
From Hopelessness to Hope: Social Justice Pedagogy in Urban Education and Youth Development

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Abstract

This article reviews the social justice youth development (SJYD) model conceptualized to facilitate and enhance urban youth awareness of their personal potential, community responsibility, and broader humanity. The SJYD requires the healing of youth identities by involving them in social justice activities that counter oppressive conditions preventing healthy self-identification. Data from a school-based organization in Tucson called the Social Justice Education Project (SJEP) describe the objectives and outcomes of the curricula employed by the SJEP. While urban youth engage in social justice activities and become committed agents of change, positive educational and development experiences will emerge.

Keywords

identity, activism, youth development

Any young person may succeed academically by developing the analytical skills that result from the opportunity to develop his or her critical consciousness (Cammarota, 2007). This personal development requires a complete transformation of self and his or her place and role in society. Without these

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transformations, achievements become harder to come by. Conversely, much is gained from learning processes that allow young people to reflect positively on who they are, where they live, and how they might bring changes to the world around them. Once a young person realizes his or her efficacy and ability to transform his or her own and others' experiences for the better, he or she grows intellectually and acquires the confidence to handle a variety of challenges, including higher education, community activism, and organizational leadership. A method for opening possibilities of transformation is through Paulo Freire's (1993) praxis—critical reflection and action. Praxis is achieved when young people study a particular problem in their social world and then present research-based solutions to various stakeholders such as teachers, administrators, students, parents, and other community members.

This article reviews the social justice youth development (SJYD) model conceptualized to facilitate and enhance young people's awareness of their personal potential, community responsibility, and broader humanity (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). The SJYD draws its philosophical foundation from "praxis" and allows young people the opportunity to think critically about their social and economic conditions and engage in actions to address these conditions. Thus, the SJYD requires the healing of youth identities by involving them in social justice activities that counter oppressive conditions preventing healthy self-identification. Youth also attain empathy for those suffering beyond their immediate communities. The three-step approach of *self*, *community*, and *global* awareness operates to expand youth consciousness to higher levels of social criticality and human compassion. The intended outcomes are young people with consciousnesses that facilitate academic achievements and social activism.

The following discussion is divided into three sections: theory, practice, and implications. The first section discusses the problem and possibility-based theories in youth development and demonstrates how the SJYD model emerges from the best aspects of each. The second section presents data from a school-based organization in Tucson called the Social Justice Education Project (SJEP). The SJYD derives from studying the objectives and outcomes of the curricula employed by the SJEP. The last, concluding section provides basic suggestions on how to reframe approaches to education and development for urban youth. Implications should be clear: while young people engage in social justice activities and become committed agents of change, positive educational and development experiences will emerge.

Discussion of the SJEP program focuses on a particular individual, a Mexican immigrant youth whom I refer to as Yolo Rodriguez. Because Yolo's educational experiences clearly delineate the potential outcomes for the SJYD model, he is selected as an exemplary case. Thus, the example of

Yolo offers a view into how the SJEP curriculum has been effectively designed to graduate marginalized youth through the SJYD three levels of awareness—*self*, *community*, and *global*. The third section concludes with recommendations for how the SJYD can influence policy to better meet the educational needs and facilitate the critical and agentic capacities of urban youth.

Right but for the Wrong Reasons: Problem and Possibility-Based Approaches

Researchers and policy makers tend to embrace two dominant approaches to address the development needs for urban youth. The first is the problem-based approach, which focuses on urban youth as “problems” that need to be addressed prior to any successful development program (Coleman, 1968; U.S. National Commission on Excellence and Education, 1983). The types of “problems” in need of “fixing” include academic failure, delinquency, substance abuse, and violence. The problem-based approach shares consonant assumptions with deficit models that conclude urban youth problems derived from cultural or intellectual deficiencies (Kirk & Goon, 1975; Valencia 1997; Valencia & Black 2002). Once these deficiencies are addressed, urban youth supposedly develop into “normal,” middle-class adults. Problem-based approaches invariably rely on assimilative strategies that attempt to inculcate White middle-class values and frameworks to counter deficiencies (Andersen, 1999; Ogbu & Simons, 1998; Wilson, 1987, 1996).

