

**Engaging Democracy and Social Justice in Creating Educational Alternatives:
An Account of Voice and Agency for Marginalized Youth and the Community**

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Abstract

Social justice and democracy are central themes that need to be engaged within today's educational landscape. Youth who leave school due to forms of social and educational marginalization make this explicit. They demonstrate the need to position themes of social justice and democracy at the centre of educational innovations designed to address their needs as learners. This paper narrates how a coalition of community actors engaged rights-based, representational and participatory democratic perspectives through their initiative to create a publically funded alternative school. Engaging youth as experts in their own lives (including their educational needs) and reframing education as a community issue became central means used by the coalition to enact social justice and democracy.

Key Words: alternative education, democracy, social justice, community, marginalized youth

Introduction

The creation of new organizational and programmatic forms of public education is an important aspect of educational innovation given the growing recognition of the diverse needs of learners and communities. Research has shown that standardized models of public education do not effectively address the needs of many students, particularly those who face forms of social marginalization. Studies relay a host of complex inter-related personal-familial, school-related and societal variables contributing to the lack of fit between students and schools (Spruck & Powrie, 2005; Stringfield, & Land, 2002; Audus & Willms, 2002; Manning & Baruth, 1995). Alternative schools provide an expanded choice of schooling within public education systems which traditionally offer a one-size-fits-all model of K-12 education. They are recognized as an effective response to addressing the needs of disenfranchised students who leave school due to multiple social and educational barriers (De la Ossa, 2005; Jeffries & Singer, 2003; Saunders & Saunders, 2002; Kallio & Sanders, 1999; Kellmayer, 1995; Manning & Baruth, 1995; Raywid, 1995).

Expanding public education options provides an opportunity to examine and implement innovations in educational democracy and social justice. Themes of democracy and social justice are of primary importance in alternative models seeking to address the learning needs of socially marginalized students. This is an area in need of concerted attention within educational scholarship. As Goldstein and Selby indicate, "our schools and communities are still divided by discrimination" (2000: 17) which makes mainstream school culture and its practices disempowering for many students. From their inception, alternative school initiatives have needed to address issues of student equity, voice and agency.

Narratives of how social justice and democracy in education are enacted and practiced are often left untold. The drive towards specific outcomes, within the context of limited time and resources, is liable to preclude documentation of the process. While community and youth actors have been involved in publically funded alternative educational programs for marginalized youth (Kellmayer, 1995) there are few accounts which document their involvements in spearheading these initiatives. Also needed are accounts which investigate their contributions in expanding understandings and practices of democracy and social justice within public education.

This paper addresses these issues by providing a narration of how democracy and social justice were engaged by a coalition of community actors to create an alternative model of education for marginalized youth; it contributes to filling in these investigative gaps. These are youth between the ages of 16 and 19 years who face significant hardships and responsibilities in their lives (e.g., street involved youth, single-parent youth, youth navigating mental health issues) and lack options to address their educational needs outside of mainstream school programs which they left before graduating.

We write from the perspective of two of these community actors — a university researcher and educator, and a community executive director. In this paper, we describe the key issues and efforts of a coalition to address the educational needs of marginalized youth who left school in an eastern Canadian community. We situate this educational change initiative within the larger context of academic discourse and community discussion. We then discuss how the coalition sought to focus on issues of social justice and democracy by examining the work of the coalition through the lenses of rights-based, representational and participatory discourses of democratic practice. In this narrative we see youth positioned as participants and partners in their education. We conclude by emphasizing the significance of youth-serving grassroots community organizations in framing the education of marginalized youth as a community issue. We argue that the contributions of these actors are vital in forging democratic and social justice educational reforms.

Methodology

This narrative was written as a democratic collaboration. As co-authors we shared history and experience as members of the coalition and through our writing partnership we brought together a diversity of experiences and perspectives as researchers, teachers, writers, activists, community workers and volunteers. We began by reflecting on our own experiences and ideas. We consulted coalition and community documents and academic literatures. We wrote drafts of this paper both individually and together. Our interactions and feedback on each other's ideas transformed our analysis and strengthened our writing. This paper is the outcome of our (university-community) partnership.

