy practitioners) 'engaging with learners and their learning on a personal level' (Sanguinetti et al 2004). This study showed that these Adult Community Education practitioners embraced a 'whole of person' orientation to their work. Maybe adult educators have imbibed much of the philosophy since strength based practice has seeped into mainstream discourse.

We read of many programs, particularly in the Adult Community Education sector that appear to have challenged traditional classroom practices as well as incorporate the values of Strength Based Practice such as that described by Brown (2005) or those referred to by Macrae (2001) as owned by the community; or Eddie Kneebone's program with Indigenous youth at Wodonga TAFE (Waterhouse 2005b).

It appears the time is ripe to investigate and articulate strength based ideologies that may assist adult literacy practitioners to better theorise and consolidate pedagogies that leap the observed gap between theory, practice and policy. This project seeks to make a significant contribution here.

However the Working from Strength guide is only a beginning. It invites further conversations about nurturing student autonomy, the quality of our teacher learner relationships and the potential for the development of strength-based education.

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