Article

Including Student Voice in the Design Process

Amy Stevens Griffith and Peggy B. Gill

Abstract: *Addressing educational change through systems design allows disciplined inquiry into the complex and emerging social structures of this dynamic system. One such method, narrative story, provides a way to examine the historical and current-lived practice of those engaged in the educational system. As a design conversation, it encourages the participation of all levels of the organization in creating a living narrative. This paper addresses how narrative story can be used to engage students within the system in developing that narrative, providing the construct within which to examine students' perspectives. Ten at-risk students from 7th through 12th grade participated in the study, with the intention of making school a better place for all students. This paper examines these stories and their implications in the design process. It also examines narrative story as an appropriate social discourse in creating and sustaining educational systems that contribute to human betterment for all students.*

Introduction

A rural school district in Texas has engaged in a systems change process over the past four years. During this time, the district has, as part of that process, addressed the need to incorporate student voice in the design conversations. Of particular interest was how to incorporate the needs and views of students marginalized by the traditional system. These students, whose needs were not being met effectively by the current system as evidenced by placement in alternative education environments (either on their home campus or at an alternative campus), school failure, and/or repeated discipline referrals, were engaged in narrative inquiry as part of the design conversation process.

Design conversations (Jenlink, 2002) occur within a particular community of educators and stakeholders engaged in a social process of constructing and reconstructing meaning. Within this disciplined inquiry process, the participants' interpreted purpose and meaning bind the dynamics of organizational change. This meaning and purpose may be focused and delineated through examination of the personal stories of those involved in the process. Rather than deal with discrete events individually, the personal stories evolving through narrative inquiry allow people to build larger frames of reference and to examine the underlying assumptions and beliefs guiding their actions. It is a natural way to explore the meaning of systems operating within such social constructs as an educational community.

Organizational change, examined within a systems theory frame, may be viewed as a meaning-making process as relationships are negotiated within a social context. Organizational meaning and purpose are individually and collectively constructed and reconstructed as the system continuously builds organizational capacity and engages in design and implementation processes (Jenlink, 2002). As part of this accountability process, the Texas school district studied here recognized the need to reduce the dropout rate. Students who had been repeatedly suspended for infractions of the disciplinary code and who frequently dropped out of school were targeted as a population whose needs were not being met in the traditional high school program.

The term *at-risk* typically focuses on the school dropout but can also be applied to those students in school who exhibit academic failure, abuse substances, are eligible for special education services, have lower socioeconomic status, or exhibit suicidal behaviors (Manning & Baruth, 1996). In conjunction with these factors, the district identified the five areas of academic failure, personal pain, family socioeconomic factors, family instability, and family tragedy as significant in these students' lives (Frymier, 1992), realizing that while the schools can directly impact the first two areas (Splittgerber & Allen, 1996), family instability and tragedy may be impacted indirectly through integrating community and social services in the school setting.

The profile of the at-risk student in the school district included a significant history of disciplinary referrals including short-term suspensions or expulsion. Many states have mandated that school districts develop alternative education programs as a step toward eliminating these two approaches. In Texas, legislation requires that districts provide a separate alternative educational setting for students removed from the classroom for disciplinary reasons (Texas Education Code 37.008). In this alternative placement, students are separated from the regular educational setting and provided appropriate academic instruction to maintain their current course load along with counseling services

to develop more appropriate behaviors. Students return to their home campuses after a review by a District Placement Committee. However, even though much time and effort was spent addressing the needs of at-risk students with significant discipline problems, students continued to experience behavior and academic problems on their return to the high school campus. Farrell, Peguero, Lindsey, & White (1988) explored the stories of such high school students, while other research has examined the voice of students with behavioral disorders (Crowley, 1993) and learning disabilities (Heshusius, 1984) in relation to their perceptions about instruction and teacher attitudes. However, no research is currently available focusing on the perspective of students marginalized by the traditional school system in their transition from the alternative school to their home school.

Framework:
Students' Multiple Worlds Model

In this article, we describe how one group of at-risk students experiences the public high school during their transition from a disciplinary alternative school to their home campus. The Students' Multiple Worlds Model developed by Phelan, Cao, and Davidson (1992) provides the framework for exploring this transition. This model identifies four patterns of adaptation that students employ as they transition across social settings:

1. *Congruent Worlds/Smooth Transitions:* Values, expectations, and rules between home/community and school are consistent, facilitating the transition between environments.

