Mobilizing sexual and gender minorities in mainstream lifelong learning: bolstering social learning

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In his call for education for uncompromising social transformation, U.S. adult educator and activist Robert J. Hill (2010, 2012) reminds us that social movements, including the sexual and gender minority (SGM) or lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer movements, are vital and energetic sites for lifelong learning and education for youth and adults. Moreover, he asserts that social movement activities profile lifeworld activities and real world contexts, influence political action, and create opportunities for social policy development and implementation. Hill’s perspective aligns with the idea that lifelong learning should be about learning for all and for all of life. Schuller and Watson made this idea the central theme of Learning through Life: Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning. In this 2009 record of the national inquiry into lifelong learning in the United Kingdom, these researchers came to the sorry conclusion that formal and nonformal lifelong learning and constituent adult education were not sufficiently concerned with social education, which they saw in decline in neoliberal times. This inattention to the social is worrisome, especially in relation to those whom mainstream lifelong learning fails. To counter this failure, Hill (2012) suggests that many youth and adults turn to social movement activities as spaces for informal and nonformal social learning in which linking action to the improved wellbeing of participants is a primary goal. In the spirit of Paula Allman (1999), this move away from mainstream lifelong learning and formal education for youth and adults requires a revision of institutionalized lifelong learning so it is recast as active learning that encompasses educational and cultural work for social transformation. This would help position contemporary lifelong learning as critical action that focuses on ethical and democratic learning practices, especially for learners outside the mainstream who experience marginalization and disenfranchisement as everyday norms. To engage in this work as critical action, exclusionary policies and practices in education, culture, and society have to be exposed; communication in the intersection of the moral and the political has to be enhanced; and the state of the struggle, the extent of transformation, and the need for further social and cultural action have to be monitored (Grace in press; Grace, Hill, Johnson and Lewis 2004).
In its application here, lifelong learning as critical action is intended to engender commitment to the mobilization and social inclusion of historically omitted learners, specifically SGM learners. Recalling the history of ignorance, fear, silence, symbolic violence (like derogatory name calling), and exclusion that have marked SGM experiences in mainstream lifelong learning and formal education for youth and adults (Hill and Grace 2009), it is vital that lifelong learning transition to become more ethical and inclusive social education for SGM learners. As a constituent of lifelong learning, Hill (2012) takes professionalized adult education to task for not emulating adult education as social education in its grassroots formation in social movements. Suggesting that preoccupations with theorizing and scholarship may be barriers to acting in real world contexts where ‘hands get dirty, hearts lifted up and hearts broken, and most importantly, systems challenged through direct action in solidarity [with lifeworld participants]’ (p. 10), Hill calls on academics and other professional educators to engage in activism as a core educational practice. As one answer to Hill’s call in this paper, I discuss social programming developed and offered by the Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services (iSMSS), which I established at the University of Alberta in 2008. Professors and graduate and undergraduate students get their hands dirty by engaging in research-informed, community-based social learning initiatives that advocate for sexual and gender minorities, especially vulnerable children and youth. Two of our social programs—Camp fyrefly and the Family Resilience Project—are discussed here. To work in these programs that mobilize participants to be, become, and belong, academics and students take on roles as advocates, actors, and agents for change. Readers can draw on dynamics driving these programs to inform educational and cultural work that mobilizes sexual and gender minorities, their families, and their allies to transgress adversity induced by heterosexism, sexism, genderism, and homo/bi/transphobia; to set realistic goals and engage in problem solving as part of surviving, thriving, and acting in life, learning, and work contexts; and to build supportive, collaborative relationships.

