Dialogical Transactions between Schools and Communities

BOB FECHO[1]
Teachers College, Columbia University, USA

JUDITH LYSAKER,
Purdue University, USA

We argue that relationships between schools and communities be seen as transactional spaces where dialogue across stakeholders is generated, multiple perspectives on issues are evoked and considered, and the simultaneous realization of multiplicity and unity prevails. Building from the works of literary theorists Louise Rosenblatt and Mikhail Bakhtin, and social psychologist Hubert Hermans, we outline a theory for school/community relations in which both school and community are seen as engaging in a transactional and dialogical process of mutual shaping and becoming. To better illustrate this framework, we offer examples of what the theory can look like in practice. Our overall intent is to suggest a dialogical process away from reified master narratives that dichotomize schools and communities and toward transactions that require both groups to be willing to see the other anew, to respect whatever expertise the other brings, and to be willing to construct themselves as a school community.

Public schools are ostensibly planned for, built for, and exist to serve local communities. By serve local communities, we mean to pay heed to the educational needs, as well as reflect and resonate with the cultures of the families who, ideally, reside in the neighborhood of the school or, at least, within the city, county, parish, or township of that school. However, schools can serve multiple purposes and masters, with one sometimes diminishing or even cancelling the others. For example, Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) have argued that U.S. urban public schools aren't broken, that they are successfully completing the task for which they were designed: creating a pedagogy of domestication for working class, working poor, and ethnic and racial minority children. As such, these schools are serving the needs of a community far removed from the neighborhoods in which the schools are located, a community with appreciable political, economic, and social capital, and one with a vested interest in remaining removed in order to secure that capital and maintain an advantaged position.

---

[1] You can reached the first author at bfecho@uga.edu

As one consequence of this divide in agentive resources, the community school—a school that is geographically situated in a certain community—frequently does not operate under the analogy of school *as community*, as a welcoming site for students and their families. This lack of welcoming community, can lead to disenfranchisement particularly if families lack the cultural capital—the value a society places on social assets such as education, heritage, and occupation that an individual brings to societal transactions (Bourdieu, 1998)—necessary to influence local and central administrations (Lareau, 1987; Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009).

Ironically, the children of families with less formal education—seemingly the ones who would most benefit from strong and inclusive ties to school—are less likely to be embraced by the schools they attend. Instead, there are often overt and tacit indications that schools, if they want parents from marginalized and disenfranchised populations to engage at all, limit such participation to low-level, highly-defined roles through which the school maintains much control (Boethal, 2003; Cohen-Vogel, Goldring, & Smrekar, 2010). One need not spend too much time in or visiting schools to see examples of how they too frequently constrain and discourage parents and other community members from in-depth involvement in curriculum, instruction, and assessment (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Consider these examples we've culled from our collective experience in public schools:

- Upon entering a school, parents are confronted by numerous security personnel and various metal detection devises (e.g, wands, airport-style screeners)
- In lieu of or accompanying such security measures, signs announce some variation of the following: ALL VISITORS MUST REPORT TO AND SIGN IN AT THE MAIN OFFICE. NO EXCEPTIONS
- The school schedules open parent meetings only during normal school operating hours and, even if in the evening, always at the school
- The school sends instructions, through teachers, about how to "help" students with schoolwork, often without consideration for families' value orientations to that work, or familiarity with how to carry out such work.
- A parent's committee or advisory board is told they can schedule fund raisers and student social events, but are never invited to discuss policy changes affecting how educations occurs in the school.

Even if the public accepts the idea that, in order to protect children, a certain level of security, as penal as it might appear, must be tolerated, it seems to us that such tolerance means that schools need to be more purposeful and deliberate in making parents and other interested community members feel invited into dialogue with faculty and administration.

Eminent American educator, John Dewey (1899/1974), in words that resonate too often regarding current school/community relationships, indicated that the general public is apt to look at school on a one-to-one basis between teacher and pupil or teacher and parent. However, he went on to declare, somewhat famously, that "what

the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all its children" (p. 295). More recently, Thomas Sergiovanni (1994) argued that stakeholders in schools have come to see them more as organizations and less as communities, due largely to administrations and policymakers need to "convince everyone that they are in control" (p. 3), that they have a dominating hand on this serious business of education. Unlike communities, which are focused primarily on the well-being of the community itself as a group, as well as the individuals in it, organizations are focused outward and have commitments to external, identifiable outcomes located outside the organization itself—like the business of education. This positioning is significant because the goal becomes an abstraction of some good—in this case, education—rather than the good of the human beings, that is, students.

