

Do More of What Makes You Awesome:
Strength-based Micro-Schools for Twice-Exceptional Children

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A Capstone

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Abstract

This capstone endeavors to answer the question, “How might a book on micro-schools inspire experienced educators wishing to invest in equitable education models to open micro-schools that serve twice-exceptional children using a strength-based approach in their respective regions?” At this time, private and/or independent school and other learning environments designed for twice-exceptional children are priced above what most families can afford, if they exist in their region at all. An awareness and understanding of twice-exceptional children is emerging and gaining speed quickly. However, appropriate and accessible services designed for these children remain scarce. Micro-schools are an important aspect to solving equity issues that plague the current educational paradigm. They are accessible by design, and agile in their ability to provide targeted, specialized services to families with twice-exceptional children. The standard of education found to be most effective for twice-exceptional students is rooted in strength-based, humanistic pedagogy. In her seminal book, *To Be Gifted and Learning Disabled* (Baum, et. al. 2017) (in other words, twice-exceptional), Dr. Susan Baum outlines five characteristics essential to a learning environment designed for twice-exceptional children. Those are; a psychologically safe environment, flexible timelines for academic growth, allowances for asynchronous development, the opportunity to forge positive relationships, and incorporation of a strength-based, talent focused philosophy. (Baum, et. al., 2017) The purpose of this capstone project was to illustrate the ways in which micro-schools are inherently positioned to offer twice-exceptional students access to the equitable, pedagogically sound, and loving learning environment they deserve. strength-based, talent-development philosophies are the driving theoretical framework for this capstone. (Baum, et. al., 2014) It is the goal of this

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capstone project to inspire experienced educators wishing to invest in equitable education models to open micro-schools to serve twice-exceptional children in their respective regions.

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Introduction

In 2008 I left an established and successful, but ultimately unfulfilling career as a chemist. A period of serious self reflection caused me to realize that I was meant for more altruistic work in service of others that utilized my deep well of creativity. I quickly found myself working as a science teacher at a very small, progressive micro-school for twice-exceptional children and immediately fell in love with a population of people and a pedagogy of teaching that I remain faithful to, to this day.

Few people intentionally put themselves on the path to teach twice-exceptional children. Teaching programs rarely cover the reality of what twice-exceptional children need, which turns out to be quite a bit different than what is provided to the majority of school aged children. Teaching highly sensitive, quirky, socially challenged children is a profession many people are thrust into by circumstance. I was pushed into alternative education for twice-exceptional children by revelations about my own educational experience, and my dissatisfaction with the life I had built as a result.

Throughout my career as a chemist, I was met with unnecessary competitiveness, other people's power issues, and a deep disregard for interpersonal connection. Through gentle probing of my science colleagues, I learned that the people contributing to our unhealthy workplace had learned to approach their work this way in school. I found this environment stifled innovation and creativity— two of my most cherished values. So I quit.

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I had always been pretty good with kids. Upon moving to the Bay Area, I made friends with a young lady who worked as a nanny while she studied for her master's degree. She did quite well and seemed to have a lot of fun. In desperate need of fun and a job, I put an ad online. In a short matter of time, it became known that if you had clever children who liked science and art, I was the nanny to hire.

One family I worked for homeschooled their three girls. These spirited young ladies would often attend group classes at a small progressive school for twice-exceptional children. The moment I heard of the school I was brimming with questions. What is a progressive school? What does it mean to be twice-exceptional? The mother of the three girls casually mentioned that I should visit the school and see if they would like me to lead some chemistry classes. I was knocking on their door the next day.

I facilitated the class of younger children as they learned independently and as a group. I taught chemistry and general science to the rest of the school. I developed a curriculum that was completely project-based, with full choice given to the students. They loved it. It was then I knew that I was doing my life's work. Many people remarked that I seem to have an intuitive sense of how an alternative program should work. Honestly, I was just teaching the way I wished I had been taught. I was by no means perfect at it. But I cared, I researched, and I tried.