Alternative Schools and the Community: The Crossroads of Democracy and Social Justice

Alternative schools for marginalized youth need to intersect with issues of educational democracy and social justice in order to address inequities encountered by these students. As educational innovations, these schools serve as potential sites for the vision, practice and study of democracy and social justice, offering leadership within public education school choice debates.

Developers of alternative schools also need to be aware of instituting forms of marginalization, thus, perpetuating the very injustices and lack of voice which contributed to students leaving traditional school programs, maybe rendering them even less advantageous than regular school programs (e.g., via seeing alternative schools as “warehouses” for “throw-away” students, maintaining low academic standards, inadequate funding (see Schutz & Harris, 2001; McGee, 2001; Cox, 1999; Dunbar, 1999; Sagor, 1999)).

Communities who assert their role as partners in educational reform, who recognize that student success requires their collaboration will play an important role in contributing to forms of democratic and social justice educational innovation in the 21st century. The role of community involvement in educational reform has long been recognized (Arriaza, 2004; Mfum-Mensah, 2004; Sanders, 2003; Dei *et al.*, 2000, Merz & Furman, 1997). As Dei *et al.* state, “[t]he task of education in North America has always been a collective responsibility, and historically, parents, families and local communities have been at the forefront of struggles for school reform” (2000: 7). And yet, there often exists a disjunction between this normative recognition and the experiences of many community actors attempting to become partners in and/or initiators of educational change and innovation. In order for community actors to be committed to educational reform, they must be meaningfully engaged. Summarizing Gill’s (1997) work, Dei *et al.*, (2000) state that communities can be viewed and treated “as partners..., as collaborators and problem-solvers..., as audience..., and as school supporters..., as advisors and co-decision-makers..., and as educational advocates” (Dei et al, 2000: 6). Referring to Evan’s (1983) work, Mufum-Mensah outlines three levels of community participation—“nominal participation”, “consultative participation” and “responsible participation” (2004:144).

The term “community” within educational reform refers to a broad range of actors including, for instance, families, students, community agencies, universities, businesses and informal organizations. As previously stated, in our narrative, we pay particular attention to youth and grassroots youth-serving community groups as key actors in this educational reform initiative. While the rationale for community involvement in schools is multi-faceted, many proponents emphasize the importance of community involvement in expanding the vision of education to “move beyond the traditional confines of mainstream education” (Dei *et al.*, 2000: 12). Although Dei’s work deals primarily with racialized youth, his arguments are valid in other settings (such as this one) in which a group of students are systematically and institutionally marginalized. It is also evident that schools cannot thrive without community support, as educators continue to be confronted with meeting the diverse lifeworlds and educational needs of students. Further, viewed “as an ecological process, community participation in education is a sort of symbiosis recognizing the interdependence of the home, school and the community” (Mufum-Mensah, 2004: 143).

The Community Initiating Educational Reform: Beginnings and Connections

In November 2001, the Board of Directors of a local community-based organization in St. John’s, NL began discussing youth, particularly those involved with the justice system, local housing support services, and mental health services. These students were identified as disengaged in their own learning. A local economic development board was having similar discussions, although there was a difference in context—the economic development board was

concerned about the local “drop-out” rate as it related to skills development, and economic prosperity for the region. These parallel conversations later converged and led to further discussions with a host of local agencies which support youth. Some of the recurring themes reported in these community discussions were that youth felt excluded in the current educational system; there was a lack of understanding in the school system of the complexity of youth’s lives; and youth who faced marginalization were over-represented in the number of “drop-outs”. Subsequent informal discussions with youth verified and expanded upon these concerns. Youth talked about feeling overwhelmed with school work and many had been socially promoted without “learning” the concepts. These students felt pushed through and they commonly reported “feeling stupid” when describing their educational experience. Youth experienced being labelled and marginalized based on aspects of their backgrounds, identities and lifestyles. Further, they alluded to the educational structure as not suited to their reality.