If we are to reclaim schools as spaces where community thrives, Sergiovanni (1994) maintains that "practices that make sense in schools understood as organizations just don't fit" if the school is rethought as a community (p. 4). Within communities, people stay engaged with the purpose of and with other community members, not through contracts, but via commitment. Rather than relying on external measures to control people, communities generate norms, ways of working, common values, and the like. Therefore, what is needed are not recipes for community building, but theoretical frameworks from which all who are invested in schools can build outwardly in ways that best suit their needs and contexts (1994).

We admit that two decades forward, Sergiovanni's conception dichotomizes understandings of what we mean by organizational structure and community structure, playing one against the other. Our preference, rather, is to see the centripetal tensions of organizational structure, frequently imposed on contemporary schools from outside the local neighborhood, being pulled centrifugally by local interpretations of community structure. To do so resists unnecessary and unconstructive dichotomies.

Still, what concerned Dewey early in the 20th Century and Sergiovanni near the close of that century—the relationship between schools and communities—we in education still grapple with as we approach the third decade of this century. How schools position parents and how parents position schools often set up an artificial separation between schools and communities, defining and enacting them as distinct, potentially conflicting entities, rather than part of a larger societal whole working toward the care and development of its members. In particular, relationships between schools and communities are often marked by asymmetrical power relations, with one—either school or community—dictating to the other.

Our argument here is that relationships between schools and communities should be seen as transactional spaces where dialogue across stakeholders is generated, multiple perspectives on issues are evoked and considered, and the simultaneous realization of multiplicity and unity prevails. Building from the works of American literary theorist Louise Rosenblatt, Russian literary and language theorist Mikhail

Bakhtin, and Dutch social psychologist Hubert Hermans, we outline a theory for school/community relations in which both school and community are seen as being engaged in a transactional and dialogical process of mutual shaping and becoming. To better illustrate this framework, we also offer examples of what the theory can look like in practice.

A DIALOGICAL AND TRANSACTIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR COMMUNITY BUILDING

It may seem curious, but the first two pillars of our theoretical framework are foundationally set in the works of two literary theorists. Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory (1994, 1995) and Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogical theory (1981, 1986), although primarily intended to explore ways we read, write, talk, and listen in literary contexts, also provide much insight into how people engage in many contexts both within and without education. This positioning is because both transactional theory and dialogic theory are ways of describing and explaining the participation of the self in human relationships, albeit as represented in text.

Bridging from the work of Rosenblatt and Bakhtin, we entertain that of social psychologist Hubert Hermans (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010) and its focus on inner dialogue as a quality of self that is brought to engagement with external contexts. Our engagement with dialogical self theory provides a needed degree of complexity to our understanding of schools as communities, since communities are not of themselves static entities, but are constituted by individuals always in active relation to themselves and others. Ultimately, our theoretical discussion argues that school personnel and the families who send children to that school are bound together in ongoing dialogical transactions through which meaning is made, stratifications are formed and reformed, and alliances or exclusions are forged, and that these dialogic transactions are potentially generative and transformative for all

Rosenblatt and Transactional Theory

Our ideas regarding transactions and how they relate to community spin from the work of literary theorist Louise Rosenblatt (1994, 1995) and her transactional theory of reading and writing. Like so many insightful ideas in education, Rosenblatt traced the conception back to Dewey (Dewey & Bentley, 1949). To Rosenblatt, a transaction is more complex than simply giving and receiving. Instead, the term describes relational activity in which old dualisms like self and other fall away in favor of the "whole situation" or transaction— the meanings constructed in dialogue between them (Rosenblatt, 1994). The relational activity of transactions arises out of their context, with both time and space playing key roles in how those persons or objects involved transact with each other in ways that create new texts.

What does that mean? Quite simply, when people read, they shape the text as the text shapes them. As Rosenblatt (1994, 1995) suggested, when reading, readers are

encountering the text in ways for which only *their* experiences can prepare them. Because everyone reads by bringing the whole of their experience to any text, all readers bring personal interpretations to all texts. These interpretations may intersect with that of others, or they may differ markedly. As Rosenblatt (1995) put it, "There are no generic readers or generic interpretations but only innumerable relationships between readers and texts" (p. 291).