**Shaping Academics as Social Activists and Cultural Workers**

Academics familiar with contemporary lifelong learning discourse know that supranational organizations including the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) work strategically, as entities and in dynamic interactions with member states, to position lifelong learning within ‘particular values, meanings and norms about the world that become accepted truths’ (Milana 2012, p. 106). One such truth is lifelong learning is vital to advance economies. In the wake of the great economic debacle of 2008 that has reduced the promise of neoliberalism to perceptibly mythical status (Grace in press), it is time to revisit and revise the values, meanings, and norms that position lifelong learning and determine its value. In academe, what constitutes meaningful lifelong learning in social terms in our contemporary change culture of crisis and challenge is a topic worth extensive critical deliberation. Engaging in lifelong learning for social purposes where, as noted, Hill calls on us to get our hands dirty should be a concomitant activity. Here we
might move forward by looking back and analyzing trends shaping lifelong learning as a neoliberal fabrication since neoliberalism’s emergence in the late 1970s (Harvey 2005). One trend has been a focus on learner agency in individualistic terms (Milana 2012). This has been accompanied by a move from emancipation to empowerment in framing educational goals: a focus on emancipation, which found expression in Faure’s 1972 report for UNESCO entitled Learning to Be: The World of Education Today and Tomorrow, is now replaced by a focus on empowerment, as conceptualized within a narrow focus on individuals, their capacity to learn and work and contribute to society as human capital, and their responsibility to be self-directed in learning to enhance this capacity amid the changes, dislocation, and instability wrought by marketization and globalization (Wildemeersch and Salling Olesen 2012). This conceptualization of empowerment was evident in the OECD’s 1996 report entitled Lifelong Learning for All (Wildemeersch and Salling Olesen 2012). In their reflection on moving forward, Wildemeersch and Salling Olesen (2012) assert that ideas of learning as lifelong and lifewide can create opportunities to engage learning and education as creative experimentation that revitalizes concern with public matters and public engagement. They issue this call:

[Create spaces] where education and learning are again connected to societal issues, under the inspiration of old and new values such as democracy, social justice, sustainability, freedom, responsibility, equality and solidarity. (p. 101)

Through its intervention and outreach programming, the Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services, University of Alberta works to create these spaces by keeping research in a dynamic and mutually informative relationship with educational and community outreach that makes life better now for sexual and gender minorities, especially vulnerable and struggling youth (12 to 19 year olds) and young adults (20 to 29 year olds). For the past several years, we have been investigating how SGM youth move from an at-risk categorization to become more resilient and at promise as they build the personal, social, spiritual, and environmental assets needed to survive, thrive, and improve their wellbeing, their self and social knowledge, and their comprehensive health (Grace 2013). We apply research findings to our social programming to help SGM youth and young adults to develop senses of self-worth and hope; a sense of belongingness and dependable attachments; and strategies for enhancing safety and security in their everyday lives.

Camp fYrefly: fostering Youth, resilience, energy, fun, leadership, yeah!

In 2004 Kristopher Wells and I co-founded Camp fYrefly, which is a summer leadership camp for SGM youth and young adults. Camp fYrefly is the largest leadership camp of its kind in Canada, with sites in Alberta and Saskatchewan and plans to expand to other Canadian locations. Its affiliation with a major research university ensures that the camp operates using research-informed programming and inclusive pedagogical principles to focus on the individual development, socialization, and growth into
resilience of SGM participants. The camp has evolved into a four-day volunteer-driven, residential-style summer leadership retreat where SGM youth can thrive (Grace and Wells 2007a). SGM youth came up with the camp’s name, with the acronym fYrefly standing for fostering Youth, resilience, energy, fun, leadership, yeah! In researching fireflies, youth learned that these insects are ubiquitous and produce their own light energy. Building on this metaphor, Camp fYrefly is a counterspace where SGM youth can learn about coming out, coming to terms, and growing into resilience in the face of the traumas they experience as consequences of heterosexism, sexism, genderism, and homo/bi/transphobia (Grace and Wells 2007b). Camp fYrefly focuses on building and nurturing SGM youth’s leadership potential and personal resilience in order to help them become agents for positive social change in their schools, families, and communities. Five themes comprise the framework that guides the development and delivery of the Camp fYrefly program:

• **Creating a Socially Just and Inclusive Community:** As citizens, we all have a social responsibility to foster a sense of community spirit and to take care of one another (Lindeman 1926/1961). Creating a community that is inclusive, welcoming, and harmonious is crucial to ensure that everyone is connected, included, and accorded respect and dignity regardless of their differences. At Camp fYrefly, we build a community that demonstrates acceptance, accommodation, inclusivity, and respect through engagement with individuals from different ethnocultural backgrounds, faiths, beliefs, abilities, ages, socioeconomic backgrounds, sexualities, and genders. Programming developed around this theme functions to help SGM youth to build awareness and understanding of democratic and inclusive citizenship in innovative ways that address barriers to full participation in our society.