Educators, in their everyday practice, come face-to-face with the challenges of youth who leave school before completing high school (De Broucker, 2006; Willms, 2003; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001; Manning & Baruth, 1995; Bernard, 1997). Many factors impact students’ ability to stay and succeed in school, factors which span individual, familial, peer, school and socio-cultural contexts. Economic hardships, family challenges, student disinterest in curriculum, mental health issues, forms of social discrimination, peer challenges, ineffective pedagogical practices, disconnection to school culture, interpersonal conflict and lack of classroom supports are some of the variables linked to lack of student engagement and success in school (Wrigley & Powrie, 2005; Stringfield & Land, 2002; McGee, 2001; Manning & Baruth, 1995; Donmoyer & Kos, 1993; Hixson & Tinzmann, 1990).

The percentage of school leavers (i.e., students “dropping-out”) is documented nationally and provincially. The Canadian Policy Research Network (CPRN) indicates that, “Canada is failing its young high school dropouts compared to many countries” stating that “[m]ore than one in ten young Canadians between the ages of 20 and 24 have dropped out of high school and are not pursuing further education” (CPRN press release, October 14, 2005). Wotherspoon & Schissel cite, “[v]arious agencies suggest that up to 30% to 40% or more of Canadian children are deemed to be “at-risk” of not completing high school” (2001: 324 >). Student disengagement and early departure from school is a relevant educational and community issue in Newfoundland and Labrador. For instance, in tracking the province’s Avalon East District’s 1995-1996 and 1996-1997 cohort of grade 10 students over 6 years, the Department of Education calculated a potential student “drop-out” rate of 18.5% and 20.4% respectively for an estimated total of 1,053 students (see also CEO Report: Phase One at <www/capitalcost.nf.ca.)

The negative implications of “dropping-out” of school at both individual and societal levels have been well documented (Audas & Willms, 2001; Guildford, 2000; Human Resources Development Canada, October 2000). The costs are particularly evident in Newfoundland and Labrador where youth leaving their communities to find employment off the island (i.e., out of province) comprise an embedded feature of its history. In the 1970's and 1980's many youth left the province to work in Ontario factories, typically in entry level jobs. However, a shift occurred, and the out-migration that was taking place in the 1990's became commonly referred to as the “brain drain”. It was the most formally educated youth who were leaving the province to find higher paying jobs off the island. Implications for the economic prosperity of Newfoundland and

Labrador were that many of the remaining youth were less formally educated and skilled. And while the St. John's, NL metropolitan area saw significant economic growth in the 1990's and beginning of the 21st century with the oil and gas industry coming to the province, this prosperity was not felt by many of the province's most economically disadvantaged youth, those very people whose lack of formal education and training served to exclude them from many job opportunities.

The combination of concern for youth and social-economic disparity brought together a diverse array of local actors to address the educational needs of marginalized youth in St. John's. The Coalition was officially formed in 2002. Community based grassroots organizations (which focus on community development, learning, housing supports, street outreach, group homes, family supports, recreation, economic development), parents, youth, teachers' associations, university educators, the School District, the Department of Education and other government departments (including, for instance, Service Canada, Health, Justice, Economic Development, Innovative Trade and Rural Development, Human Resources, Labour and Employment) comprise some of its diverse membership.

Key features of the Coalition

During the period 2002-2006 the Coalition undertook a number of activities to develop a proposal for an alternative school. A vision statement, mission, and guiding principles were developed to guide the work, and laid the foundation for the Coalition to move the process forward. The Coalition provided an opportunity for community forums and focus groups which included the participation of marginalized youth and families.

The Coalition was facilitated by representatives from community organizations (not by education-sector representatives) and funding was secured from the efforts of these community representatives. The Coalition was an open and transparent group which promoted shared ownership, power and responsibility for the Coalition. Decisions were based on consensus and the collective voice of its members. The Coalition sought to take a leadership role in effecting educational change needed in the lives of youth.