Although Rosenblatt was primarily interested in transactions between readers and printed text, she conceded that humans are constantly transacting with their environment (1994). By factoring in a broad definition of text—that which can be interpreted—then it becomes easy to see that people are surrounded by texts. Consequently, how we read this wider range of texts results in the feeling that we are always reading and always in the process of transformation. The carillon song ringing from a nearby steeple; the sudden shifting of sky from a shimmering aquamarine to a glowering tanzanite; faces of children waiting for the puppet show curtain to open; the ponderous opening strains of Also Spake Zarathustra; the brief yet profound haiku of Basho—all are texts waiting to be read, providing impetus for response and meaning making.

Schools then, by this definition, are, texts, transactional spaces that are constructed daily with multiple other texts that lead to constant and countless transactions. They are spaces in which people are "reading" all the time, making sense of environments, faces, sounds, languages and printed texts created by others with, within, and for the school community. Consequently, it is never a question of introducing transactions into the school community—they are there and will always be there—but actually a matter of acknowledging and drawing more understanding from those transactions. To do this depends on those involved in the school community and its transactions having a kind of faith in the transactional process. By indicating an understanding of their roles and having a willingness to bring their experiences to the texts they encounter, they allow themselves to be vulnerable to the shaping they will experience.

Rosenblatt (1995) was explicit about what taking a transactional stance means for classrooms: "The task of education is to supply [students] with the knowledge, the mental habits, and the emotional impetus that will enable [them] to solve [their] problems" (p. 125). She asserted that schools and colleges should not be places where "ready-made formulas and fixed attitudes are taught" but should, instead, provide a suitable context within which learners "develop the will to learn" (p. 126). This "will to learn" is in part a *response* to the opportunities for authentic transaction set up in the environment, which can be related to Valsiner & Cabell's (2012) concept of catalytic conditions. That is, a transactional stance sets up the possibility for students to develop the will to learn. For Rosenblatt, learning in a transactional classroom connected the emotional to the intellectual in that it provided students with opportunities "*to think rationally within an emotionally colored context*" (p. 217, emphasis in original).

The widening of these notions of transactions beyond individual classrooms to embrace the entire school community compels an acknowledgement that all stakeholders—students, teachers, staff, administration, parents, business leaders, and others—have experiences that can offer something to the dialogue surrounding education and contribute to the creation of "new texts." Equally important, all stakeholders, if they are open to the experiences of others in the transactional space, have the possibility to be shaped by their encounters, making schools dynamic places of growth for all participants.

A transactional perspective underlines the belief that all stakeholders bring multiple and diverse experiences to school community transactions and that this multiplicity of experiences has the potential to create a rich human presence within schools. Such a stance suggests that we seek answers (plural) rather than a single answer and that we acknowledge that any answer arrived at is already on its way to a new one. A transactional school community, therefore, is one where rational but emotionally contextualized dialogue encourages informed reflection, wide-ranging perspectives, critical, but supportive questioning, inclusive participation that values individual interpretation, and a sense of trust in ongoing and evolving process.

Bakhtin and Dialogical Theory

That sense of an ongoing and evolving process, contained within the transactional theories of Rosenblatt, is echoed in the language theories of Bakhtin (1984). In his work, he suggested that people need to routinely liberate themselves from "the prevailing truth and from the established order" to engage in "feast[s] of becoming change and renewal," the better to question "all that [is] immortalized and completed" (p.10). In such contexts of change, participants come to understand that there can never be "a first and last meaning" (1986, p. 146), that, instead, all meaning is immersed in an infinite chain that draws from the past, responds in the present, and positions toward the future. Although we prefer the image of a complex mesh—one that is three dimensional—as opposed to a linear chain, we agree that all the intersections in this mesh "are renewed again and again, as though [they] were being reborn" (1986, p. 146) with each new construction of meaning. This organic renewal process integral to meaning making presents a challenge to schools that often see holding fast to order, security, standards and other seemingly fixed and necessary constraints as central to their function.

All meaning making, according to Bakhtin, (1981, 1986) is conducted in a context characterized by opposing tensions that are always present in our individual and collective lives. He argued that language is continuously beset by centripetal tensions—unifying, but eventually reifying—and centrifugal tensions—individualizing, but eventually disuniting. As the prior sentence implies, we need language to be both unified and individual. It's not a question of one force or the other; there exists an ongoing tension between forces of unification and individualization.

Through these tensions, we seek some measure of common meaning so that communication can be facilitated. Yet we simultaneously imbue words with our own meanings—ones both nuanced and widely variant—and those meanings shift as contexts shift.