• **Building Resiliency and Youth Leadership Capacity:** Engaging SGM youth in learning how to make significant contributions to their own lives and to their schools, families, and communities helps to build a strong, ethical, and just community for tomorrow (Grace and Wells 2007a, 2007b). By helping them to develop a resilient mindset, SGM youth can make informed and healthy decisions about the issues and challenges that impact their lives and social interactions. Programming developed around this theme focuses on social and cultural learning about human and civil rights, advocacy, media awareness, public speaking, peer-to-peer mentoring, sex and gender stereotyping, healthy living, protective factors, harm reduction, and leadership skill development.

• **Helping Youth to Know Their Rights as a Basis for Empowering Them to Address Bullying, Harassment, and Hate Incidents/Crimes:** Knowing one’s rights as persons and citizens comes with concomitant responsibility to advocate for others to advance a socially just society (Grace 2007). Helping SGM youth to feel supported and empowered to address discrimination, bullying,
harassment, sexual harassment, and hate incidents/hate crimes is key to change processes focused on nurturing the self as well as assisting schools, families, and communities. Programming developed around this theme focuses on personal wellbeing, social activism, anti-oppression, inclusive cultural work, healthy decision-making, safety, and coalition building.

- **Learning Through Art, Music, Writing, Visual and Performing Arts, and Games:** The arts have the power to open up both the heart and mind (Grace and Wells 2007a). At camp, SGM youth learn about themselves and others through creative exploration and expression. This helps them to develop new forms of communication, understanding, and community building. Programming developed around these themes often uses arts-informed pedagogy whereby youth engage in song writing, improvisation, dance, visual arts, personal journaling, movement, poetry, photography, and learning leadership skills through games.

- **Self and Social Development:** In our complex and rapidly changing world, SGM youth often struggle to find support, purpose, and a sense of space and place. Finding access to non-judgmental information about the issues that impact their lives is critical to self and social development (Grace 2013). Programming developed around this theme focuses on personal development, personal wellness, self- and social-esteem, healthy minds and healthy bodies, spirituality, family (as they construct it), and overcoming internalized homophobia and transphobia.

**The Family Resilience Project**

While more community-based programs and services are now available in Edmonton, Alberta to provide direct support to SGM youth, prior to the creation of the Family Resilience Project, there were no specialized or dedicated resources to support their families (as they construct them). When children come out as SGM individuals, families struggle to find existing resources and available professional supports, with access often limited by socioeconomic status. Parents or other primary caregivers need peer support groups for meeting others who can relate to their experiences (Grace 2013). In addition to a dearth of supports for families, Edmonton also lacked specialized community-based supports to meet the complex needs of gender minority (transgender or gender nonconforming) youth. Thus iSMSS created the Family Resilience Project, which utilizes a holistic model to offer integrated supports and services to SGM youth and their families. Those participating get to learn about research outcomes, resilience factors, and helpful behaviours that specifically support SGM children and their comprehensive health, happiness, and wellbeing. At iSMSS, we work in the intersection of relational differences, applying research on resilience to assist SGM youth who are also, for example, Aboriginal youth or youth with ethnocultural differences. Three emphases undergird the framework that guides the development and delivery of the
Family Resilience Project, which focuses on networking and providing supports across:

- **Program and Community Development**: Here the project aims to build the capacity of community agencies and neighbourhood centres to identify and meet the needs of SGM youth, their siblings, and their families as an integrated unit that is coming to terms, albeit from different vantage points, with a non-heterosexual identity and/or a nonconforming gender identity. iSMSS provides programming and resources to help these agencies and centres to identify and become aware of 1) protective factors for SGM youth, 2) positive caregiving skills for significant adults, and 3) the assets that include having accepting families, which help youth to grow into resilience. Within this work, iSMSS also focuses on building public/community awareness, utilizing volunteers to provide peer support, developing strategies for community advocacy, and providing evidence-based information and referral services.