The Coalition secured funding to research alternative educational models and examine the relevance of these practices to the context of Newfoundland and Labrador. This research helped to form a framework for an alternative model which was then presented back to the broader community for feedback. Parents, youth, government departments, community organizations, and policy makers, for instance, had an opportunity to pose questions, challenge components of the framework, identify any oversights or gaps, and provide an unofficial endorsement of the framework. The Coalition's research, community input and guidance resulted in the development of a comprehensive proposal, "All Youth Learn, All Youth Succeed", for an alternative school model.

The Coalition: Engaging Issues of Social Justice and Democracy in Education

Issues of social justice and democracy in education were central issues underpinning the work of the Coalition for many explicit and implicit reasons. The Coalition was clear, for instance, in seeking to create a model of alternative schooling which was rooted in supporting youth voice, agency, strengths, participation and choice. In order to promote youth agency, the Coalition understood that they were looking to create a learning environment which would not re-enact forms of inequity and dis-engagement. Creating an alternative school experience rooted in forms of social justice and democracy coincided with the desire to instill these values within the Coalition's process of developing the proposal itself.

The Coalition's engagement with issues of social justice and democracy was an emergent process and not a neatly defined and prescriptive one; it involved more than becoming informed of inequities facing youth in schools and in the community, and acting to change them. It called for a transformative process through engagement of social justice and democratic values. This process promoted acceptance of complexity and a continual deepening of meaning-making, critical reflection, dialogue and active engagement at multiple levels (e.g., personal, professional, group, institutional and community). The transformative process became the essence of working collectively towards an innovative, context-specific response to youths' educational challenges within a social landscape still rising to the challenge of democracy and justice principles and practice.

Many authors argue that schools need to be "sites of democracy" to enable democracy and justice at societal levels (Bolmeier, 2006; Loder, 2006; Miretzky, 2004; Davis, 2003). This stems from the assumption that democracy (and justice) in schools and the community are intimately connected (Loder, 2006). Meanings of democracy and social justice vary, demonstrating both the breadth of discourse and their multiple meanings and uses. Rights-based, representational and participatory discourses are three areas of democratic (and related social justice) discussion which link to youth facing forms of social and educational marginalization. Here we examine the work of the Coalition through these three areas of discourse and practice.

Rights-Based Discourses as an Influence of Social Justice Practice

The view that every child has a right to quality education and that schools must ensure access and quality is essential to discourse on rights-based democracy and social justice (Loder, 2006; Rogers & Oakes, 2005). This was the initial premise of the Coalition. Inequalities in education have been well documented. Dei et al. state, "it has been documented that in North American schooling contexts, resources are unevenly distributed related to race/ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic class such that social inequities are continually reproduced" (2000: 3) thus, "for a large number of people, participating in today's mainstream schooling is not only problematic, it is impossible" (2000: 2). Articulating educational practices contributing to inequitable educational quality and access, Kelly states,

...schools too often operate in ways that undermine [democracy]. Overly narrow (e.g., Eurocentric) curriculums and various other institutional practices – standardized testing, ability grouping and tracking, in-grade retention, repeated failure, suspension,

and expulsion – selectively discourage, stigmatize, and exclude young people from school. Both inside and outside schools, societal inequalities based on class, race, gender, sexual identity, and ability place further limits on “actually existing democracy...” (2003: 124).

Rights-based discourses and practices of democracy and social justice must be central to alternative schools for marginalized youth because these are the students who have been most impacted by their absence in schools and in society. Hence, the Coalition engaged the view of rights-based democracy as a means to foster social justice for youth. It held that society has an obligation to provide educational options that provide effective opportunities. Morley’s definition of alternative education reflects the Coalition’s view, stating:

Alternative education is a perspective, not a procedure or program. It is based upon the belief that there are many ways to become educated, as well as many types of environments and structures within which this may occur. Further, it recognized that all people can be educated and that it is in society’s interest to ensure that all are educated to at least...[a] general high school...level. To accomplish this requires that we provide a variety of structures and environments such that each person can find one that is sufficiently comfortable to facilitate progress (1991: 8).