2. *Different Worlds/Border Crossing Managed:* Some inconsistencies exist between the values, expectations, and rules of home/community and school, but the transition between environments is managed.

3. *Different Worlds/Border Crossing Difficult:* Significant incongruities in values, expectations, and rules exist between home/community and school, making transitions problematic, but attempts continue to be made to function in both worlds.

4. *Different Worlds/Border Crossing Resisted:* Home/community and school have incongruent values, expectations, and rules, and little or no attempt is made to assimilate.

This model was developed to address the transition process of adolescents moving from family and social settings into the school and classroom setting. However, it has not been used to examine the experiences of students transitioning between contexts within the school setting. Specific areas meriting study include: (1) How do students who have been placed in a disciplinary alternative setting view the transition process when they return to the home campus? (2) Do they have successful strategies for moving from one setting to the other? (3) Are they able to adapt and reorient as the movement across contexts occurs? (4) From their perspective, what factors influence the success or failure of the transition?

The study reported here used the Students' Multiple Worlds Model as a framework within which to examine the following questions: (1) What do students identify as the most significant problems and issues as they transition from alternative school to regular high school? (2) What features in the classroom or school environment assist students in making a successful transition? (3) What are the social, emotional, and educational implications of the student's experience of the transition process? Gaining the student perspective on these issues allows educators to address students' needs appropriately, thereby increasing the likelihood of a successful reintegration into the home campus setting.

Constructing the At-Risk Students' Worlds

At-risk students exist in many worlds: They are members of a family, a peer group, a school culture, and a community. It is necessary to explore the entire sociocultural context of students' lives in order to gain insight into their perceived experience and, thus, their realities.

This study examines how at-risk students perceive the reality of the school experience using constructivist theory. This theory, based on the premise that people construct their own understandings of the world through interaction with problems, objects, and others (Prawat & Floden, 1994; Reynolds, Sinatra, & Jetton, 1996), suggests that reality cannot be separate from one's perception of it (Rhodes, 1987). From the social constructivist perspective, social interaction within socially bounded contexts is a primary consideration in how learning occurs. In this context knowledge is socially shared rather than a possession of a single individual. From such a perspective, the voice of at-risk students is crucial in examining the transition process from alternative setting to home campus.

Method

Interviews of students transitioning between school contexts provided the data used in this study. Within the social sciences, the interview process is recognized as a process of systematic inquiry (Colaizzi, 1978; Holstein & Gubium, 1995; Kavale, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1989). Set in the social constructivist framework, the interviewing process and its subsequent outcomes become social productions. Both the interviewer and the participant actively shape the form and content of what is said (Holstein & Gubium, 1995), meaning the interviewer monitors the ideas and feelings being expressed as well as the relationship between the interviewer and the participant.

The 10 students interviewed attend school in a small, rural school district. These subjects included 9 males and 1 female ranging from 13 to 18 years of age. The ethnic composition included 4 African-American, 3 Caucasian, and 3 Hispanic students. The community is predominantly Caucasian (60%), with African-Americans and Hispanics each making up approximately 20% of the population. In recent years, the African-American population has remained stable, while the Hispanic population has increased and the Caucasian population has decreased. The district has a single high school that houses grades nine through twelve, an alternative school (ACE) serving students with serious disciplinary offenses, and an academic alternative school (PRIDE) for students who wish to further their education but are not successful under the traditional academic program.

Students assigned to ACE must stay at least 12 weeks before returning to the home campus. Core academics and counseling are provided to all students while attending this school, and a transition

coordinator is assigned to monitor all students during their transition to the home campus.

Ten high school students who had recently returned from alternative school placement for nonviolent offenses participated in semiformal individual interviews (see Appendix for prompts) over a period of approximately three months. Originally, interviews were to be audiotaped, but because several students were uncomfortable with that process, notes were taken during the interviews. Students were asked to review the notes with the interviewer to check for accuracy and understanding.

Each interview session was held in the high school conference room. While a few guiding questions were asked to encourage students to focus on the experience of transition, students directed the conversation. Probes were offered to encourage elaboration and to ask for specific examples. Because both the transition coordinator and ACE counselor had established relationships with the 10 students, they reviewed the interviews to check for authenticity and consistency within the student comments. In general, the students appeared to speak freely, and the interviews are believed to be good representations of their perceptions.