In contrast, the possibility-based approach focuses on the assets that youth putatively bear to support healthy and productive development (Blasi 2002; Irby, Pitman, & Tolman, 2003; Wilson 2003). Strategies for possibility-based approaches rely on engendering opportunities, so youth can draw on their own assets to determine the solutions required to solve problems impeding a healthy existence. Development programs therefore offer the support and opportunities for urban youth to cultivate their assets for problem solving.

Paulo Freire’s (1998) understanding of culture and its use as praxis in educational development reveal how the problem and possibility-based approaches hold misconceptions of human behavior and culture. Freire states that:

The first dimension of our new program content would be the anthropological concept of culture . . . as the addition made by men and women to a world they did not make; culture as the result of people’s labor, of their efforts to create and re-create . . . In short, the role of man and woman as Subject in the world and with the world (1998, pp. 84-85).

Perceived from Freire's understanding of culture, the problem and possibility-based approaches may imply that some essential qualities are inherent or "natural" to the lives of urban youth. The former assumes inherent qualities fall to the negative side, whereas the latter argues that the essential nature of urban youth is positive. Although many (rightfully so) are currently drawn to the positive inflection of possibilities (Yates & Youniss, 1996, 1999; Youniss et al. 2002; Youniss, McLellan, & Yates 1997; Youniss & Yates, 1997) the approaches are nevertheless founded on flawed theoretical or philosophical assumptions that something "natural" or "essential" exists within young people. Even those pseudo problem-based perspectives that may eschew the relevance of genetic inheritance may still gravitate toward definitions and explanations of culture that appear immutable and fixed (Andersen, 1990; Newman, 1999; Wilson, 1987, 1996). Scholars convincingly point to the lack of evidence that deficiencies, whether intellectual or cultural, are naturally prevalent among people of color (Taylor, 1993; Valencia, 1997; Valencia & Black, 2002). Furthermore, culture, which is neither stable nor fixed, rarely ever transmits from one generation to the other unproblematically (Gonzalez, 2005; Mead, 2000). Given this important understanding of culture, it seems erroneous to suggest that anything, even something raw, exists at the core of one's cultural sensibility. For instance, the assumption that certain cultural groups do not value education is impossible to verify as an essential characteristic. The fluidity of culture over time prevents any value from becoming entrenched permanently in a particular cultural group's normative structure.

Although the problem and possibility-based approaches bear several incorrect assumptions, they are right in certain respects but for the wrong reasons. Urban youth do in deed face quotidian problems, such as educational failure, drug abuse, and violence. However, they are neither inherent to their existence nor unproblematically and internally adopted from their environments. It is too simplistic to state that a young person has problems because he or she comes from a "bad" neighborhood, implying that he or she is pathologically integrated with his or her environment. Young people may in fact learn maladaptive behaviors from family or peer culture, but these transmissions are socially constructed. They are socially produced inventions and disseminations on how to act. Social constructions must be learned, even if they are internalized, they are still subject to reflection, resistance, and restructuring via lived experience and critical action.

Social constructions that facilitate behavior and activity, or what social scientists call "social structures," vary in their effect. Many claim that the social structures of families or peer groups bear significant influence on youth behavior (Andersen, 1999; Coleman, 1988; MacLeod, 1987; Newman, 1990). Although families and peers influence adolescent behavior, nothing can be

more influential with shaping the lived context in which behavior is embedded than structures related to the political economy (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Gregory, 1998). Poverty, inadequate health care, police harassment, and underfunded schools lean heavily on the lives of urban youth. Frequently, young people bear witness to and endure myriad iniquitous conditions in their communities. Peers or families, in many cases, rarely eclipse the negative influence of a severe paucity of resources and opportunities compounded by a large dose of state repression.

Therefore, young people may display behavioral problems, but they have very little to do with individual make-up or family/peer cultures. Rather, problems spawn from unhealthy political and economic conditions shaping the urban context. Evidence suggests that consistent exposure to the “social toxins” of institutional oppression leads to unhealthy outcomes among urban youth, such as increases in mental illness, asthma, and communicable diseases (Garbarino, 1995; Garbarino & Abramowitz, 1992). Development outcomes follow a similar pattern in that urban youth, particularly working class youth from communities of color, experience excessive rates of educational failure and unemployment (Anyon, 1997; Noguera, 2003).