Creating opportunities for success became understood within the Coalition as providing educational options that reflect the realities of youths’ lives and experiences and ensuring that these options would not add further forms of marginalization. As several authors suggest (such as Dei et al., 2000) marginalized students’ experience must be seen within a complex socio-historical context and recognize that each student is located differently within that context. The Coalition took up issues of diversity, explicitly and implicitly, and began to interrogate notions of equal opportunities. The Coalition forwarded the view that it is not as simple as providing an educational system, thus expecting all youth to have equal opportunity to experience success. Below is an example, one of many forwarded during discussions, of how youth can experience marginalization through being treated “the same as every one else”:

A local 16 year old youth was consistently 10 minutes late for school. The school administration, frustrated by this seeming lack of respect for school rules, his failing grades and lack of motivation to learn, labelled him a “trouble maker”. After several weeks of being late he was suspended. The youth’s reaction was to quit, he had had enough. In this scenario what has remained invisible is the reality of this youth’s unstable housing situation - he was living on his own in a bedsitter 20 km away, and had a transportation difficulty of catching two buses—which caused him to arrive at school late every day. Understanding the challenge of being 16 years old, of living on his own without family support, of having to pack his own school lunches and travel to another city every day to attend school would validate this youth’s experience. Rather than seeing an unmotivated “trouble-maker” who needed to be “treated equally” the Coalition viewed the youth differently—as one who needed to be celebrated for his determination and perseverance.

The Coalition resisted educational frames which compartmentalized students and failed to take their complex lifeworlds into account. They saw how these frames often serve to individualize and de-contextualize student challenges and emphasize deficit-based, problem-saturated accounts of youth. Instead, the Coalition forwarded a complex and holistic frame of education which situated youth challenges within the context of the social-structural realities around them. The Coalition considered many challenges identified by youth—the hours school operate are not flexible enough, there are too many students per class room, there are too many restrictions, school fees are too high, the effort required is intimidating, course content does not connect to their lives, they feel labelled and unable to get the support they need with their studies. Community issues of poverty, hunger, drug-use/abuse, homelessness/unstable housing and isolation from family comprised another intersecting tapestry equally crucial to youth disengagement from school.

The Coalition adopted the understanding that it is not youths' responsibility to adapt, either within school or within the community, to structures that place them at a disadvantage for educational and community success; rather it is the responsibility of the community and educators to create learning environments and structures which demonstrate partnership with youth. This meant developing integrated solutions which rely on many forms of student-family-school-community collaboration; it also meant engaging youth from deeper notions of democracy by “beginning from where they are and where they want to go”.

Engaging Representational Democracy and Justice

Representational democracy is about civic rights and responsibilities. Are schools teaching and providing experiences of representational democracy to marginalized students? Do schools give these students involvement in school decision-making, while going further to recognize and address the reality, that, as Kelly states, “dominant groups [students] are [still] more likely to have their voices and concerns heard [than marginalized groups/students] ” (2003: 142). While there may be talk in schools about democracy, many argue democracy within the school itself is not implemented in practice (Loder, 2006; Miretsky, 2004; Effrat & Schimmel, 2003; Davis, 2003; Kelly, 2003). Students are not positioned as having central roles in shaping democracy in their schools, rather they are offered superficial forms of involvement (Miretzky, 2004; Kelly, 2003). Effrat & Schimmel refer to the lack of student participation in school decisions, stating,

...on the whole, our schools and educational systems talk the talk of democracy, but, at best, they limp the walk. They teach about democracy— tracing the history of institutions, reviewing important constitutional provisions...discussing contemporary social issues ...Schools seek to impart knowledge and inculcate values, but they provide little opportunity to... learn through doing, or to engage in authentic work that would enhance one's ability to participate in the role of citizen in a democratic society. A number of large-scale studies based on extensive interviewing of students report that students had little or no opportunity for participation in the decision making process in schools (2003: 1).

