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Bozic, Nick, Lawthom, Rebecca, Murray, Janice  and Oldfield, Jeremy  (2021) Using a situative perspective to gain a deeper understanding of how children's strengths are related to social context. *The Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 21 (3). pp. 280-289. ISSN 1471-3802

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.12520>

Publisher: Wiley

Version: Published Version

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Additional Information: This is an Open Access article which appeared in *The Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, published by Wiley

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Using a situative perspective to gain a deeper understanding of how children's strengths are related to social context

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Key words: activity system, affordance, critical realism, situative perspective, strength-based assessment.

Abstract: Over the last twenty-five years, there has been an increase in the availability of published checklists and schedules which allow practitioners to identify the strengths of children and young people, including those with special educational needs. While helpful, these assessments are unable to tell us about the nature of contextual factors which support the expression of particular strengths. In this study, we took a situative perspective to explore how specific classroom practices facilitated strengths. A multiple case study design was used to analyse practices nominated by three children/young people with special educational needs. Qualitative analysis revealed how aspects of practice afforded the opportunity for each child to participate in ways which they equated with their strengths. This style of strength-based assessment led to a more sustained examination of supportive practice features than would have been achieved through interview alone.

Introduction

In the introduction to this research paper, we consider the nature of strength-based assessment and develop the argument that this approach can be enhanced by investigating how strengths are located within a social context. There is a discussion of how the situative perspective (Greeno and Nokes-Malach, 2016) can provide an account of the activities and practices in which strengths are situated and how the concept of affordance has been used to explain how social practice offers opportunities for specific forms of participation. This leads to an account of the main research study, which sought to apply such a lens to contextualise the strengths of a small sample of children with special educational needs. These children were receiving support from an educational psychology service in an urban area within England. The research took place in the schools they attended.

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Strength-based assessment

Since the 1990s, there have been calls for the educational and psychological assessment of children and young people to take more account of their strengths, rather than focusing exclusively on their difficulties and needs (Climie and Henley, 2016; Epstein and Sharma, 1998; Jimereson et al., 2004). The argument has been that including strength-based assessment would lead to a more holistic view of the child or young person, improve engagement and create a more collaborative alliance between assessor and assessed (Bozic, 2013; Tedeschi and Kilmer, 2005).

The UK government's Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (DfE/DoH, 2015) promoted a person-centred approach and encouraged greater attention to how a child's strengths could be harnessed in the development of provision (White and Rae, 2017). Research considering the extent to which these goals have been achieved has drawn a mixed picture – highlighting some successes but also a need for further consideration of how to implement such perspectives (Cochrane and Soni, 2020; Hellawell, 2019; Sales and Vincent, 2018).

There is a growing body of published strength-based assessments which can be used with children and young people in schools, including those with special educational needs (Climie and Henley, 2016; Nickerson and Fishman, 2013). These sample a variety of psychological attributes which may be seen as strengths, for example behavioural or emotional characteristics (Buckley and Epstein, 2004), character strengths (Park and Peterson, 2006) and protective factors (Merrell et al., 2011). The majority of these assessments conceptualise strengths as qualities which are possessed by individuals, or the relationships of which they are part. They are often structured as checklists and provide an efficient way of sampling the strengths that children and young people may possess.

The issue of context

The supportive role that context plays in allowing someone to demonstrate strengths has been recognised by researchers (Saleebey, 1992; Wilding and Griffey, 2015).

By focusing only on strengths, there is a risk that important ways in which the context facilitates strength expression and development will be lost (Wilding and Griffey, 2015). For children and young people with complex forms of special educational need, the nature of the supportive context is likely to be crucial in eliciting skills in areas such as communication and learning (Hynan et al., 2014; Nind and Hewitt, 2012).

Some forms of strength-based assessment seek to gain a certain amount of information about the contexts in which strengths are expressed (Brazeau et al., 2012). For example, whether they tend to take place in categories of places such as the family, school, amongst friends, and during leisure time.

Recent research has begun to explore the community contexts in which young people demonstrate strengths (Barba et al., 2019; Harris et al., 2017). There is potential for this to be extended to further our understanding of school-based contexts which children associate with their strengths and to explore how theory can help to deepen our understanding of these places.

Theorising the nature of context

How does one begin to understand the nature of a context? Without some kind of guiding framework, it can be hard to know where to start. Using theory holds the promise of indicating where we might look.