If language undergoes these continual tensions, then that which we construct with language—the texts of our lives— similarly undergo tensions that unify and tensions that individualize, along with the disequilibrium that can often occur. The transaction between schools and the communities and the texts created can become imbalanced when the meanings constructed within schools dominate and diminish those that community members bring to the transaction. Such an imbalance, if left to stand, reifies the dominant position and skews future transactions towards monologism. The current push toward standardization in school systems worldwide is a prime example of such monologism. The more that regional and national governments dictate what should occur in schools—impose codified meanings from the outside— the less impact individual and local voices of teachers, parents, and students have on curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Beyond impact, the imposition of meaning, by its nature monologic, has a destructive effect on the relational; the possibilities inherent in a more open dialogue and real transaction between school and community are lost in the establishment of asymmetrical relationships. Of course, other cultural constructs such as religions, academia, parenthood, deafness, football clubs, and the like undergo similar tensions. For our use here, school community relations cannot escape these opposing tensions, with administrators and policymakers frequently trying to simplify, unify, and control perspectives on school and education while individual stakeholders try to individualize and make complex those very same perspectives. In fact, the escape of tension works against authenticity and meaningful relationships.

Within this tensional context, school personnel and community members are in a continual state of response. Bakhtin (1981) noted, all understanding happens through contextualized response and through this understanding we generate a multiplicity of meanings. Thus, it is in openness to this multiplicity of response that creative ways of dealing with complex issues emerge and are fostered, though their importance may not be immediately apparent. Indeed, in words that reflect those of Rosenblatt, Bakhtin argued, "Powerful and profound creativity is largely unconscious and polysemic" (1986, pp. 141-142). It is within tension created by simultaneous, conflicting multiple meanings that school personnel and community members have the opportunity to grasp the idea that they seek new understanding, even as they do so through '[their] own already formed world view, from [their] own viewpoint, from [their] own position' (1986, p. 142).

Working toward commonly constructed understandings in the midst of these tensions is hard work, requiring acceptance and a sense of inquiry into the discord, ambiguity and discomfort of the transaction. These diverse stakeholders must be

completely willing to shift and even abandon those stances, because, 'in the act of understanding, a struggle occurs that results in mutual change and enrichment' (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 142). Even as we endeavor to see the world through the eyes of the other, we do so feeling the tug of the opposite tension imposed by our own experience and the sometime difficult sense of vulnerability.

Neither can we help but acknowledge the past, that 'something created is always created out of something given,' yet what is created is never just 'given and final' (pp. 119-120). Instead, such an act 'always creates something that never existed before, something absolutely new and unrepeatable, and moreover, it always has some relation to value' (pp. 119-120). The tension between past and future responses and understandings feeds an eternal process of regeneration when openness and vulnerability afford the process.

It is from these Bakhtinian ideas that we mount a key leg of our argument: school and community relations are fraught with tension, and it is to the advantage of all stakeholders to create a context within which it is possible to identify and explore complex understandings of those tensions as well as to recognize them as generative and valuable. To do such is to break the cycle of the omnipresent culture of school merely replicating itself. Instead, the acceptance and valuing of dynamic tensions as the voices of community become real and vibrant within school cultures institutes opportunities to reimagine school for the complexities that await it in the near and distant future. To further explain this sense of vibrant possibility and its potential for school/ community relationships, and other insights it brings to this discussion we turn to Dialogic Self Theory (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010)..

Hermans and Dialogical Self Theory

As first explored by Hermans and Kempen (1993) and further expanded by Hermans and Hermans-Konopka's (2010), Dialogical Self Theory (DST) brings the concepts of "self" and "dialogue" together in profound ways. In psychology, the self has often been considered primarily internal and singular, housed in the mind of an individual person. Dialogue, on the other hand, has primarily been considered an external process of communication among more than one individual. Bakhtin (1986), for example, considered that an utterance, what he called the "*real unit* of speech communication" (p. 71, emphasis in the original), cannot exist without being addressed to someone else. However, Bakhtin acknowledged the speaker/ listener relationship as being complex and blurry at the borders.

Hermans and Hermans-Konopka, (2010) explained how DST further veers away from a self-other dichotomy and instead considers the "dialogical self," which engages in both internal and external dialogue. In DST, the self is extended not just into the world, but *dialogically* into the world just as the world is extended *dialogically* into the self. At base, the dialogical self is composed of multiple I-positions within a single self. Certainly, these I-positions are internal (e.g., I as musician, I as puzzler, I as my

brother's sister). Yet, they are also external (e.g., fellow hiker, colleague, part of the classes I teach, matriarch, committee member) in ways that such external positions comment on the self (e.g., I worry that my colleagues would disagree on this position; Seeing how my parents were lifelong learners, encourages me to try new things as I age).