Although young people have the possibility to overcome political and economic problems, it is still wrong to assume, similarly to a problem-based perspective, that possibilities somehow emerge from an ingrained pathology. Young people can acquire special assets, such as artistic creativity or intellectual analysis, to enhance their existence, but they are not any more given than being born left-handed as opposed to right-handed. They must cultivate possibilities and assets in the same way they attain and build knowledge. Although humans are born with the potential for intellectual thought, it must be harnessed, enacted, and refined and provided with the space to evolve.

Social Justice in Education and Youth Development

With these important critiques in mind, SJYD represents a conceptual model of development that would accurately address the needs of urban youth. The language of “problems” and “possibilities” seem useful only when the discussion of urban youth experiences and growth are grounded in an analysis of political economy. Through this political economic perspective, problems and possibilities are based more on the influences of dominant state institutions and prevalent social and economic conditions (McLaren, 2002). To overcome the impediments preventing the attainment of youth assets, young people must adopt a social justice awareness, which centers on understanding how social and economic institutions, policies, and practices can either stall or promote healthy youth development outcomes.

Awareness in SJYD is actually comprised of a set of awarenesses that constitutes critical consciousness focused on systematic injustices and actions required to overcome social and economic oppression. There are three steps or stages in the set of awarenesses involved with social justice in youth development: *self, community, and global*.

Awareness of Self

The first and most foundational of the three is an awareness of self in positive, healthy terms. Urban youth, especially black and Latino youth, often experience socially induced fractures in their identities. The consistent social pressure and aggression they experience simply from being people of color unfairly marks them as intellectually deficient and socially deviant (Smith-Maddox & Solórzano, 2002; Steele, 1997). Negative representations of urban youth materialize in media productions, government policies, and popular discourses (Haymes, 2003). The extent of these representations saturate the lived social context of urban youth, and the effect is often a lowering of self-esteem and confidence (Steele, 1997). To reverse this trend, urban youth must engage in a learning process that heals their social fractures and nurtures positive self-perceptions of their racial/ethnic identities.

Awareness of Community

The attainment of a positive self-awareness requires building greater awareness of community conditions that impede healthy development (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). Community awareness, the second in the set, derives from an understanding of how social and economic conditions in young people's lived context contribute to the fracturing of their identities. Consistent exposure to austere poverty, dysfunctional schools, police harassment, and environmental degradation will lead to unhealthy outcomes but also lowered self-esteem, confidence, and misrecognition of capacities. Therefore, learning and development processes must not only heal the individual self but also focus on healing the community and palliating those social and economic toxins that poison young people's hope for the present and the future.

Awareness of Others

Personal hope is elevated through feeling compassion for those who experience suffering but exist beyond the individual's immediate community (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). The third and last in the set of awarenesses,

global awareness constitutes the final stage of consciousness formed through social justice in youth development. Global awareness involves understanding how oppression affects the lives of others while contributing to social justice practice that counters this oppression. Showing empathy for people who suffer from pressures palpable in one's personal context builds a sense of compassion that aspires to bettering the world for all. Once young people feel they can contribute to improving the lives of others, they become confident about cultivating positive changes in their own lives. Young people will fail to understand how to affect individual changes if they miss the opportunity to demonstrate compassion for suffering that occurs peripheral to them.

SJEP Program Evaluation

This article is the result of data collected on urban youth who participated in a school-based organization located in Tucson, Arizona (Camarota, 2007, 2008). The organization is called the SJEP and represents a model for SJYD. SJEP exists at Cerro High School in the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) of Arizona. The students who enroll in the SJEP are all working-class Latinas/os from the southwest area of Tucson. They meet everyday for one period, usually second period, and four semesters straight. The social science program is aligned with state-mandated history and U.S. government standards and involves students in participatory action research (PAR) projects. PAR, in short, is research conducted by stakeholders within particular institutions or communities to make changes within them (Selener, 1997). In the SJEP, students conduct research primarily to address and change conditions at their schools. By participating in our second period social justice program, students receive their social science credits for graduation and the knowledge of how to conduct original PAR projects. The program is split between state-mandates and PAR; three periods per week are devoted to U.S. history and government requirements while two periods per week focus on PAR. I am codirector of the SJEP and assist the teacher with implementing the PAR program.