What kind of theory would be best? The research reported in this paper is informed by a situative perspective which seeks to represent the social world in terms of the relations between people and the tools that they use to coordinate their activity (Greeno and Nokes-Malach, 2016). Within this perspective, the concept of the activity system is used to represent the social context in which human activity occurs. Greeno and Engeström (2014) define an activity system as:

[T]wo or more people, such as a dyad, a group, a classroom, a community, or an individual person working with objects and technological systems (. . .) Research on activity systems focuses on the ways the individual components act and interact with each other, and also focuses on larger contextualizing systems that provide resources and constraints for those actions and interactions. Greeno and Engeström (2014, p. 128)

Greeno and Engeström (2014) explain that the concept of the activity system is general enough to incorporate varying approaches within sociocultural research, by for example cultural–historical activity theory (Engeström, 1987), situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Activity systems are seen as flexible entities which can be organised into different forms of *practice*. For example, the activity system of a

school classroom, made up of educators, children and resources, can be arranged into different practice configurations depending on the way a lesson is designed.

Following this perspective, researchers have examined the nature and implications of practices within educational settings. For example, in order to consider how different practices provide varying opportunities to learn (Greeno and Gresalfi, 2008), how they construct what it means to be competent in those setting (Gresalfi et al., 2009) and how some practices may be better than others at promoting positive engagement and participation (Hand and Gresalfi, 2015). It is a perspective which offers a promising approach for studying how strengths might be understood as forms of participation within the practices of the classroom.

Affordance

Researchers interested in how practice facilitates *specific* forms of participation in learning contexts (e.g. Gresalfi et al., 2009; Martin and Evaldsson, 2012; Nolen and Koretsky, 2018) have found the concept of affordance (Gibson, 1979) to be helpful. In Gibson's work, affordance was used to explain how aspects of the environment can be directly perceived as offering (affording) opportunities for action. From a pedagogical point of view, affordance is concerned with how the resources and practices of an activity system enable a learner to participate in certain ways (Greeno and Gresalfi, 2008).

Gresalfi et al. (2009) examined how, within the activity system of a maths classroom, certain practices afforded the opportunity for learners to exercise particular forms of agency. Practices which focused on the accomplishment of procedural skills (e.g. how to solve a particular form of equation) afforded the opportunity to exercise a narrow form of disciplinary agency (Pickering, 1995), whereas practices which involved more open-ended project work afforded learners broader 'conceptual agency' – where they made decisions about methods, carried out exploratory work and strategised, for example. Different practices afforded and constrained the learner's trajectory of participation in different ways.

Martin and Evaldsson (2012) employed the concept of affordance in their sociocultural research into the practices within a Reggio-Emilia school in Sweden. They were able to identify a range of spatial and communicative aspects to the practices in that setting which afforded opportunities for the children to engage in forms of learning consistent with the Reggio Emilia pedagogy.

Affordances are not just offered by the general nature of a practice. They are also supported (or limited) by the way that participants engage and interact with each other. In the work of Gresalfi et al. (2009) and Martin and Evaldsson (2012), we see how teachers deliberately interact in ways which support particular forms of participation congruent with a practice. This may be through

asking certain forms of questions or publicly formulating what is happening in the classroom in particular ways. Similarly, the students at times pick up on opportunities to participate in ways which are consistent with a certain form of practice and at other times resist these opportunities.

Greeno and Gresalfi (2008) emphasise that affordances are relational, that is a combination of what is offered by practice and how this is 'picked up' or utilised by participants. They argue that not all affordances are accessible or perceived by every participant. To some extent, it depends on an individual's disposition and abilities if they are able to make use of affordances.

Returning to the topic of this paper and the contextualisation of strengths, the concept of affordance may be a useful analytic tool in examining how social practices offer the possibility of strengths being demonstrated.

The aim of the research was to explore what was learnt by applying a situative framework to better understand the school situations which children with special educational needs associated with their strengths.

Methodology

The research was carried out following a critical realist philosophical orientation which views the social world as something which exists independently of the researcher (Blaikie, 2007; Sayer, 2000). Critical realism sees theoretical concepts such as activity system or practice, as models of real (social) objects, which make up the social world. Social objects possess generative mechanisms which can be activated to produce events (Sayer, 2000). A generative mechanism can be depicted as an aspect of a social object which permits some form of individual agency (beliefs, reasoning or action) (Dalkin et al., 2015; Pawson and Tilley, 1997). In this paper, we adopt the view of Volkoff et al. (2013) that (at the social psychological or psychological level) a generative mechanism is equivalent to the concept of affordance – those aspects of an object which allow or enable an agent to engage with it in a certain way. We are interested in aspects of classroom activity systems and how their practices afford strength-related agency for certain children. Furthermore, we consider the wider contextual conditions which might make it more or less likely that such affordances are activated. Critical realists maintain that as events occur within open systems, there will always be the likelihood of external factors having this influence.