There is, then, no sharp divide between internal and external selves or internal and external dialogues. There is, rather, a gradual and perhaps hazy transition as our internal and external worlds intersect and transact in ways so that the other is seen as a constituent part of the self.

According to Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010) "collective voices speak through the mouth of the individual person" (p. 6). In a given moment, an individual echoes, constructs, and transforms the many cultures she carries with her in that transaction, speaking with one voice and yet shaping and being shaped by many. In this way, all of us on this planet participate in and come in contact with a range of cultures throughout our daily experience. The various positions we construct in relation to those cultures reside and continue to fluctuate within each of us. While cultures outside you engage in dialogue and cultures within you engage in dialogue, those cultures within us and outside us engage in dialogue in a blurred space, sometimes more external and other times more internal. As Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010) phrase it, "the other is not outside the self, but rather an intrinsic part of it" (p. 7).

This phenomenon holds for institutional I-positions, like school principal or president of a parent teacher organization, and also for other kinds of I-positions like being an identical twin, a deeply curious person, a cynic, or a ComiCon attendee. We come to know and construct our I-positions and others' I-positions—as an introvert, as autistic, as middle class, as cisgender, as a nurse, as a photographer—through the language and signs we give to these classifications. Likewise, such construction occurs through the groups, practices, knowledge, expertise, and institutions we form and change because of and through the language and signs we leverage to make sense of and perform who we are doing, being, and becoming (Fecho & Clifton, 2017).

In a given moment in a particular time and place, there is a way in which a given I-position is in dialogue with all the groups, practices, knowledge, expertise, institutions, language and signs that, up to that moment, have given shape to a multiple, but unified self (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). This means that in school/community relationships, people are invested differently in particular I-positions that are in part shaped by their participation in the school and community. Appreciation of the dialogic complexity of each individual, and their investments in evolving I-positions shaping their identities is important to enhancing understandings between group members.

This multiplicity within unification frequently impels most people to attempt to create certainty out of uncertainty (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). They want to tug centripetally in response to too much centrifugal activity. Sometimes they try to do this by limiting the range of positions and voices in our lives; consider the friend who suddenly announces he is no longer participating in social media or a co-worker who quits her high-paying but high stress job to become a librarian in a rural county. Another tack is to award dominance to one position, either an interior or exterior one. Supporters of extreme and often unexamined political views might fall under this umbrella.

A third approach is to make boundaries between self and others stark or of high contrast, from whence xenophobia arises or campaigns are waged to keep others in a position of subservience. Lastly and paradoxically, by adding in a new position, people can hope for achieving certainty in order to find solace through that new position. Someone who leaps into a new profession or seeks in a new partner what was lacking in a former partner is on a quest for certainty through addition (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010).

These tacks are all quests for what Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010) have called pre-dialogical certainty—*pre*-dialogical because of the ways they seek to gain certainty before, and often instead of, being in dialogue with the uncertainty that has arisen. It is important to consider that the individuals involved in school/community work, like everyone, may have the tendency to seek pre-dialogical certainty through these approaches thereby constraining at the outset what is possible in any school/community dialogue. Thus, interrupting this constraining effect of certainty-seeking is important.

Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010) urge people to consider a fifth approach, one that opens up rather than constrains and that, much like turning into a skid on an icy road, may at first feel counter intuitive (Fecho & Clifton, 2017). Similarly, when confronted with uncertainty, we encourage educational stakeholders to turn toward uncertainty rather than steering to avoid it. As such, dialogue becomes its own process for negotiating the uncertainty created by dialogue. By dialoguing with others and/or oneself around an issue that has created a sense of uncertainty, individuals enter into an open-ended and flexible process that has no pre-determined destination or outcome. Instead, all parties and positions are openly invited to contribute toward a mutually constructed end that, if not creating certainty, reduces uncertainty (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). What can at first feel full of dread can morph into a space rife with possibility.

Coalescing Theory

It is specifically the concept of school/community relations, although often fraught with uncertainty, as being rife with possibility that we explore. Based on our theoretical framework, we suggest that operationalizing the following points can

create dialogical and transactional relationships between educators and the most direct stakeholders of the school. Consequently, school personnel and parents should:

- Avoid lining up as an us/them dichotomy or enacting paternalistic scenarios and instead view their relationship as opportunities for dialogical transactions, as a space where the experiences of all stakeholders are valued.
- Acknowledge that all members of the school community bring a range of I-positions to any dialogue and on any given day these I-positions may facilitate rich discussion or could create distractions.
- Approach uncertainty and complexity, not with dread, but with openness toward possibility.
- Realize that each decision in a complex situation changes the context thus necessitating further transactional reflection and dialogue.
- Accept that not all perspectives can be acted on, but most, if not all, can be given sincere consideration through dialogue.