The objective was to create a description of student experiences during transition in relation to negotiating both the boundary crossings within the school settings from alternative school to home school and the boundaries between family or community and school. Skill at negotiating the boundaries between family or community and school was used to type the students, with the four types of adaptation patterns in the Students' Multiple Worlds Model serving as the initial framework for examining the data. Students were interviewed, and their responses were used to type their patterns of adaptation when transitioning between worlds.

Although the themes identified from the interviews shed light on the complicated experiences of students crossing borders between educational programs, this is a small pilot study with a small sample size. In addition, interviews were with students in one school site in a rural area of Texas. Future research should explore the experiences of more students from a variety of regional settings. Further, placement offenses and recidivism were not considered and, thus, are areas to consider in future studies. However, although limited, the experiences of the students involved provide insight into their worlds as they maneuver through educational environments.

The themes emerging from these student interviews offer a descriptive structure for the complex experiences of the students. Although these themes provide an overall understanding of the information, excerpted quotes are included here to maintain richness and to allow the students' voices to speak.

Findings
Different Worlds/Border Crossing Managed

In the interviews, all of the students indicated some degree of difficulty with the transition process and could not be identified as having congruent worlds with smooth transitions. Each student indicated differences between the home and/or peer group world and the school world that complicated the transition from ACE to the home campus. However, two students were managing the border crossing. Three themes emerged when students appeared to be managing the transition process without significant upheaval. First, these students

had a record of average to above average academic ability with a history of positive experiences with school personnel. Secondly, most of their problems that had resulted in ACE placement had occurred outside of the school environment. Finally, these students voiced a strong sense of personal control over the outcome of their transition. Students who had found a way of belonging in the school community either through academic ability or athletic ability were comfortable in the return process, describing themselves as having value in the school. For instance, Shaun, an African-American 10th grader, commented that:

> I'm no different than other students. I know most of the teachers, and we get along pretty good. I made good grades. They know the person I am and I know them. Teachers can tell who you are. The teachers are nice and don't show favoritism. I'll probably get a scholarship. I'm a pretty good athlete too, so maybe that will help.

The managers of transition, although acknowledging that peers might make remarks about their having been to ACE, dismissed these comments. Reggie, an African-American junior, was clear that other students' behaviors were not going to control his when he reported, "Some people will try to mess with your head and bring you down. But it's just up to you. Don't get me wrong. Some people can get to me. They'll say, 'You've been to ACE!' But it's all up to you."

Different Worlds/Border Crossing Difficult

Four themes emerged among the six students who saw their worlds (family, peer, community and/or school) as distinct with few commonalties and who experienced difficulty transitioning between school placements. First, all of these students had a history of marginal academic performance, each having either been retained in school or failing courses in high school. References to marginal academic performance were frequently accompanied by explanations. Larry, a Caucasian freshman who had been retained twice and was repeating his freshman year, was clear that he felt overwhelmed by the academic requirements. However, he saw himself as successful in other areas of his life. He related:

> I don't want to fail. I just get bored sitting. I don't like to sit at a desk. They give you a lot of homework. It's hard to adjust. I just can't pass. I asked a friend for help. She (the teacher) wouldn't help me, but then I got in trouble. I made a whole lot of money last year doing taping and bedding. But then they made me come back to school. I want to pass.

Second, these students reported few positive interactions with adults on the high school campus. Although adults associated with school were generally viewed negatively, students were able to identify at least one on campus who was a positive force. Colby, a Caucasian 9th grader who had failed 7th grade, was continuing to struggle:

> School is a terrible place. They treat you like a bad kid. Like they'd call me out of class and threaten to tell Ms. H. (transition coordinator). When you're bad, they know. But one teacher is really nice. If the other kids start talking about ACE, she'll tell them to stop.

To be quiet. I don't like everyone knowing I was in ACE.

Hector, an Hispanic 10th grader with a history of gang involvement, found school a difficult environment:

Some of the teachers are all right. Most of them don't do anything. They didn't even know I was gone (to ACE). So when I came back, it was the same. The high school is really bad. My counselor is nice. She calls me in sometimes just to talk. She doesn't care if I've been to ACE. She just wants me to stay in school. But it's hard.