The Coalition worked in a number of ways to ensure that youth had a representational voice in the process and the final proposal itself. Central to their understanding of youth's representation was that youth needed to be given the freedom, accompanied with respect by the Coalition, to choose if and how they wanted to have input into the process. This view was taken in response to the experiences of many marginalized youth who feel they lack the freedom to define and choose meaningful forms of participation for themselves. The Coalition acted on this understanding in three central ways. First, youth were given options for participation and input: youth could participate as Coalition members on the steering committee, attend community forums, participate in focus groups, be part of a research team and/or contribute in other ways which they themselves defined. Second, the Coalition realized that this 'options approach' for youth would only have real representational (democratic) meaning if the above options were not viewed hierarchically but were considered of equal importance. The understanding was, for example, that the ideas and participation which occurred through Coalition meetings (which most youth chose not to attend on a regular basis) were not viewed as more important than the input which came from any of the other forms of participation. The options approach was meant to actively challenge the marginalization of youth's voice and representation. A third step for the Coalition was to double-check its own role. This meant not only welcoming input from youth in the various options of participation, but incorporating their input into the design of an alternative school model and then following up by asking youth whether their voices, issues and concerns had been represented and addressed.

Deepening Democracy: Engaging Participatory Democracy and Justice

Another construct of democracy to include within educational discourse is the need for "authentic democracy" as opposed to "false democracy" (Loder, 2006). The distinction stems from notions (beyond representation) to explore democracy more broadly as "a way of life" and a "moral way of living" as articulated by educators like John Dewey (see Henderson, 1999). Some central notions are "How we live and work and talk together...[is]...embedded in and builds upon how we develop and practice skills of making everyday decisions, communicating our interests and listening to others, and respecting differences of perspectives and peoples" (Effrat & Schimmel, 2003: 4). Concepts of "inclusive" and "deliberative democracy" assert the value of difference and the importance of constructing our individual and collective lives from dialogue and decision-making as influenced by multiple perspectives and social locations (see the work of Nancy Fraser and Iris Young discussed in Kelly, 2003). These concepts, in turn, connect to Barber's (1984) concept of "strong democracy" and "human freedom" (explored by theorists such as Maxine Green as discussed in Henderson, 1999: 8). What is common to these concepts and their ties to social justice is the desire to move beyond what Barber calls "thin democracy" which refers to "instrumental, representative, liberal democracy (1984: 117)" (cited in Henderson, 1999: 8) to notions of life, meaning, freedom, voice, diversity, inclusion and participation. The plethora of terms in the literature is indicative of the struggle to elucidate the concepts of what we refer to here as 'deep' democracy.

The Coalition sought to draw from these deeper democratic concepts and meanings in addressing the educational needs of marginalized youth in a multiplicity of ways. School policies and practices which undermine student voice and agency were questioned. The Coalition agreed, as Davis states, that management and control practices which institute "predetermined and

nonnegotiable procedures” lack the “participative agency of democratic engagements” (2003: 1). Narrow views of youth success which emphasize academic achievement at the expense of the meaningful inclusion of their broader contributions, diversities and needs were seen as undermining youth voice and agency. The Coalition saw how alternative programs for marginalized youth can be (particularly) susceptible to perpetuating non-democratic practices. Lacking real democratic engagement are schools which identify youth by deficit-based labels such as “at-risk”, “drop-out” and “juvenile delinquent”. Schools which concentrate on youth behaviour modification, personal-social rehabilitation, conformity, curriculum “basics”, rote learning, skills-based approaches and job readiness programs also lack deep democratic engagement (see Schutz and Harris, 2001, Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001; McGee, 2001; Raywid, 1995). When youth become positioned as diverse learners and knowledge constructors who are given authentic voice and agency to shape their learning experience deeper notions of democracy become enacted.

Deficit-based perspectives towards youth fail to incite or empower forms of democratic and social justice educational innovation. The Coalition did not conceptualize marginalized youth “as behavior problems” or as “troubled disruptive students” nor did the Coalition attract and/or retain potential Coalition members interested in operating under these views. The Coalition also realized it was not interested in notions of 'care' and 'support' connected to 'therapy' and 'charity' orientations towards youth. These orientations emphasize 'giving aid', 'taking care of', 'offering treatment', 'possessing feelings of good will and kindness' and 'normalizing/socializing' youth. The Coalition did not view itself as 'acting on behalf of youth'; nor as developing an educational option to 'help youth out' or to 'provide a program that would heal/treat youth' based on possible 'disorders or labels'.