Unfortunately, after teaching there for two years, the school closed, but I was quickly offered the position of lead educator at another program. While that program was being organized, I taught out of a living room and a garage. It was common to joke about how I was one step away from teaching in a van down by the river. This took place over a year and it was then that I realized the heart of these schools was not a fancy facility or access to amazing

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technology, though those things are fun and help meet needs for comfort and ease, and I certainly would not turn them down. No, the heart of these programs is the families, the students, and the teachers all coming together to learn and play. Soon, my students felt pride in their efforts and eagerly suggested cool new things they wanted to learn. Best of all, they went home and told their parents, “I like school!” I began to understand that working in partnership with children, treating them with respect, and doing my best to make sure their needs were met created a sturdy foundation for learning to occur.

Once the next program was running, I was immediately confronted with the challenge of keeping the school’s doors open, which included navigating complicated relationships and working to build and maintain enrollment—all while teaching essentially solo and trying to meet the educational needs of a diverse and intense population of families. I began to understand what it meant to run a school as a business and the deep complexities of interdependence that come along with that. Under this great strain, I held on as tight as I could to my teaching philosophies and prayed that something would give. Three years later, it did. The program ended, and I was left once again to find a new venue for my mission.

The program took such a toll on me that I considered giving up teaching and taking up waitressing for a living. Thankfully, my waitressing fantasies were quickly squashed. I would have hated missing out on what came next. A group of families I had previously worked with recruited me, desperately wanting to create an appropriate learning environment for their children. Once again, innovation was born out of necessity. Enter One Room Micro-School for Twice Exceptional Students. For the next two years, this program would be my baby. The buck stopped with me. I named the program One Room out of my love of the idea of a one-room schoolhouse (a familial and intimate place to learn, but without the corporal punishment and

rote memorization, of course).

We started in a donated space in the upstairs room of a musical theater and dance school for children, a business owned by one of my student's parents. I will be forever grateful to the families, as they pushed me professionally to become a better teacher, businesswoman, and overall person. During this time, I began to take serious ownership of my philosophies and methods. A friend created a website for me, and I began blogging about my work. I felt stronger in my boots than ever before. My blogging led to an invitation to write a book about my teaching philosophies and micro-school building practices. My book eventually led to the award of a fellowship and grant that allowed me to open Sunnyside Micro-School for Twice-exceptional children. Receiving the fellowship not only provided me with the cash I needed to build a micro-school rooted in all of my prior experience and reflection, it also infused me with the confidence to claim that micro-schools are a relevant and very necessary piece of the puzzle when figuring out how to serve twice-exceptional children.

Where I Am Now

Over the years, I have learned a lot about educating, administering, and working with families. Alongside my students, I learned who I am, what motivates me, and what I am capable of. I am thrilled by the chance to share all of this and more in my capstone project for Bridges Graduate School of Cognitive Diversity.

As it stands, school and other learning environments designed for twice-exceptional children are priced above what most families can afford, if they exist in their region at all. An awareness and understanding of twice-exceptional children is emerging and gaining speed quickly. However, appropriate and accessible services designed for these children remain scarce.

Families with twice-exceptional children need access to viable schools and other learning environments designed with their unique constellation of needs in mind. These learning environments must be strength-based, and talent focused if they are to be in alignment with current research and best practices for serving twice-exceptional children.

Micro-schools are an important aspect to solving this problem. They are accessible by design, and agile in their ability to provide targeted, specialized services to families with twice-exceptional children. With this capstone project, it is my hope to inspire experienced educators wishing to invest in equitable education models to open micro-schools to serve twice-exceptional children in their respective regions.

The proliferation of micro-schools, designed in alignment with the most current research and best practices in the delivery of education to twice-exceptional children, will benefit the cognitive diversity movement in general. Specifically, it will benefit the families of twice-exceptional children by providing a caring environment that allows the child to thrive in accordance with their strengths and talents. Lastly, it will benefit all the well-meaning but burnt out educators looking for a way back to the profession they love without the oppressive system most teachers are forced to exist within. Freedom. Learning. Love. Doesn't that sound great and exactly like what education needs most?

Definition of Terms

Micro-Schools: A learning environment serving 150 people or less, designed to deliver a specialized education to a specific group of learners.

Twice-exceptional: A person with both advanced cognitive abilities, i.e., gifted and lagging skills, in the form of a learning, social, or attentional disability.