Case study design

A case study design was selected for this research as it allowed the opportunity to examine the complexity of a real-life classroom setting viewed as an activity system (Thomas, 2011; Yin, 2009). Case study is well suited to a critical realist philosophy (Easton, 2010). Both acknowledge that real-world settings are influenced by a

multiplicity of issues that make the possibility of experimental control unrealistic (Sayers, 2000; Yin, 2009). The critical realist approach is to use research to build theoretical accounts of this local complexity and assess their adequacy through the insights they confer (Danermark et al., 2002; Fletcher, 2017).

Research questions

The research aim was divided into the following research questions:

Research question 1 – What kind of representation of a strength-based context emerges when concepts from a situative perspective are used to understand it?

Research question 2 – How can strengths be understood as part of a social practice?

This question was further broken down into three sub-questions:

i. How is a child or young person's strength re-described when it is seen as a form of participation in a practice?

ii. What aspects of the practice afforded strength-based participation the opportunity to happen?

iii. Is it possible to identify supporting, but more distal conditions, which make it more likely the affordance will be activated?

Participants

The first author of this paper was an educational psychologist working in an English urban local authority educational psychology service. He was able to select three children/young people to be participants in this study from his usual caseload. This enabled children to be chosen whose needs and situation varied from one other. From a critical realist angle, this allowed the application of situative theory to be tested more thoroughly.

The research was given ethical clearance by Manchester Metropolitan University. Informed consent was gained from all the participants involved, the children and their parents and school staff (teachers and support staff). Mindful of the professional power conferred by his role (BPS, 2010), the educational psychologist emphasised to all participants, including the children, that they were not obliged to participate. Parents of other children in the class were given the possibility to withdraw their children during lesson observation. This option was only taken up by a small number of parents in the third case.

Below is a short resume of the three participants and the assessment undertaken (pseudonyms are used for the children's names and later for staff names to provide anonymity):

1. Jayden was a 13-year-old white British boy with an education, health and care plan (EHCP) who attended a small alternative provision for pupils of secondary

age with social, emotional and mental health needs. It had about twenty pupils on roll.

2. Davy was an 11-year-old white British boy in Year 7¹ at a mainstream secondary school. Staff were worried about the levels of anxiety that he had displayed since starting there.
3. Nazia was a 10-year-old British Asian girl, who was in Year 6 of a large mainstream primary school. Her special educational needs were in the areas of language and learning.

Procedure

The procedure had two components: initial interviews with each child to identify contexts where they were able to demonstrate their strengths and following this, observation and analysis of those contexts, which is reported in this paper.

The initial interviews were carried out using the Context of Strength Finder (CSF). This is a structured assessment tool which was developed in an earlier phase of this research project and requires a child to place cards depicting their strengths into groups representing contexts where they are evident (Bozic, 2020; Bozic et al., 2018). Notes were made to record these interviews.

From assessment with the CSF, the three participants identified the following contexts:

Jayden – his PE lesson in which the PE instructor, Mr Gold, led the class through a series of activities. Jayden associated this session with his strengths of ‘problem solving’ and ‘good sportsmanship’.

Davy – his Art lesson taught by Mr Hill, where three of his strengths were present: ‘I feel safe’, ‘I can make things’ and ‘There is a teacher who believes I can do well’.

Nazia – her English class, which was small group of about twelve children taught by Ms Taylor. She linked this class to many strengths, including ‘writing well’, ‘speaking well’ and ‘doing things on her own’.

For each child, arrangements were made to observe the strength-related context and then interview the child and a relevant teacher about the practices that had been observed.

Methods

An observations schedule was developed and piloted. It was designed to support an initial interpretation of the class as an activity system engaged in distinct practices. It recorded the following aspects of a lesson: participation (action and interaction), the use of reification (linguistic abstractions which appeared to be commonly understood within the activity) and artefacts (objects which mediated

participants’ action). This meant that information was not just collected about the child’s activity but also the teacher’s and others who were within that context.