The Coalition felt it was a matter of fact that youth learn in different ways, have different needs, thrive in different environments, or respond differently to various approaches. There was no judgement placed on the issues that youth face, or on the youth themselves. Rather than think “How can we provide an educational option that would help 'fix' these issues/youth?”, the Coalition took the approach that youth who have complex lifeworlds require educational options which reflect the reality of their lives.

Engaging deep democracy by positioning youth as experts in their own lives

The Coalition consistently worked under the premise that “Youth have a voice, they know what works for them and what does not”. Reframed as “the experts in their own lives” rather than as mere recipients of educational goods, youth facing forms of systemic marginalization know how these inequalities shape their daily lives (both in and out of school) and what is required to break down these systemic marginalizing practices. The Coalition thereby understood that full participation in their own learning would enable youth to respond creatively, in partnership with educators and the community, to their lives as learners.

Participatory perspectives view learning as a relational process rather than as something that is given or done to students” (Daloz, 1986) thereby positioning teachers and students as collaborators in knowledge construction (see Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Bray, Lee, Smith & Yorks, 2000; Heron & Reason, 1997). A view of identity as being emergent, complex, multi-perspectual

and contextually situated contests fixed and simplistic understandings of marginalized youth (see Chase, 2005; Weedon, 1987). With youth situated as experts in their lives, learning becomes a political act “where dominant knowledge is deconstructed and new knowledge is constructed” (Berry, 1998: 45). Youth strengths, resilience, resources, agency, voice and lived knowledge, moreover, become centralized in the learning process (see Kim, 2006; Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Pasco, 2003; Fine, 1991). The Coalition sought an alternative learning environment which, to use Berry’s phrase, immerses youth “in an epistemological world...of their [own] making” rather than one which is predominately upheld by the authority of “teachers and textbooks” (1998: 42).

While alternative schools began in the 1960's as a progressive, democratic movement (Schutz and Harris, 2001; Kellmayer, 1995; Raywid, 1995), many alternative schools designed for marginalized students, (increasingly prevalent since the 1990s), have fallen short in centring themselves within participatory democratic and social justice educational discourse (McGee, 2001; Schutz and Harris, 2001; Dunbar, 1999, Raywid, 1995). Others have failed to make explicit how their programs are explicitly attempting to engage rights-based, representational and participatory democratic educational principles and practices. Educational researchers need to re-examine alternative schools for marginalized youth through the lens of these perspectives. Wotherspoon & Schissel bring to the foreground two examples of “progress made within models of schooling that adopt a broader critical framework and social justice orientation to students and their communities” (2001: 1). Referring to one of these programs for marginalized aboriginal youth, they state that the Won Ska school in Saskatchewan implements a social justice lens of schooling in the following ways:

The school also succeeds because of its particular approach to democratic decision making. Authority structures are not rigid; students decide on issues surrounding administration, curriculum, and social events. The logic is that marginalized youth...are already disenfranchised and that a responsible and just education has to invest students’ lives with the right and the ability to have an influence (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001: 334).

Easton (2005) also provides an example (though this school is not funded through the school system) of an alternative high school for marginalized youth which has been designed to “enact democracy”. Youth agency and voice, embedded in democratic principles, are enacted through “choice-making”, “mechanisms that create democratic culture”, “leadership expectations” and through the “program (curriculum, instruction, and assessment)” (Easton, 2005: 54-55). These two examples mirror the values and kinds of educational practices advocated by the Coalition.

A participatory action research study which was initiated by a Coalition member to give youth a central role and voice in the creation of an alternative curriculum for the proposed school is one example of the Coalition’s commitment to participatory democracy. This research centred youth as experts in their own lives and engaged youth as curriculum authors and leaders within the proposed alternative school initiative. Youth who were involved became researchers throughout all stages of the research, from its inception to dissemination, including presenting the curriculum vision to the Coalition. The event of sharing was a powerful moment for the Coalition. Not only did the youth experience the empowerment of their own agency and voice as leaders, but the Coalition witnessed the power of their social justice and democratic principles

being lived in practice - youth serving as educational change makers and experts in their own lives. Significantly, the Coalition adopted the curriculum vision as part of their school proposal.