In the next section, we provide examples of dialogical and transactional relationships that lessen the gap between school and community, moving ever closer to constructing school as community.

THEORY INTO PRACTICE

Fremont Elementary School is a fictionalized composite of schools in which we've both either taught or researched. As such, imagine a school located in an urban setting, serving a population experiencing high unemployment and low high school graduation rates. Families in the community are thus subject to high poverty and the tensions that come with it: frequent disruptions of everyday life as making ends meet drives all activity, sporadic and many times involuntary changes in housing, and fluctuations in who constitutes the family at any one point in time. Families are at least tacitly, if not overtly aware, that their children are entering a school system where students who come from homes like theirs far too often get lost in the machinery. This sense of fighting some kind of "inevitability" weighs on them.

By contrast, the teachers employed by these schools often live in bordering, but more economically advantaged neighborhoods. The school and its personnel thus frequently convince themselves, often on incomplete data, that they are serving a community with significant needs and few assets. With this perspective, there is often a tendency to see serving the community as helping the children of these families to understand, conform to, and succeed with school constructed texts including curricula, assessments, positions, policies, and procedures. Despite the good intentions of school personnel, such a relationship can seem patronizing to the families—the kind people of the school helping what they might construe as the helpless needy.

This fictional school/community example, demonstrates a type of monological approach to school/community relationships that occurs commonly in the current

American educational landscape (Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009). The differences that exist between families and the schools that serve them include differences in values, purposes, perceived status, or importance. The authoritative discourse of the school—a monologue of dictums—has an inhibitory effect on the willingness of families to voice who they are and what they need. It is within this example, that we will explore the usefulness of a dialogical, transactional approach to school/community relationships.

One Dialogical and Transactional Possibility

It is the beginning of the school year. Fremont Elementary, like many schools, is preparing for its open school night. Traditionally, families are invited to this event, to "get to know" the school, their children's teachers, view classrooms and meet administrators in a largely informal way. Fremont's principal plans to give a brief opening welcome and each teacher has planned something to say and do with parents to give them an idea of the routines and expectations their child will experience in their classroom. Children have made decorations, written invitations and produced special projects to be displayed for parents at this event to be held on a Tuesday night at the school.

On the face of it, all this may seem benign and benevolent enough, even hospitable and informative, and yet considering this scenario from a dialogical, transactional perspective illuminates the constraints it places on school/community relationships. Fremont and its teachers and principals have constructed the "texts" of this parent evening, largely on their own. With the exception of what the children have produced—done of course with teacher initiative and guidance—the school "texts" are positioned as dominant and central to the evenings' interactions.

Such a set of circumstances creates a dichotomy between families in the community and the school. In some ways, this dichotomy represents the imposition of meaning from "the outside" thus giving the message that family voices are not needed or valued, creating passivity rather than liveliness in the school/community dialogue. Indeed, the school texts may be difficult to transact with.

There is little for families to personally connect with that would lead to meaningful personal responses and authentic dialogue. Recall that, for the most part the constructors of these texts come from social positions unlike the families they serve and texts constructed by them (e.g., school philosophy, codes of conduct, curriculum) may be experientially and possibly linguistically distant to families. Even the children's involvement could be difficult for parents, if families perceive their children as being made naïve contributors to the school texts, inculcated into an "I-position" radically different from those held in their families.

How could this be different?

What if planning the open school night began with a series of meetings in which families could come together with teachers and administrators to plan two evening events together—one at the school and another at a community location decided by families? In this scenario, open school night becomes school/community nights as families have a say in one of the meeting locales and contribute to the texts created for the evening. In this kind of scenario, families and school personnel could construct a "Wall of Stories" at each locale, walls that portray their lives in the community through photographs and words. Such an approach allows the voicing of numerous and diverse "I-positions" by all stakeholders: caregiver, father, grandmother, mother, uncle, community member, church member, teacher, administrator, basketball coach, and so on. Posted as texts, these story walls become part of the larger text that defines "school" and "community" as one larger community, and encourages both the creation and response to complex texts that represent this new merger.