Follow-up audio-taped individual interviews with child and teacher followed a semi-structured interview schedule which focused on:

- Further elaboration of the main practice phases within the lesson.
- How strengths might be re-described when seen as forms of situated participation.
- The aspects of practice which afforded such situated participation the opportunity to happen.
- The conditions which were likely to support the triggering of these affordances.

Analysis

Observation and interviews were transcribed and subject to the following analytic procedure developed by the authors, but based on the work of Danermark et al. (2002), Maxwell (2012) and Fletcher (2017).

I. In order to develop the draft account of the practice phases, units of meaning within interview transcripts and completed observation schedule were subject to coding using theoretical categories (Maxwell, 2012, p. 113). To begin with, these theoretical categories consisted of the initial three: forms of participation, reifications and artefact use. Where data could not be accounted for in terms of these, additional codes representing concepts from the situative perspective were added. Additional codes were as follows: Object (purpose of the activity was mentioned), Object reasoning (material about the reasoning behind a purpose); mutual accountability (statements about the rights and wrongs within the practice and ‘uncoded’, for material that could not be coded within this scheme).

II. The adequacy of this theoretical coding was examined by noting any emerging ambiguities and considering the proportion of statements which remained uncoded. Uncoded statements were then examined to see if they related to alternate ways of theorising what was happening. Additionally, consideration was given to any differences in the codes used to represent what different actors (teacher and child) said about the context.

III. These coded statements were then drawn upon to create a situated narrative account of the practice phases of the activity system. This was aided by reflecting on a number of questions which helped to draw links between coded concepts (see Appendix 1).

IV. Interview transcripts were then examined to see how strengths could be re-described as forms of situated participation, using the codes from (I). Participation here was viewed in a broad sense to include any form of ‘doing, talking, thinking, feeling and belonging’ (Wenger, 1998) within the activity.

V. A form of retroductive analysis (Danermark et al., 2002) was carried out, to consider which specific aspects

¹Year 7 is the first year of secondary school in the UK education system, Year 6 is the final year of primary school.

of practice were necessary for these forms of participation to occur (affordances to be activated).

VIA final layer of analysis considered the conditions which were likely to impinge on whether affordances were activated. This again was arrived at through a retroductive question: what more distal factors supported or impeded activation?

Validation

At a later date, representations of the practices in the lesson and the strength-related affordances were shown to each teacher to check for accuracy and agreement.

Findings and analysis

Representations of practice

Observations and interviews supported the notion of a class moving through a sequence of distinct practice phases. Jayden's PE lesson moved through three distinct forms of practice: The ABCs: a question–answer session at the start of the lesson; a handball game; and then some guided work in the gym. Davy's Art lesson had four separate phases: entry into the room; round the table teaching; independent work; and tidy-up. This lesson was more complex, because there were successive episodes of round the table teaching and independent work. Nazia's English lesson was divided into two phases, a whole class teaching phase and then a time for independent written work.

Practice phases lasted for periods of time from 6 minutes (Art: Entry into the room) – 38 minutes (English: independent work). Each represented a social arrangement where the activity and goals of the group were distinct. As an example, here is the situated account for the ABCs phase of the Jayden's PE lesson:

Situated account: The ABCs

From the instructor's perspective one of the primary objectives of the first phase was to calm the pupils by getting them to sit and listen. This was established through an adult-directed form of practice in which the pupils sat in a line on the floor while the instructor stood in front of them. Mr Gold asked the pupils questions about an ABC mnemonic representing different athletic qualities. The ABC mnemonic was a reification which was used to structure adult-child interaction and allowed the instructor to assert control over when children spoke and moved. The pupils' role was to answer questions and physically demonstrate certain skills.

During the analysis, there were checks to counter the possibility of confirmatory bias. These checks were done to ensure that what was being learnt about a lesson was not being forced into the theoretical mould offered by the situative perspective. Where units of meaning in transcripts

could not be coded using situative codes, they were flagged as 'uncoded' and examined later to see if they represented a different way of theorising the social context. Twenty-four sections of the transcripts had been labelled in this way, representing just over 6% of the total number. Some of these 24 extracts had been uncoded because they reflected talk that was not specifically about the observed lesson.

Ms Taylor: Pangea, yeh yeh, and what they had to do then, and I think they did that last Thursday or Friday, when you lead up to a write, they often are exposed to examples. (KP3: 44–45)

In a small number of cases, staff referred to notions of 'ability' to explain what was happening in the social context of their lessons.