Equity: The provision of personalized resources needed for all individuals to reach common goals. In other words, the goals and expectations are the same for all students, but the supports needed to achieve those goals depends on the students' needs. (Latta, 2019)

Review of Related Literature

This section will begin with a discussion of micro-schools; what they are and how they are designed to meet a wide range of educational needs. Next, there is a review of the most current research and critique on micro-schools, equity in education, and cognitive diversity.

Micro-schools

A micro-school is simply a small learning environment that delivers a specialized education to a distinct group of students. Sometimes these programs have flexible schedules and each family chooses to attend for three, four, or five days per week. Micro-schools are designed to run lean with very little overhead and expenditures. They provide only the opportunities, services, and materials that truly contribute to a child's education. Micro-schools are the minimalist movement in education — all protein, no fat. Micro-school designers focus on the process, valuing quality and individuality in their methods. Within the program's pedagogy there is typically a heavy emphasis on connection with oneself, others, and the world. (Rivera, 2019)

Micro-schools typically exist beyond public and charter schools. They are considered independent, alternative schools or learning programs. While the existence of alternative schools or programs is not a new phenomenon; the specific constellation of parameters that define a

micro-school is not well known. The novel design of a micro-school means that there is little to no research related to their equity, effectiveness, scalability, or accessibility. There are slightly more studies on alternative schools and programs in general that speak to these issues but further research is needed to understand how that research would intersect with micro-schools specifically. In one study, Kim and Taylor (2008) reported on student perceptions of alternative schools and found, "... that the school provided a caring environment for students and gained their trust." (Kim & Taylor, 2008). However, the same study showed a contradiction between the positive social experience and the inability to affect cycles of inequity found throughout conventional education.

Ultimately, a multidimensional state of disequilibrium permeated the school environment. One facet represented a state of caring that existed between students, teachers, and administrators. Another facet disclosed an authoritarian and hegemonic bureaucracy, which prevented the school from providing an education beneficial to the students. (Kim & Taylor, 2008)

The independent nature of a micro-school can act as a boundary between the student's educational, social, and emotional needs and the bureaucratic nature of conventional, public education models. This boundary protects the alternative program's ability to meet student's needs for an equitable and effective learning experience.

However, the independent nature of a micro-school also calls into question issues about the model's scalability and accessibility. The bespoke nature of each micro-school makes standardization challenging. It is thought that standardization is necessary to scale education models; it's also thought to be necessary for keeping tuition and fees accessible. As of now, it is unknown whether micro-schools can serve all children, everywhere. Given that even our free

public, and charter schools do not serve all children, everywhere; it would seem that a robust educational system with multiple models is necessary. Justin Cohen (2017) notes,

Then there is the question of cost. In order to ensure they have the freedom to innovate, micro-schools are private. While their fees are often lower than other private and parochial schools in their communities, they are not free, unlike charter and public schools, and financial assistance is not widely available, unlike traditional private schools. While some offer part-time enrichment programs, often as a supplement to home-schooling experiences, for the most part, the price of attending a micro-school means they attract financially secure families who are either looking for a bespoke, innovative educational choice for their child or a less-costly alternative to traditional private school... Other micro-schools have explored partnerships with traditional public schools, charters, and university sponsors. And policymakers see education savings accounts or vouchers as potential mechanisms for expansion in low-income communities. (Cohen, 2017)

Overall, the micro-school model is a compelling idea for serving those students that are most vulnerable due to their learning, social, and emotional profiles. Most specifically for children that need a highly individualized curriculum to succeed due to learning disabilities. In her dissertation profile of The Monarch School, a micro-school for children with neurological differences, Christine Clark (2011) notes that the strength-based, talent-development model used by the micro-school is essential to their student's success. She shares,

Talent development is marked by peak experiences. Peak experiences are valuable moments when an individual experiences insight and the feeling that something important has happened. Usually the individual loses track of time and awareness of his

or her self. The moments may be characterized by a sense of intense joy and a many-sided awareness of the object or idea which brought on the given peak experience. A peak experience is a self-validating moment which serves as an end in itself. Usually the individual experiences a feeling of integrated wholeness. Positive attributes include an increased sense of creativity, functioning, and a feeling of being closer to actualizing individual human potential. Using peak experiences in the classroom envelops the humanistic philosophy of education in which the student experiences cognitive and personal growth simultaneously. In an open educational setting which is flexible for students to have peak experiences, excitement and enthusiasm will be heightened in the classroom. Such is the case in The Monarch School. Allowing for peak experiences will give substance and direction to students, and will serve as personal and professional motivators throughout their lives. (Clark, 2011)