Or consider this possibility. What if children created projects that represented their lives at their home or homes, wherever they might be, and those were displayed alongside of their school creations in individual classrooms? What if they brought personal, favorite artifacts from school to exhibit at the community local? Such displays set in motion Bakhtin's "contrasting voices" which inform and shape each other as their edges bump against one another. These displays also affirm and celebrate differences, tensions, and anomalies between and among stakeholders and even between and among the I-positions held by those stakeholders. This kind of exhibition serves as a demonstration, a representation of how this school/community engages one another with courage in faith.

These classroom and community displays, along with the Story Walls, introduce those in the school and larger community to the neighborhood families the school is charged with serving. Moreover, these activities and others like them help school personnel and families from the community look beyond single stories (Adichie, 2009) and instead gain the insight that all educators and parents bring multiplicity in unity (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). By identifying and sharing their invested, multiple I-positions—as parents, workers, church goers, shelter members, gardeners, dog-owners, introverts, artists, and, perhaps most importantly, contributors—family members and school personnel can construct new ways of working together, of developing mutual goals, of generating new knowledge and understanding.

Such approaches to uncertainty and complexity promote openness instead of dread, and invite consideration of possibility. To extend the scenario, open forums at the evening events at both sites could invite conversation about the concerns, personal worries, and dogged fears that all stakeholders might hold about the coming school year. Of course, this kind of open forum could fall flat if people sense that invitations to dialogue are false or artificial, coming from some outside policy mandate (e.g., *Schools will allow time for families to talk about their concerns early in the school year*) rather than a sincere effort on the part of the local school to engage dialogically with

parents. People generally don't voice concerns in environment where they sense their voices are invited only to fulfill an empty requirement imposed by the school.

However, with earlier invitations to families and other stakeholders to contribute to classroom displays, as well as "Wall Stories", all participants may now experience the school building and the community locale as part of one community. This new sense of one dialogic community promotes authentic engagement of all and would be a move towards an embracing of uncertainty as possibility. Families could voice concerns that lead to curricular change, or consideration of alternative testing situations. Teachers could voice their own worries about meeting the needs of students with limited resources and high demands. A chart co-constructed by school and community members that listed the issues raised and imagined possibilities that could arise from them, would serves as a co-authored text within this new school community.

A Second Dialogical and Transactional Possibility

Another kind of invitation from the school could concern constructing better ways to support students who struggle and who, due to these struggles, may act out in manners deemed inappropriate by teachers and administration. Too often, such students are suspended, labeled as behavior problems, and/or warehoused in special education classrooms. The meetings that make such determinations frequently become pathological, focused only on "what's wrong" with the child and throwing all the responsibility for improvement on the child and her family. School personnel often sit panel-like behind desks and do most of the talking, frequently in language laden with educational and medical terminology. Parents, particularly for those for whom school had not been an inviting and supportive experience, may be relegated to going along just to get along

What if the school, before resorting to drastic labeling and reassignment, made an honest effort to find ways to support a struggling student through dialogical means? For example, the school might convene a meeting designed to address issues and make recommendations for support, but doing so in a way that seeks more inclusive dialogue. Along with current teachers, counselors, and administrators, the school should think creatively as to how former teachers, a school nurse, classroom aides, secretaries, and other school personnel could contribute to such a conversation. Parents or other legal guardians should be included, but they should also be encouraged to invite others from outside the school who would advocate for their child—a community center coach, the religious leader of their place of worship, older siblings, or a neighborhood watch captain to name but a few possibilities.

A more dialogical approach would gather all convened around a common table. A facilitator would first ask everyone at the table, including the student, to express what they saw as the positive traits the student brings to learning. Each person would speak in turn—no cross talk—and notes taken by the facilitator would be shared at

the end of the round. The next round would be carried out in a similar fashion, while being devoted to identifying the issues and concerns that prompted the meeting. The last round would entail suggestions for building on the strengths of the student in order to show progress in minimizing, if not altogether eliminating the concerns.

Finally each person would offer what he or she would do to facilitate working toward these goals. The intent and hopefully result is that the student would be described through a range of I-positions and perspectives, and the goals for working through the issues would be negotiated and responsibilities for achieving those goals shared. Furthermore, this meeting would be considered a step in a longer process, one that entailed future dialogical transactions to monitor what was occurring as time passed and contexts changed.