Ms Taylor: (...) which is why for my group, my group's a bit a little bit more able. (KP3: 95)

Mr Hill: and >we've got< you know a low ability year 7 class you will get that still (...) (KP2: 171–172)

These were isolated examples where a more individualising perspective broke through, interestingly, often to explain why something undesirable had happened in the class. On the whole, the situative interpretation was able to make sense of how the lesson was understood.

The identification of actualised affordances

At stage IV of the analysis, attention was turned to how strengths could be re-described in a more situated way as form of participation within a specific practice. For example, what Jayden had described as the strength of 'problem-solving' was now seen in a form of participation that occurred during the handball practice phase of the PE lesson. This involved Jayden interacting with other players in his team, advising them and correcting the way they were playing the game, to make it more likely that they would score a goal. What Davy had termed as the strength of 'feeling safe' was a more private form of participation, a feeling of comfort which arose internally during his time in the Art lesson. Whereas, for Nazia, the strength of 'speaking well' was seen in the way she participated during the whole class teaching phase of the English lesson.

In analytical step V, the focus was on what aspects of practice had been necessary for a specific form of strength-based participation. For example, in considering how Jayden described his act of problem-solving – as correcting the actions of other children.

Jayden: Yes in handball we were I would correct them and say if you do this then maybe we'll be able to get another point >and things like that< (CYP1, 150–152)

It seemed that this could only happen in a form of activity in which it was permissible to offer advice to fellow students. This happened within the handball session because it was specifically organised to allow goal-oriented team-working. His advice-giving was further supported by his nomination as team captain during the game. In this way, affordances provided by this form of practice were picked up on, or activated, when Jayden acted to problem solve by ‘correcting’ his teammates’ actions.

Sometimes, the forms of strength-based participation that children mentioned were psychological states, such as when Davy talked about his feeling of safety within the Art lesson. Nevertheless, from the interviews with children, it was possible to see how these less visible forms of participation were still related to particular affordances provided within the practices of the lesson. Davy’s awareness of a feeling of safety, for instance, being related to the opportunity in that lesson to sit near to his best friend.

During the analysis, it became clear that affordances were activated by members of staff as well as the children. This was noticed because sometimes the activation of affordances happened in sequence. In these cases, a teacher might take the opportunity presented by a practice to perform a certain action, which created the possibility of a child participating in a certain way. For example, during the whole class teaching phase, Ms Taylor made a point of asking a question which she knew Nazia could answer.

Ms Taylor: (. . .) but I do make it a point at least, every other if I do a whole class question, not every question, every other, every three, I try to get her in because, then I know she’s engaged. (KP3, 159–161)

The identification of conditions

In stage VI, the final analytic stage, consideration was given to the conditions which made the activation of affordances more (or less) likely. In all three classes, staff were mindful of how earlier practice phases could create fruitful conditions for successive practice phases. Thus, in the PE class, Mr Gold viewed the ABCs practice as helpful in calming the class and preparing them to participate more successfully in later phases of the lesson.

Mr Gold: the sitting down thing yeh straightaway to esta = we want them to calm, to calm down. (KP1: 100–101)

Similarly, round the table phase in the Art class and the recap phase in English provided conditions which were meant to support subsequent independent working.

However, higher order class level conditions were also alluded to. Mr Gold set a lot of store by creating a

climate of discipline and self-control within the class. He felt this was especially important within the environment of alternative provision where many of the students had emotional and behavioural needs. There seemed little doubt that without this condition being established within the lesson as a whole, specific practices such as handball would have been more likely to become disrupted and less likely to furnish the opportunity for participation that Jayden described.

Similarly, class level conditions could be delineated in the other two cases. In the Art class, Mr Hill placed an emphasis on developing a positive relationship with the students, recognising them around the school site and taking an interest in them.

Mr Hill: (. . .) the lesson doesn’t always start in the classroom you know, I see Davy walking around sometimes, not just Davy, other pupils, it’s nice to acknowledge the pupils in the corridor, ask them about the work or ask them about the day. I think pupils respond well to that once they’re (out) of your lesson then. (KP2: 219–223)

It seemed likely that the praise which he made a point of bestowing on Davy’s Art work was more potent because of this existing relationship.