Third, these students voiced a feeling of persecution in the school setting. Students saw rules as impossible standards to meet and administrators and teachers as the enforcers of these impossible standards. Peers were equally untrustworthy. Jose, an 11th grade Hispanic student, described administrators:

They're always watching you. They really get on your nerves, you know. Mr. J. (the principal) was always there. When there was a fight, or about to be a fight, he called me out. I wasn't even there. Between classes, he was always there. I don't know. You got to be perfect. You can't get in any trouble the whole semester. The principals are looking for ways to get you in trouble. They really get on your nerves.

Not only were rules presented as impossible standards to meet but they also were applied differently to different students within the school. Michael, an African-American 11th grader, spoke with passion:

They have different rules for different people. I don't know why, but they're different. I know for sure that when K. (a girl friend) wore that dress to school, they called her Momma, and she had to go home and change. But T. was a cheerleader, and she wore the same dress and they didn't do anything to her. I mean, I saw it. It was the exact same dress. And she wore it all day. She even wore it a couple of more times. Now, I didn't see anything wrong with the dress. But it's not right to send one girl home and let the other one stay. I know they have different rules.

Colby, the 9th grade Caucasian student who felt teachers treated him like a bad kid, also saw rules as being enforced differently. "They watch you all the time. They treat you different. Like I got in a fight and they called my parents, but they didn't call his parents. And that's not right. They should treat all kids the same."

Finally, the problems reported by these six students experiencing difficulty with the transition tended to cluster in only one world (family, peer community, or school). Larry was working in home construction with his father after school and on weekends and had a small group of friends that enjoyed skateboarding. Colby participated in a local afterschool program for at-risk students. Jose and Hector, both first-generation immigrants, had strong support within the Hispanic community. Although both indicated some ties to local gangs, they were not reported to be gang members. Cody, a Caucasian 7th grader, worked after school for an area rancher taking care of cattle.

He described the rancher as "a good guy, who really lets me learn about stuff." Michael was a promising athlete in his 9th grade year, but after problems with drugs and illegal activities in the community, he was dropped from the athletic program. He is still struggling with these problems and is enrolled in a community program for drug abuse. He maintains contact with his football coach and hopes to rejoin the team.

Different Worlds/Border Crossing Resisted

Two students were unsuccessfully transitioning to the home campus. Themes of hopelessness, defeat, and anger emerged from their interviews. These students had poor academic skills, identified no adult support on the regular campus, and were experiencing difficulties in more than one world (family, peer, community, and/or school).

Eddie, a slender, soft-spoken African-American 10th grader, had a history of drug abuse and an identified learning disability. His mother was in jail, and in the past year, he had lived with three different family members. He told his story of failure with little emotion:

The teachers at high school don't really care about you. Well, some do, but most won't help you with your work and the classes are really noisy. Everybody is talking, and I can't concentrate, and I get in trouble. They could keep the classes quiet if they wanted to. They just don't care. I ask for help, and they just tell me to do it. I can't do it. But they don't care. The administrators just send you to detention. They don't help. You need to just do your work and stay out of trouble. But you can't do that because nobody will help you.

Angie, a seventeen-year-old Hispanic 9th grader, missed 98 days the previous year. She and her mother fight frequently about her dating the leader of one of the local gangs. Problems at home have compounded problems at school, and she cannot concentrate on her schoolwork. Under court order, she is attending school with more regularity than in the past, but she is not engaged in the educational process:

I don't care what happens at school. I just do my work. All people think I'm gonna be bad. All my friends are bad too. I've been arrested and locked up. I was locked up for a month. I want to prove people that they're wrong. I don't fight in school. I just don't come. I like to party and have a good time. I'm not bad, but people think I am. It's just that they won't let me see him (her boyfriend), so I leave school and go with him. It's not school.