Equity

At its core, the impetus of educational equity is concerned with ensuring that each student has access to an education that serves them academically, socially, and emotionally. The many arms of equity in education extend and often intersect into issues such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, cognitive diversity. The issue of cognitive diversity is particularly salient as it's an issue that affects all other identities equally and yet is often overlooked in conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion. Margaret McLuaghlin (2010) explains how individualization is essential to equity for students with disabilities ,

Individualization is central to the concept of equality of opportunity in all

disability policies ... The goal requires that each person with a disability be considered in terms of his or her strengths and needs. The latter includes considerations for accommodations, supports, and services. Adherence to the goal requires that educational programs and policies be flexible enough to respond to individual differences and not be based solely on categories, labels, preconceptions, or biases. As interpreted in IDEA, the concept of individualization is found in the core entitlement to a FAPE, which is operationalized through the individualized education program (IEP). (McLaughlin, 2010)

However, the intersection between cognitive diversity and equity in education is not solely focused on students with learning disabilities. It also affects students with advanced cognitive and creative abilities, students commonly known as gifted.

For decades, Black, Hispanic, and low-income students have limited, if any, access to these programs and, therefore, the programs have operated in inequitable ways by keeping entire groups of students out of their specialized classrooms—denying them needed educational opportunities. The underrepresentation of students of color and those from economically insecure backgrounds is not new to GATE as a field. Before and after Martin D. Jenkins's study of Black giftedness in 1936, there has been a deaf ear among some professionals to the possibility that Black children could be gifted and talented. For more than half a century, scholars and advocates (the co-authors, Alexinia Baldwin, Mary Frasier, Tarek Grantham, Ernesto Bernal, Jaime Castellano, and Fred Bonner, to name a few) have worked feverishly to correct these conditions, including ideologically racist ideologies, while insisting that all public programming for GATE be accessible to students from all racial, ethnic, linguistic, and economic backgrounds. The data on

underrepresentation of Black and Other minority students in GATE programs are as old as the field's inception. (Ford et al., 2021)

Viable frameworks and suggestions on how to increase equity in education abound in the work and writings of Dr. Ghody E. Muhammad, Dr. Donna Y. Ford, and Dr. Joy Lawson Davis yet their ideas languish. In *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy* Muhammad (2020) describes her work thusly,

The framework offered here allows for a practical model based on culturally relevant and responsive theories of education. Further, the model and content of this book puts critical theory, sociocultural theory, and cognitive theories collectively into a practical model for teaching and learning—one that helps youth develop both personally and academically. (Muhammad, 2020)

Furthermore, Ford, Davis and colleagues have collaborated on multiple publications calling for increased equity in education for gifted and Black and other culturally diverse students. In 2018 they released their Culturally Responsive Bill of Rights for Gifted Students of Color. In it, there is a list of non-negotiables required for these students if they are to thrive academically. The list spans every corner of education policy from identification to parent education. On the issues of accessibility, the demand is clear, “The right to an administrative structure that seeks funding for gifted programs and services in all federally funded programs—particularly Title I, II, III, and IV” (Ford et. al. 2018)

Cognitive Diversity

This capstone project was concerned with the intersection of equity and cognitive diversity as it pertains to twice-exceptional students. I specialize in working with twice-exceptional children, or children with both advanced cognitive and creative abilities as well as lagging skills. These remarkable children are neurologically developing asynchronously. Baldwin et. al (2015) characterizes them thusly,

The term twice exceptional was coined to describe students who have a disability and who also have characteristics and traits associated with giftedness. These students may appear to be capable and bright but do not demonstrate that ability when asked to produce work in the classroom. Recognizing these students may be challenging, as the disability may overshadow the gift, the gift may mask the effect of the disability, or both remedial and advanced learning needs may go completely unnoticed. (Baldwin et. al 2015)