In the English class, Ms Taylor sought to create a culture of drafting, where the successive development of a piece of writing was valued over the immediate production of a finished copy. This seemed to be in the background when Nazia declared that, for her, good writing meant the alteration of sentences so that they made sense.

However, interviews also highlighted higher level school structural forces which had an impact on the way that practices were organised in individual classrooms. Mr Hill explained how the setting system in his school meant that the observed class had fewer children in it. This made it easier for him to bring them all round the table at the front of the room for teaching demonstration.

Discussion

The aim of the study was to consider what was gained by using a situative framework to make sense of the contexts which children and young people associated with their strengths. How did this approach compare with what is achieved by more conventional checklist forms of strength-based assessment when it was used with the case study examples in this study?

Seeing strengths differently

Perhaps the first thing to observe is that it differed from the majority of strength-based assessment procedures in its method. It pursued a more ethnographic assessment of strengths, involving what might be described as a

strength-based observation with associated follow-up interviews, rather than arriving at information through interview alone.

In this sense, it provided an answer to the dilemma articulated by Brazeau et al. (2012, p. 385) when they pointed out how the meaning of answers to a checklist can be rather opaque without further elaboration:

An additional challenge arises in explaining assessment results to clients and their families. Relaying to a client that they have strengths in the area of ‘interpersonal strengths’ may not be particularly useful without elaboration on the context within which this strength becomes apparent.

By looking in detail at how a strength was understood, as a form of participation in practice, it helped to spell out what a child meant by ‘problem solving’, ‘feeling safe’ or ‘good writing’, for example.

Also, taking a situative view, shifted the meaning of ‘strength’ away from the attribute of an individual, towards a specific form of participation which was valued within a practice context. This study of the particular was enlightening but did lead to questions about how this observation might relate to the child’s participation in other contexts of their lives at school and elsewhere. Thus, the benefits of ‘drilling down’ might still be enriched by knowing something about the general distribution of strength-based contexts.

Affordance – linking practice and participation

Within the analysis the concept of affordance allowed us to explain the connection between a practice phase and a specific form of strength-based participation. For example, we saw that the practice of handball contained qualities (e.g. goal-oriented teamwork, the ‘captain’ reification) which afforded Jayden the opportunity to engage in what he termed problem-solving.

Seeing ‘participation’ as a broad form of being and engagement, which encompassed not just action-based forms, but also experiential ones (Wenger, 1998), allowed a reading of Davy’s feeling of safety to be seen as a form of participation which was afforded by the opportunity to sit near his friend in Art lessons. The idea that an actor’s participation in the actualisation of an affordance may lie in their capacity to feel an emotion is consistent with the work of environmental psychologists who have studied the activation of emotional affordances in urban environments (Broberg et al., 2013).

Furthermore, the concept of affordance moderated a purely social view of what was happening. A myriad of latent affordances could be identified within the practices within Mr Hill’s Art class. Davy had focused our attention

on one that had particular significance for him: that the seating arrangement allowed him to ‘feel safe’. This affordance was salient for a child who had had a history of participation in contexts at school where he had experienced anxiety. For other children, it may not be an affordance of the practice which is relevant or even perceived.

Greeno and Gresalfi (2008) make the point that the activation of affordances relies as much on the capabilities and disposition of the actors as on the presence of certain opportunities presented by the practice. In addition, they state that:

affordances for action are relational; students’ histories of participation shape their attunement to affordances in a setting and in a task. (p. 178)

This quotation highlights the way that marrying the concept of affordance with an activity systems perspective can introduce some element of individual-level characteristics into the analysis.

In addition to this, the analysis revealed that affordances were not just related to student participation, teachers also perceived how practices allowed them the opportunity to achieve certain things. Ms Taylor, for example, made a special effort use the recap practice to fashion and offer Nazia a question that she could answer. Thus, affordances might be seen as related and linked to one another: the teacher takes an opportunity to perform an action which in itself affords the child the opportunity to perform another. This echoes the work of Martin and Evaldsson (2012) who, in their detailed study of a Reggio-Emilia class, showed how episodes afforded within the practice of this pedagogy were actualised through the combined participation of teacher and children. It also parallels the work of Strong et al. (2014) who highlighted, how in a work setting, it was more usual to see ‘bundles’ of affordances operating in series and parallel, rather than single ones being activated alone.

Thinking about practices

In considering the affordances that were activated within a practice, our gaze shifted towards practice as an object in its own right. What was particularly significant about certain practices, which affordances did they allow?