SJEP moves students through the entire set of awarenesses by encouraging positive identity formation, community activism, and universal compassion. I observed and documented through extensive field notes the educational and organizational processes and practices that promote SJYD. The goal is to identify shifts in consciousness that lead to an engaged activism with positive intellectual outcomes measured by commitments to education and social justice.

The discussion of SJYD is based on my experiences and research evaluation of the SJEP. The SJEP provides Latina/o students with an opportunity to

engage in youth PAR (YPAR) in which the research focuses on youth and their educational experiences (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). The intention is to help students enhance their level of critical consciousness through a curriculum that meets state standards and affords them the opportunity to develop sophisticated critical analyses of their own social contexts.

I assist the instructor of record with the implementation of the YPAR projects. Instruction practices are documented in weekly notes while I occasionally hold regular conversations with the teacher and SJEP high school students. I also conduct interviews with SJEP students to evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of the program. The interviews are informal with open-ended questions pertaining to the students' academic experiences and their perspectives of school or community-based activism. Exit interviews are conducted with students to document their own assessment of the program's effectiveness with increasing their critical consciousness, academic performance, and willingness to attend college.

As part of the SJEP evaluation process, students' research is collected, including field notes, poetry, and photos, to assess the level of their engagement and critical understanding. Therefore, documentation of the SJEP is based on field notes, exit interviews, and student-produced research. SJEP data illuminate how the SJYD influences young people's critical perspectives, academic performance, and willingness to engage in social change actions.

SJYD in Education

In the SJEP, poetry facilitates the first step of self-awareness in SJYD (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002) by allowing for positive social identities and active engagements in communities. SJEP students are assigned the research task of thinking about themselves in positive terms within their own social context, either at home, school, work, or neighborhood. The students write out their analyses with the help of an "I AM POEM" template that provides students with "I" statements for each stanza. Poetry is therefore our initial pedagogical effort for providing students with opportunities to reflect on their identities and challenge injustices that impede possibilities for self-determination. They recite the poems publicly to classmates, peers, family members, and community.

The student poem below represents a critical expression of both identity and social struggle.

I am a proud Mestizo. I wonder if my color will change
I hear people screaming. I see confusion in my eyes. I want to be free.

I am a proud Mestizo
I pretend to speak, I feel angry, I touch a heart but I worry if my color
will change. I cry for my race. I am a proud Mestizo
I understand las vendidas but I say I am a proud Mestizo
I dream that everyone will be equal. I try to have a voice
I hope that someone will hear me. I am a proud Mestizo

Yolo Rodriguez, a Mexican immigrant student created this poem. At the age of 14, he came to the United States from Magdalena, Sonora. He attended Cerro High, and with his limited English proficiency, counselors immediately enrolled him in a Structured English Immersion (SEI), a program centered on remedial coursework in English. Cammarota asked him during his exit interview about his mandatory participation in the 1-year SEI program.

Julio Cammarota: So when did you do the 1-year immersion?

Yolo Rodriguez: That was my freshmen year.

JC: Freshman year?

YR: I had just turned 15 when I was a freshman.

JC: And you didn't know any English?

YR: At all I didn't know nada (nothing), and that's when they put me in those classes you know my welding class and stuff like that.

JC: So they would just put you in welding class, shop class?

YR: Yeah, and then they sent me to the ESL classes and like I knew more stuff than the students there and I had barely got here too, and the same students too but I kind of knew more stuff about the United States how to say something I kind of knew more stuff but it was kind of hard because they put me in those classes you know the ESL classes and I was expected to learn English in 1 year and I took my freshman class, my ESL class and my sophomore year I was placed in English 78 you know and it was kind of hard for me because I didn't know nothing but I figure it you know I worked it and I did it.

JC: So what other kinds of classes did they put you in?

YR: Okay what kind of mierda (shit) is this?

I took a cooking class.

JC: They put you in a cooking class?

YR: They show me how to do huevos. I had to do pancakes. I mean what the hell? I already know how to do that!

JC: You got to be kidding me.

YR: Yeah, we all came in together we had to do huevos, pancakes; they showed us how to do spaghetti.

JC: So how did you learn English?