Providing an appropriate and accessible education is particularly challenging given the highly standardized, conventional public school model. School, in its current iteration, serves a slice of students very well and many others hardly at all. Those others typically belong to marginalized and underserved populations. For the purposes of this review I have focused mainly on Black and other children of color who are also twice-exceptional as well as their white counterparts. The conventional public school model fails nearly all twice-exceptional students. It fails twice-exceptional Black and children of color two times over. Dr. Renee Mayes (2016) shares more on the intersection of race and disability, “Generally speaking, African American students in special education tend to face strenuous personal and social issues in schools related to their race. Having a disability sometimes compounds the challenges that they already endure in their schooling.” (Mayes & Moore, 2016) For many African American students, being placed in special education involves not only understanding what their own disability means but also

confronting stigma associated with having a disability. When the problem of equity in education for twice-exceptional Black and children of color is solved - all twice-exceptional students will benefit.

Dr. Joy Lawson Davis, pioneer in the field of gifted education and known for highlighting the need for increased equity in gifted education also discusses twice-exceptional Black and children of color, uses the term 3e in her writing when discussing these remarkable children. In her paper, *Being 3e, A New Look at Culturally Diverse Gifted Learners with Exceptional Conditions*, Davis shares (2018), “The 3e label signifies three exceptional conditions: being culturally diverse members of a socially oppressed group); being gifted or having high potential, and simultaneously being LD or having another disabling condition (such as dyslexia).” (Davis & Robinson, 2018)

The standard of education found to be most effective for twice-exceptional students is rooted in strength-based, humanistic pedagogy. In her seminal book, *To Be Gifted and Learning Disabled* (Baum, et. al. 2017) (in other words, twice-exceptional), Dr. Susan Baum outlines five characteristics essential to a learning environment designed for twice-exceptional children. Those are; a psychologically safe environment, flexible timelines for academic growth, allowances for asynchronous development, the opportunity to forge positive relationships, and incorporation of a strength-based, talent focused philosophy. (Baum, et. al., 2017)

The purpose of this capstone project was to illustrate the ways in which micro-schools are inherently positioned to offer twice-exceptional students access to the equitable, pedagogically sound, and loving learning environment they deserve. I relied heavily on strength-based,

talent-development philosophies as the driving theoretical framework for this capstone. (Baum, et. al., 2014)

Methodology

The goal of this project was to deliver a comprehensive, evidence based book about the best practices to use when designing and launching micro-schools for twice-exceptional children. The target audience for this book is educators or those with experience in education who are also entrepreneurially minded. They are most likely unhappy with the current educational paradigm and are inspired to create something that will deliver an educational experience that serves children in alignment with best practices. An experience that cuts through the bureaucracy, red tape, and inefficiency found in conventional school and gets right to serving each child's highest and best interests.

There is a first edition of this book out in the world, published by GHF Press in 2016. GHF Press has agreed to publish the second edition. The purpose of this capstone was to write a very polished draft of this book, then work with their editor to polish it enough for publication. They were not involved with this capstone project, but their press is the ultimate destination for the book.

This original outline of this book consisted of six chapters total with a reference section. After the proposal for this capstone was approved I thought it reasonable to write two chapters a month, beginning February 2022 and ending April 2022. This left most of May and June for revisions. It was my hope that my capstone advisor would act as a first-reader and provide a first round of edits for each chapter as they were finished to provide feedback on both content and organization. Below is a chapter outline along with a short synopsis of what *I thought* would be included in each chapter when I sought approval for my caption proposal.

Chapter One: Who is this Book For?

This chapter will explain who this book is for with regard to their life experience, their strengths and interests, as well as their support system. Micro-school design and administration requires a certain type of person, that person must be strong in systems thinking, well organized, and most of all passionate about education.

Chapter Two: An Overview of the History of Alternative Education

This chapter will offer an overview of the ground covered by prior alternative education movements primarily in the United States. This history will contextualize the micro-school movement within the current education milieu.

Chapter Three: Why Micro-schools for Twice-exceptional Children?