Forging participatory democracy by framing education as a community issue

Grassroots community organizations are not typically seen as having “expertise” in the area of education. In many circumstances, their voice is easily lost within institutional bureaucracies; however, within the Coalition they were placed in central leadership roles. A distinction needs to be made between “community involvement in education” and the positioning of “education as a community issue”. The distinction is important to the fostering of deeper understandings and practices of democracy and social justice in education. To view “education as a community issue” means to emphasize shared ownership and to acknowledge education within a broader and more inclusive/holistic/multi-perspective conceptual frame of the community. “Community involvement in education” is a more limited arrangement wherein an educational structure considers input from the community while maintaining its own ideological lens and structural and decision-making arrangements. As learning comes to be viewed, more broadly, “as life” and pedagogy as a “complex conversation”, the boundaries separating education and the community (i.e., life) become blurred. If curriculum, for example, is the creation of “lived curriculum texts”, not just courses of study (Olson, 2000: 171) then community actors’ “experience-near” awareness of the lifeworlds of marginalized youth becomes a critical component of educational curriculum.

The Coalition framed education as a community issue because it was the community which possessed the commitment, experience, knowledge, approach and expertise to risk starting from where youth are and where they want to go; it was this vision and know-how which guided the Coalition’s efforts to create an alternative school program. The grassroots youth-serving organizations on the Coalition were a unique and pivotal voice in the Coalition. Operating from a community development perspective, these grassroots organizations engaged social justice and democratic perspectives and practices in their daily work with youth. They understood and had access to the complex lifeworlds of youth in a way that most other community actors and educators, except youth themselves, lacked. They were the ones hearing youths’ perspectives on school on a daily basis. Moreover, investing significant time and resources in fostering meaningful connections with youth, and in supporting their voice and agency, are central aspects of their work. The Coalition came to realize that what youth portray to the school community is often very different than what they are willing to reveal to grassroots community workers. Youth experienced the school exerting power over them and grassroots workers were hearing the ways in which youth were trying to negotiate their own power within this setting. For example, many youth would share with community workers that they acted out and skipped school as a mechanism to protect themselves because they were seeking to hide the reality that they don’t understand what’s happening in the classroom. These grassroots organizations were, moreover, explicitly engaged with the challenges of poverty, drugs, violence, homelessness and sexual exploitation which were the “norm” in the lives of many youth.

The Coalition choose to endorse the (often marginalized) grassroots community voice as their (democratic) leader/facilitator. This validated and honoured the community's experience and expertise, and it demonstrated the Coalition’s commitment to enacting social justice and

democracy practices. It signalled that the Coalition was willing to risk doing something different even though being led on the coalition by representatives from formal educational institutions might engender greater respect by government and other funding agencies. Indeed, the Coalition came to understand that in framing education as a community issue and in empowering leadership from within the grassroots community, social justice and democracy principles and practices became deepened and expanded.

Conclusion

How can educators and community members address the complex lifeworlds and educational needs of marginalized youth without positioning the principles and practices of democracy and social justice at the centre of these efforts? This is a question that must be addressed when developing innovative educational alternatives. In this paper we have examined how a coalition of community actors engaged in a democratic participatory process of creating both an educational context and curriculum for learning. In this innovation, youth were recognized as experts and offered the opportunity to engage in their own agency and voice in ways which are essential to their empowerment and success as learners. In promoting the full participation of relevant grassroots community groups, the Coalition discovered the significance of framing education as a community issue. The Coalition engaged in a diversity of democratic and social justice processes including rights-based, representational and participatory perspectives and practices. Alternative programs which centre youths' voice and complex lifeworlds offer innovative opportunities to engage justice and democracy. In taking up this opportunity the Coalition moved from educational reform to educational transformation.

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