YR: I just worked my stuff out and then like it was a big help because at my house you know because everybody like speak English except for my dad because everybody they would talk to me in English and I would be like yeah, cool or I would be you know just working it out you know cause I wanted to learn it because I knew it was going to be hard I was in another country where they expect me to speak English.

JC: So you didn't learn English in that 1-year emersion?

YR: No, I didn't and still right now I still try to perfect my English and you can't learn English in 1 year! You know I've been here 5 years already and I still haven't perfected my English you know.

Unsurprisingly, his research with the SJEP focused on the loss of language and culture through education. He believes the U.S. education system does not support his own, positive perception of Self as a Mexican immigrant. He realizes that partial assimilation is necessary for full integration in American society, but it should not come at the shameful expense of losing one's language and culture. His research took aim at explaining why and how loss of primary language is a prevalent experience among immigrant students.

Yolo's preferred research methodology was photo documentation. He would run around campus taking photos of different classrooms, either his own classes or random ones. Then, he would bring the photos into our SJEP class for discussion. The following is a classroom dialogue based on one of Yolo's photos of a Geometry class. We projected the image onto a screen while Yolo and his classmates discussed and asked questions.

Jaime: What class is this?

Yolo: This is a Geometry class.

Jaime: Geometry class? They have Algebra books for Geometry?

Leticia: Out of the whole class probably only about 3 kids out of 15 are participating. You've got kids over here [pointing at the photo] . . . doing their own thing. Having their own conversation. A lot of empty seats.

Julio: So how can you use this picture with your research topic?

Yolo: Well, it's public schooling, you know? It's like, you know, basically all these kids are losing their education because the teacher is not doing her job or not helping fulfill their education.

Jaime: Right so it is taking away from their opportunity, right?

Carmen: What about . . . what language are those kids learning now?

Yolo: Any text book that I've read at this school there really has been no Spanish. No, nothing else other than English—even though the school population is 70% Mexican American students. Like in English class almost all the class is Mexican. Maybe about one student in there that is not.

Angel: I've also noticed that the Spanish-speaking students are in classes and they don't understand what is going on because they don't speak English. I don't understand why they are not in classes with special classes so that they can learn to speak English. 'Cuz they came here to get an education but they are not getting it because the teachers don't know Spanish and they are in these English-speaking classes.

Yolo: In that picture, there are Mexican students . . . they never ever, ever get a sheet. And she doesn't ask them any questions, you know, because she doesn't know how to talk to them.

Erika: There are a lot of Spanish-speaking students here in this picture

Elena: Talking about how students don't understand English. In every class I have there is at least. There is always a group of kids that don't speak English. And they are always sitting in the back in a little group and talk. And the teacher never tells them anything or what they are trying to explain or anything. They are in every class. They never do anything and the teacher never cares. They do whatever they want.

Yolo: I don't know if the teachers are always scared to tell them because they don't speak Spanish or . . . I don't know what it is but I think that teachers should do something.

Yolo and his classmates brought the photos and their ideas to the TUSD school board. They did a formal presentation on the educational inequalities experienced at their school. The SJEP students made several recommendations to enhance the possibilities for equal outcomes; among the recommendations was the suggestion that the district expand the bilingual education waiver program. Currently, the Arizona law prohibits bilingual education and mandates English as the only instructional language allowed in the classroom. However, Arizona schools can legally apply for waivers if they can demonstrate a need for instruction in a language other than English. The SJEP students' presentation clearly demonstrated "the need" but the school board failed to formally adopt their recommendations.

Although many Spanish-speaking students at Cerro do not receive an education, Yolo and other students in the SJEP did receive educational benefits

from participating in the action research. The SJEP pedagogy connects the students learning to their lived context, which makes education relevant, interesting, and vital for students. Yolo's study of loss of language and culture helped him to understand his own institutional struggles around English language proficiency. This knowledge allowed him to realize how obstacles for language acquisition are not internal but external to his own being. He has the capacity to learn but external institutional forces attempt to limit this capacity. When Yolo realized his agency, he proceeded to excel academically.