This chapter details the pedagogical framework necessary to design a micro-school for twice-exceptional children. Namely, it will focus on strength-based approaches and talent development within the context of the unique constellation of social and emotional concerns that twice-exceptional children grapple with everyday.

Chapter Four: On Equity, Giftedness, and Special Education

Micro-schools are uniquely positioned to solve equity issues related to the conventional school system's treatment of both gifted children and learning disabled children. This chapter discusses these issues from a research-based perspective and offers solutions inherent in the micro-schools design.

Chapter Five: The Sunnyside Story

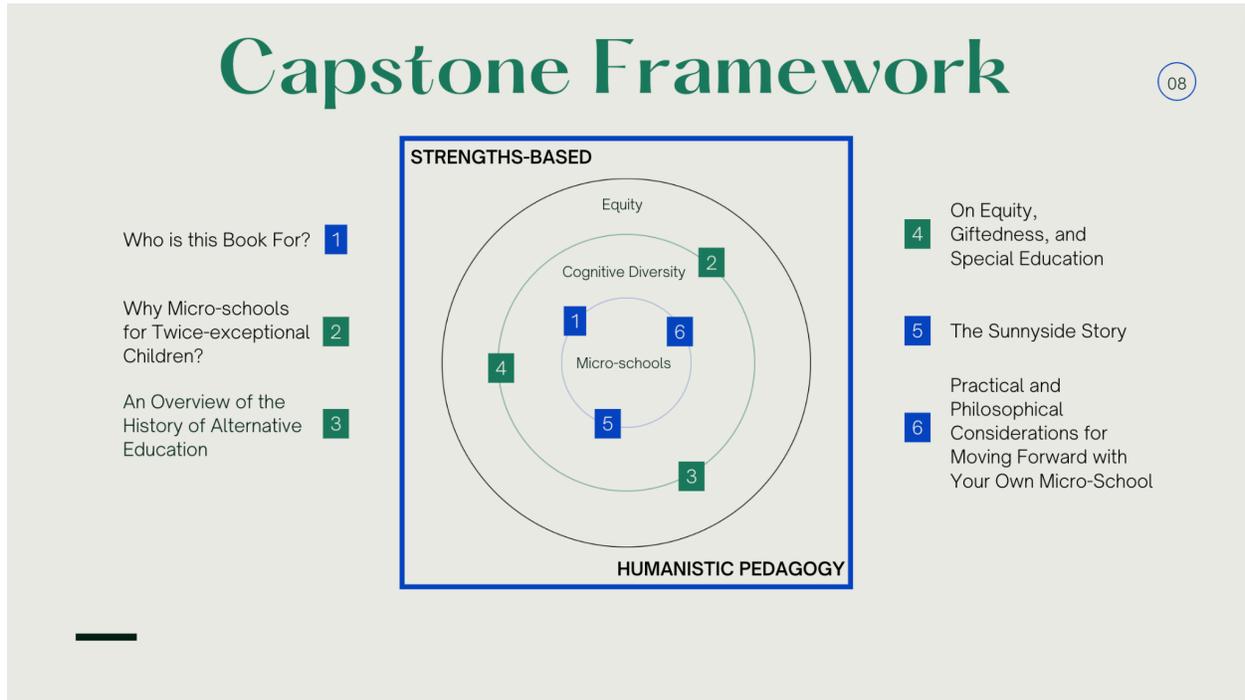
This chapter will give details about my own experience owning and operating a micro-school for twice-exceptional children. I will share lessons I've learned along the way through anonymous storytelling and frank advice giving.

Chapter Six: Practical and Philosophical Considerations for Moving Forward with Your Own Micro-School

In this chapter, I will share practical considerations for starting a micro-school. Such as funding, the pros and cons of private versus non-profit entities, contracts, etc. Additionally there will be philosophical information on management, leadership, and building community.

Below is a graphic I designed that illustrates the interconnectedness between the thematic analysis of my capstone project, the theoretical framework I intended to rely on as a guide, and my chapter outline. As my project took shape, I referred back to this visual aid as a means to ensure that my project remained focused and relevant. Each concentric circle acts as a sort of Matryoshka nesting doll and signifies an aspect of my theoretical framework; micro-schools exist within the domain of cognitive diversity and cognitive diversity exists within the greater domain of equity. The squares are aspects of both my research, my chapter outline, and my theoretical framework. Some of the boxes are placed on the boundary between each circle, denoting the interconnected nature of the various aspects of my capstone.