PULLING OUR IDEAS TOGETHER

In her book, *Re-Reading Families*, Catherine Compton-Lilly (2007) argued that schools should "foster rich relationships" with parents because "together the stories of parents and children offer nuanced and complex accounts" that create insights into the lives of students and the communities in which they live (p. 120). Clearly, she is calling for a different relationship between parents and schools, one that doesn't replicate traditional asymmetrical relations of power. Instead, she imagines that parents and their children bring funds of knowledge—expertise and cultural ways of knowing and responding to contexts—that are not just useful possibilities, but instead are invaluable necessities for the education of those children (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Important in her account is the idea that story, or narrative, is a key way to open dialogue that counters oppressive master narratives.

The movement away from such master narratives and toward dialogical transactions between schools and communities requires both groups to be willing to see the other anew, to respect whatever expertise the other brings, and to be willing to admit their own lack of understanding. There needs to be an openness, a perceived and actual vulnerability that communicates trust and good faith. Both communities and schools would benefit from a realization that they often "bring different needs, aspirations, and desires to their children's education" (Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009, p. 2210).

Time needs to be accorded—set aside in appropriate amounts—to provide a context that implies that dialogue is enough valued to justify the time. It is through such commitment that teachers can realize Brazilian educator Paulo Freire's (1970) charge to avoid entering communities "to *teach* or *transmit* or *give* anything," but come instead "to learn with the people, about the people's world" (p. 181, emphasis in the original). It's only then that schools and their surrounding communities can imagine being a school community.

References

Adichie, C. (2009, July). "Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: The danger of a single story." [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en

Bakhtin, M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays by M. M. Bakhtin.* C. Emerson and M. Holquist, Trans. U of Texas Press. (Original work published 1975).

Bakhtin, M. (1984) *Rebelais and his world*. Helene Iswolsky, Trans. Bloomington, IN: U of Indiana Press. (Original work published 1965).

Bakhtin, M. (1986). *Speech genres & other late essays.* V. W. McGee, Trans. U of Texas Press.

Boethel, M. (2003) *Diversity: School, family and community connections. Annual synthesis 2003*, Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

Bourdieu, P. (1998). *Practical reason*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Cohen-Vogel, L., Goldring, E., & Smrekar, C.. (2010). The influence of local conditions on social service partnerships, parent involvement, and community engagement in neighborhood schools. *American Journal of Education*, *117*(1), 51–78. http://doi.org.proxy-remote.galib.uga.edu/10.1086/656346

Compton-Lilly, C. (2007). *Re-reading families:The literate lives of urban children four years later*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Dewey, J. (1899/1974). The school and school progress. In R. Archambault (Ed.). *John Dewey on education: Selected writings,* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, pp. 295-310.

Dewey, J., & Bentley, A. (1949). *Knowing and the known*. Boston, MA: Beacon.

Duncan-Andrade, J. & Morrell, E. (2008). *The art of critical pedagogy: Possibilities for moving from theory to practice in urban schools*. New York: Peter Lang.

Fecho, B., & Clifton, J. (2017). Dialoguing across cultures, identities, and learning Crosscurrents and complexities in literacy classrooms. New York: Routledge.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* Trans. Myra Bergman Ramos. New York: Continuum Publishing Company.

González, N., Moll, L., & Amanti, C. (2005). *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities, and classrooms.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Hermans, H. and Hermans-Konopka, A. (2010). *Dialogical self theory: Positioning and counter-positioning in a globalizing society.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Hermans, H., & Kempen, H. (1993). *The dialogical self: Meaning as movement*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Lareau, A. (1987). Social class differences in family-school relationships: The importance of cultural capital. *Sociology of education*, 73-85.

Lareau, A., & Horvat, E. M. (1999). Moments of social inclusion and exclusion: Race, class, and cultural capital in family-school relationships. *Sociology of Education*, *72*(1), 37–53. http://doi.org.proxyremote.galib.uga.edu/10.2307/2673185

Rosenblatt, L. (1994). The transactional theory of reading and writing. In R. B. Rudell, M. R. Rudell, & H. Singer (Eds.), *Theoretical models and processes of reading* (4th ed., pp. 1363–1398.) Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Rosenblatt, L. (1995). *Literature as exploration* (5th edition). New York: Modern Language Association.

Sergiovanni, T. (1994). *Building community in schools*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Valsiner, J. & K.R. Cabell (2012). Self-making through synthesis: Extending dialogical self theory. In, H.J.M. Hermans & T. Gieser (Eds.), *Handbook of Dialogical Self Theory*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Warren, M., Hong, S., Rubin, C., & Uy, P. (2009). Beyond the bake sale: A community-based relational approach to parent engagement in schools. *The Teachers College Record*, *111*(9), 2209-2254.