Yolo also went beyond focusing on concerns within his own immigrant community to photograph injustices with special education students at Cerro High. Because students of color are extremely overrepresented in Special Education, two special education students in his photo were unsurprisingly a Latino male and Latina female. These students were neither touching each other nor smiling; they were looking stoically into the camera as if they did not know why anyone would want their picture out there in the margins of the campus. The expressionless look revealed a sense that they were aware they are the forgotten or "invisible." The stoic, emotionless stare into the camera appropriately characterized their state of being in special education. The inadequate conditions for special education students include a classroom located in an abandoned shop garage that had no windows and plenty of broken machines and rusted tools lying about. Although these students had special needs, the abandoned shop garage that served as their classroom clearly indicated that they received little if any consideration by the school.

The school forces the special education students to learn in the worse conditions. Many special education students are from low-income neighborhoods, and their parents are disenfranchised, lacking the political voice to improve the situation. SJEP students seemed angry and understood the injustice when viewing the photos. Students asked whether anybody knows about this, and Giovanna, an SJEP student responded by saying that, "No, not many people, even some of the students in our class didn't know about it. It is something not really talked about." I asked the class, "Why is this a special ed room and not an Advanced Placement room?" Celina answered, "It's not a good learning environment and shows that nobody cares." "I do," said Angel, another SJEP student. I asked him how he first found out about the class and he said, "It was when I had to clean it during a detention." I asked what he thought about it the first time he encountered the room, and Angel quickly responded, "I didn't care then. I didn't start caring about things until this year [while participating in the SJEP]." Angel's comments reflect someone who has evolved through the SJYD and attained an acute sense of global awareness.

The SJEP students, led by Yolo, decided that day during the slide presentation that they would do something about the injustices experienced by the special education students. They would document the discrepancy and bring it to the administration and school board. Armed with a video camera, SJEP students filmed special education students, most of whom were Latino, sitting crowded together in one corner of the abandoned shop garage, while the rest of the huge space was littered with broken shop machines, old mechanical parts, and rusted tools. The teacher did not have a desk or even a board to write on. The SJEP students made a video featuring the unjust learning environment for the special education students. Once copies of the video were distributed to the school board, the Cerro principal subsequently moved the special education students to a new room with fresh paint, newly installed carpet, and blackboard.

Yolo evolved through the three steps of SJYD. He generated an I AM POEM that speaks to his pride and struggles around his racial/ethnic identity. He also engaged in language research to investigate problems within his own community of immigrant students. His research moved him to the next step of community awareness. Finally, his overwhelming compassion for the injustices experienced by special education students provided him with a global awareness. The outcome of moving through the steps of SJYD includes increased academic achievements and community involvement. Yolo graduated from Cerro high school and provided the commencement speech at his graduation ceremony. During this speech, Yolo acknowledged the SJEP and its contribution to his academic success. He entered Cerro with limited English-speaking ability but graduated conducting research presentations in English for the school board, federal, state, and local officials, as well as national academic conferences. Many of these presentations helped to expand the SJEP to other high schools throughout the district.

Concluding Implications

Yolo's case demonstrates the true force and benefit of engagement. By facilitating a young person's commitment to learning and development, academic progress should occur. This statement may seem self-evident, but having marginalized young people increase commitments to education is challenging. There is enough evidence demonstrating that urban youth are less likely to achieve academically than their White counterparts. In part, this lower achievement is the result of diminished engagement. Increasing students' engagement may involve the development of opportunities to participate in YPAR activities. YPAR projects allow students to engage in Freire's conception of culture

and undertake a praxis that leads to a transformation of self and community. Yolo's case demonstrates this transformation through YPAR.

In this article, the main argument rests on the postulation that the level of engagement is contingent on the social justice perspective of urban youth. For urban youth, the process of understanding how and why they experience social marginalization is key to their empowerment as well as discovery of new, empowered perceptions of self. At this point of discovery, a young person views his or her own social and economic predicament as not the result of his or her own volition but of systematic structural forces beyond his or her immediate control. Once this realization occurs, the young person may adopt a social justice perspective that may allow him or her to feel empowered enough to engage in his or her learning in ways that lead to systematic change. These efforts to bring about change may motivate young people to look for ways to learn or develop academically to acquire the theories and practices that facilitate the desired changes. The outcomes of SJYD are young people who excel academically to change their own social and economic statuses along with those of other underprivileged individuals.

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Bio

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