- **Education and Skill Building for Families**: Here the project assists family members to learn about SGM differences as a basis for accommodating them. As needed, access is provided to short-term professional counselling that assists vulnerable SGM youth and their families to strengthen their coping skills, build personal and familial resilience, and develop healthy relationships and positive life choices. The coming out process represents one of the most significant developmental periods in the life of an SGM individual. Since SGM people comprise a heterogeneous population, each person has particular needs regarding their individual development and socialization. When youth are mediating sexual and gender differences, they may also be dealing with bullying, symbolic and physical violence, relationship abuse, peer and familial alienation, and self-harm. Thus short-term professional supports are often critical in helping these youth and their families navigate turbulent coming-out and coming-to-terms processes. Youth from different ethnocultural backgrounds may also need support to help them cope with the trauma of unaccepting traditional cultures that ignore or reject sexual and gender differences. Experiences of community alienation can exacerbate youth risk taking. To help address these issues, the Family Resilience Project helps parents, other primary caregivers, and siblings to

  - Understand and appreciate an SGM identity as unique;
  - Develop positive strategies to affirm and support the SGM individual’s authentic self and sense of self worth;
  - Work through their feelings (the good, the bad, and the ugly) in a safe, non-judgmental, and supportive space so the SGM person is not left with the burden of trying to educate or counsel their families;
  - Learn how to respond to the SGM individual in affirmative ways that promote acceptance and safety;
Develop proactive strategies for dealing with family members, faith communities, teachers, schools, and the community;

Access appropriate evidence-based information about sexual health, gender health, sexual identity, and gender identity; and

Make connections with appropriate comprehensive health (including mental health and sexual health) professionals and community agencies, as needed (Ehrensaft 2011; Ryan 2010).

Peer-Based Supports for Parents and Youth: Here the project focuses on the development of volunteer and peer-based support groups for 1) parents, guardians, and caregivers of SGM youth (e.g., PFLAG [Parents, Friends, and Families of Lesbians and Gays] support group); and 2) gender minority youth (e.g., youth drop-in spaces focused on the specialized needs of transgender and gender nonconforming youth). The PFLAG group is designed to enhance caring adult/SGM child relationships through peer discussion groups and the promotion of effective/supportive skills for parents, other caring adults, and families. Key referrals for these parent and peer support groups come from existing community agencies and specialized healthcare programs including the Gender Clinic at the local Grey Nuns Hospital. Edmonton Public Schools also makes programming referrals in keeping with their Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity policy. Delivery of these peer support groups emphasizes volunteerism and interagency collaboration in creating a sustainable community support system for SGM youth and their parents and families in Edmonton.

Concluding Perspective: Engaging in Critically Progressive Education

Hill (2012) asserts that academics have the potential to engage in problem solving and interventions that abet cultural change for social transformation. At iSMSS, we work to be proactive change agents who use our research to propel inclusive, ethical, and engaged practices that make the world better NOW for SGM children and youth and their families. At its heart, this work, which has applicability for working with multivariate vulnerable populations, is an engagement in critically progressive social education that focuses on 1) social interaction and learner agency in an emancipatory context and 2) social learning and education for the public good (Grace 2012). In this reflexive process of education, learning is linked to critical action as participants learn to address ignorance and absences so they can enhance everyday life in individual and familial contexts. The goal here is to locate lifelong learning as a collective endeavour where problem solving and action in the real world are summative of the contributions of all participants, from child to significant adult with assistance from the university-community network. This locates lifelong learning as critical action whereby advocacy and agency nurture the social and engender hope and possibility for continuing social advancement. Here the end goal is a social democracy with no inside/outside for sexual
and gender minorities, just space and place for all. This is cultural work for social transformation as something real and dynamic.

References
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