Sometimes teachers were conscious of what certain practices could offer and how they could take advantage of these opportunities. Mr Hill realised that when he brought the class around his front table to learn about the next stage of their lesson, it was an ideal time for him to indirectly praise the work of pupils by show-casing their work to the rest of the group.

On other occasions, they were less aware of the affordances within a practice that were significant for

individual children. Mr Hill hadn't known how important the classroom seating arrangement had been for Davy, Mr Gold didn't realise how Jayden had seen opportunities in handball practice for the expression of his problem-solving strength. In this way, the research process enriched the teachers understanding of a child's perspective.

Thus, the process of analysis allowed the opportunity to offer an appreciative gaze on the functioning of a practice that suited a child. In this sense it might be compared to forms of strength-based or solution-focused enquiry which seek to identify what works well in an institution (Brown et al., 2012; Lewis, 2020).

There was scope to also notice how certain practices were limited in how far they could promote certain strengths. Nazia may have seen the recap phase of the English lesson as a place where she could do 'good talking', but in answering questions it only provided a specific way that this could be achieved, there was no opportunity here for longer turn-taking interactions; similarly, Jayden's exercise of problem-solving could only occur in a relatively brief window within the PE lesson when handball was sanctioned. To consider how these episodes might have been enriched would have enabled a further development of practice to occur.

An assessment approach which shifts the gaze towards how practice furnishes opportunities for strengths begins to address the concerns of critics who have warned of the potentially individualising nature of strength-based assessment (Wilding and Griffey, 2015).

The conditions around a practice

The analysis drew attention to wider supportive conditions that were prevalent in the different classrooms: the discipline of Mr Gold's PE lesson, the intimacy and relational aspect of Mr Hill's work and the culture of drafting in Ms Taylor's English class. In so doing, it reminded us that practice is not just about the immediate support of children to accomplish particular forms of agency but also about the creation of a culture or community of practice (Wenger, 1998) within the class.

Such conditions then extended outwards to more distal, institutional forms which influenced the nature of the practice within the lesson – the setting systems and seating plan regulations.

All-in-all then, a fairly complex account of how strengths may be seen as participation within practices nested in broader conditions. This could, perhaps though, provide an informed starting point for reflecting on how assessment might translate into ideas for intervention. Whereas a traditional checklist-based strength-based assessment provides us with an initial listing of a child's strengths, it does not give the contextual information about how they

might be supported to arise in a school environment. The kind of approach documented in this research begins to provide some examples of practice and affordances which could be developed and perhaps deployed in new contexts to facilitate a greater scope for strengths-based participation.

Limitations

Despite the contextualised formulation of strengths that was achieved by this study, there were limitations which need to be acknowledged:

The study was an analysis based on three cases and so requires further application to check that the same approach could adequately represent the strengths that children and young people display in other school contexts. The assessment, by its nature, was a snapshot in time and this was both a strength and a weakness. It was an advantage in that it offered a relatively quick way of examining a context associated with a student's strength, thus preserving the efficiency offered by checklist methods of strength-based assessment. On the other hand, it did not examine, with equal candour, other situations which may have served as contexts for the expression of a strength. So, it might be seen as a sample whose typicality and uniqueness would have to be established by other methods of enquiry. Furthermore, the representation of the strengths as forms of participation which have been afforded within a specific practice remains a hypothesis rather than a proven law. It is a model of what is happening based on the evidence that has been collected and subject to adjustments in time, as new observations and new information are obtained.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore the impact of using a situative perspective to represent the school contexts that children and young people associated with their strengths. With a small sample of three individual case studies it was found that applying a situative perspective enabled strengths to be re-configured as forms of participation within distinct practices. The concept of affordance was helpful in showing how particular elements of practices allowed certain forms of participation to occur. This way of thinking about strengths naturally led to a reflection on the nature of practices and how these might be developed to extend their impact. However, it also drew attention to how the effectiveness of activity systems and their practices was mediated by higher level conditions such as the cultural norms in a class or the structural forces operating in a school.

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Appendix 1: Questions used to develop situated accounts of practice

1. Is there a single object to this activity or several? Maybe some are subordinate. What level of agreement is there about the nature of the object?
2. How is participation related to the object of activity?
3. What forms of mutual accountability exist or are sought?
4. How do reifications mediate participation and towards what goal?
5. How do artefacts mediate participation and towards what goal?