Figure 1



Findings, Analysis, and Synthesis

At the capstone proposal meeting, the committee suggested that I format the chapter outline of my book to speak more to my passion and enthusiasm for micro-schools, strength-based education, and twice-exceptional children. The concern was that my original chapter outline was too dry and formal for the purposes of my book. I welcomed this feedback and was relieved that my personality was welcome in my academic work. Holding the tension between an academic tone and a conversational tone was difficult. In the end, I think I achieved the correct balance between the two.

It is well known that story-telling is the best writing strategy to capture and hold a reader's attention. Early on in my process I sketched out an avatar family, the Bridgers, made up of various characteristics of past families that had enrolled in the various micro-schools I had led. Throughout the book I refer to the Bridgers, specifically their twice-exceptional, autistic, ten-year old daughter “Joey”, her mom “Rose”, as well as her father (who shares Joey’s autism diagnosis), and her grandmother, a retired public school teacher. I connect each aspect of micro-school design, including the humanistic, strength-based theoretical framework I relied on to guide the structure of the book to Joey’s story. I also share plenty of my personal experience, opinions, and conclusions about designing, launching, and leading micro-schools for twice-exceptional children for the last fifteen years.

Below is a chapter outline with a short summary of what is included in each chapter. I do believe that this revised organization imparts my passion and enthusiasm for my capstone project.

Preface

This chapter serves to speak directly to the audience of this book, entrepreneurial minded and experienced educators. The field of education and the profession of teaching is in crisis. The National Education Association, the largest teachers union in America, polled three million American teachers in January 2022. They found that, “More than half (55%) of members plan to leave education sooner than planned because of the pandemic...” (Jotkoff, 2022). In the survey, teachers shared that everything from poor ventilation in their physical classrooms to staffing shortages as the reason why. More and more teachers are feeling physically unsafe in the

classroom while also bearing the weight of increased responsibility on top of an already full workload.

I also take a moment to orient the reader to some of the terminology used throughout the book and share a bit about my place within the current educational milieu.

Chapter One

strength-based, Humanistic Pedagogy

In this chapter I make a multi-perspective argument for strength based, humanistic pedagogy as the best strategy for serving twice-exceptional children. I touch on the dubious history of education research, and introduce Joey. Joey is the avatar child I created to make the ideas and opinions shared throughout the book come to life. I begin to share how one might incorporate strength-based, humanistic ideals by also introducing Sunnyside Micro-School. I opened Sunnyside Micro-School in the fall of 2017 in beautiful Oakland, CA. An unofficial tag line of Sunnyside was “Do More of What Makes You Awesome.” This motto was everywhere at Sunnyside: posters, stickers, and on the front cover of binders. In other words, I wanted the Sunnyside students to find their strengths, use their strengths, and love their strengths.

Chapter Two

Joey’s Story

This chapter goes into deep detail about Joey’s story at Sunnyside and relates her story specifically to the five characteristics essential to a learning environment designed for twice-exceptional children. In her seminal book, *To Be Gifted and Learning Disabled* (Baum, et. al. 2017) (in other words, twice-exceptional), Dr. Susan Baum outlines these five characteristics.

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Those are; a psychologically safe environment, flexible timelines for academic growth, allowances for asynchronous development, the opportunity to forge positive relationships, and incorporation of a strength-based, talent focused philosophy. (Baum, et. al., 2017) This is the theoretical framework I used to justify the entire capstone.

Chapter Three

The Bridgers

I go on to share the details of Joey’s family; her mom, dad, and grandmother. In this chapter I share the typical but very difficult journey most caregivers face when attempting to find a learning environment where their twice-exceptional child will thrive. I discuss how to approach the transition of conventional to alternative schooling and the questions or concerns that might arise.

The previous two chapters are important for establishing empathy for those the audience intends to serve if they decide to build their own micro-school. Nearly every educator who reads this book will realize that they have met a student like Joey before. Some of the educators reading this book may find themselves reflected back to them through the Bridgers story.

Chapter Four

Sunnyside Design: Freedom, Creativity, and Growth

Our three pillar values—freedom, creativity, and growth—informed every aspect of the Sunnyside model. From the initial design, to how I organized our systems, to hiring, and of course our curriculum, these three values were held in tension.

In addition to other points, I saw this chapter as my chance to make the case for micro-schools as an essential aspect to solving issues of educational inequity. Sunnyside was designed with liberation in mind. I want all students, everywhere, free from imposed limitations on their drive and self-expression. As an anti-racist educator it is my duty to ensure that there is space for all identities within the micro-schools I design, that the micro-school strives to be anti-racist on a structural, curricular, and interpersonal level. Cognitive freedom is intertwined with cultural freedom. To do justice to them both we must affirm the identities of our students through word and deed.

Chapter Five

Agile by Design: Sunnyside's Covid Story

In March of 2020, families all over the world found themselves suddenly and unexpectedly homeschooling. In the midst of a global crisis created by the COVID-19 pandemic, parents were sent scrambling across the internet in search of anything of value to supplement their child's education. At this same time most teachers suddenly and unexpectedly found themselves teaching online. Due to our agile design and non-standardized approach to education Sunnyside Micro-School was in a unique position to help.

Almost overnight Sunnyside Micro-School became Sunnyside Online. Sunnyside Online was a sliding scale, pay-as-you-go school designed for twice-exceptional third-, fourth-, and fifth-graders who needed access to thoughtful, engaging lessons led virtually by experienced educators. This chapter goes into our unique model, our justice-oriented fee structure, and our reach. Over the course of a year and a half, we served over one hundred families from all over the United States and Europe.

Chapter Six

Designing a strength-based Curriculum

I am particularly proud of the Sunnyside approach to designing curriculum for twice-exceptional students. I share how project-based learning and design thinking were central not only to our academic curriculum but to our social and emotional approach as well.

Chapter Seven

What is a Micro-School?

This is the moment in the book where we shift from generating empathy and excitement about designing, launching, and leading to a micro-schools to the more pragmatic. While I define and describe micro-schools in general, I also discuss the concept of positive niche construction (Armstrong, 2011), and how it dovetails nicely with the micro-school model. Economic sustainability and accessibility are two aspects of micro-school design that are constantly held in tension. I go on to share some innovative ideas for holding that tension while running a business that thrives.

Chapter Eight

Getting Started

In this chapter I walk the reader through the exact process I used to design and generate interest in Sunnyside Micro-School. I go into detail about Hypothesis-Driven Entrepreneurship (Eisenment, et. al. 2013), a process-based business development model that can help a micro-school builder determine what is most essential, useful, and sustainable about their

micro-school design. Developed at Harvard business school in the 2010s, this powerful framework keeps costs low and return on investments high.

Final Thoughts

For this last chapter I circle back to some of the points I make throughout the book about strength-based education and equity. I speak directly to this reader and conclude some of the thoughts I began in the preface. I also share more about The Bridgers and how joining Sunnyside catalyzed a ripple of healing, ease, and connection that ultimately strengthened their bond as a family.

Overall this book revealed much more of my heart and soul than I had originally intended, and I think that is a good thing. My original problem of practice for this capstone was, “How might a book on micro-schools inspire experienced educators wishing to invest in equitable education models to open micro-schools that serve twice-exceptional children using a strength-based, talent-development approach in their respective regions? Midway through the writing of this book I realized that to inspire others, I would have to share what inspires me. I am moving on from designing, launching, and leading my own micro-schools. It is time to turn my attention towards helping others do the same. It was healing to return to the Sunnyside story. I’m proud of what Sunnyside accomplished as a community and it is an honor to have the opportunity to tell our story.

Conclusions

The first draft of this book is strong, and I do intend to offer it to the GHF, as originally intended for publication. However, I also intend to submit it to other, larger publishing houses. I do this with the hope that a larger, more established publishing house might market the book to a larger audience. Previously I had not had the opportunity to organize all the thoughts, intention, and theory behind the design of micro-schools. I would like to continue sharing about the power of micro-schools, strength-based education, cognitive diversity, and equity in future publications, interviews, and consultations.

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