Conclusions and Implications
What They Tell Us

The 10 students interviewed in this study identified difficulties in at least one of the four worlds of family, peer, community, and/or high school. As they moved back to the regular campus, these problem areas became issues of concern in the transition process. These findings indicate that in addition to academic instruction and counseling, an alternative disciplinary setting should begin planning efforts to address student-identified areas of concern impacting the transition

process. Listening to the voices of these 10 students suggests four avenues of early intervention to support successful transition between a discipline campus and a home campus: individual student interviews, exploration of school district alternatives, interagency planning and collaboration, and professional development training

Interviews. Each student assigned to an alternative discipline center should be interviewed to identify his or her perception of the problem areas prior to transitioning out of ACE. Students in this study were anxious to talk to someone about their problems. Every time the researchers came to the school, students asked to be interviewed, with the refrain, "Miss, Miss, can I talk to you today?" echoing repeatedly in the hallway. The transition coordinator checked with teachers and administrators about student progress, but the students themselves were involved only after a problem occurred. At ACE, the students developed relationships with teachers and identified many of the problems that surfaced in this study. However, there was no formal plan for transition or systematic involvement of students in the planning process.

Exploration of school district alternatives. Although these students had a history of academic difficulties, only one had been referred for assessment to determine the need for special education services. Information from student interviews, along with information from cumulative folders, provides a starting point to begin exploring alternatives within the school district that may allow a student to be successful. Students who have been assigned to a discipline center may have underlying learning or emotional disabilities that have been undetected because of behavior and/or attendance problems. As a result of this study, two students, Hector and Colby, were referred for assessment to determine the need for special education services. Both students had learning disabilities and qualified for additional assistance through special education.

Larry, the 17-year-old 9th grader, completed a self-referral to the accelerated academic program. With the shortened school day (four hours) and individual pacing, he has less difficulty completing his work. He continues to work with his father and would like to have his own painting business after graduation.

Interagency planning and collaboration. All the students involved in this study had complex situations that are not easily addressed. Although most of the students were involved with the juvenile justice system and/or the local mental health agency, coordination of these efforts tended to be at the administrative level without teacher, parent, or student input. There was no single plan or case management system in place that could ensure a focused, collaborative effort. Student interviews provide a natural vehicle for case management. Students become co-managers of their cases, using their knowledge about the agencies and people working with them individually to participate in the decision-making process. Training and practice, provided during placement in the alternative discipline center, allows each student to assume the role of self-advocate.

Professional development for staff. Students repeatedly referred to staff insensitivity to their situation. Only in rare cases did these 10 students see teachers or administrators as understanding the dif-

ficulties they faced returning to high school. Conversations need to be held about these obstacles, addressing specifically how teachers can help students returning to the high school campus, which teacher behaviors are helpful and which are detrimental, how administrators can be both supportive and responsible for a safe and orderly environment, and what role peers play in the process. Until teachers and administrators begin talking about these issues, at-risk students in transition are likely to continue to experience difficult, uncertain, and resistant boundary crossings.

Personalized instruction. The students participating in this interview process showed great insight into their educational needs. Eddie's insight was particularly astute. The ACE program he was in provided small classrooms with five to seven students per teacher. Instruction was individualized in order to meet the diverse needs across the curriculum. Staff was available to work individually with students and time was provided to discuss personal issues or concerns either in group or individual counseling. Eddie, a student with a learning disability, experienced success both academically and socially in the ACE program. However, he returned to a high school and a system that did not meet his needs.

Before going to ACE, Eddie thought that he was the problem, that he was dumb and just could not learn. In one of the final interviews, he sat quietly at the table, eyes down, rolling a pencil back and forth as he spoke:

> The teachers in ACE helped you with your work. And everybody worked, so it was quiet. Can you help me get back there? I know it's supposed to be for bad kids, but I could do my work. Nobody helps me here. Can you help me get back there?

Eddie can articulate what he needs: quiet and individual assistance. He cannot achieve these without help. The interview process, exploration of school district alternatives, interagency collaboration, staff development, and personalized instruction can help provide the program he needs to succeed. His transition can be a success. We can help Eddie, and others like him, "get back there."

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Authors

Amy Stevens Griffith is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Special Education at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, Whitewater, WI. Her interests include learning disabilities, best practices in special education, and systemic program change. griffita@uww.edu

Peggy B. Gill is an Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at the University of Texas at Tyler. Her interests include education policy development and leadership capacity building. pgill@uttyler.edu

Appendix

Guiding Prompts
1. How do you feel about returning to the high school?
2. What factors in the school or classroom have helped you make the transition from alternative school to the high school?
3. What factors at home or in your community have helped you make the transition from alternative school to the high school?
4. What factors have made it harder for you to be successful as you return to the high school campus? These could be things in the school, the classroom, your home or your community.
5. In your opinion, what could the teachers and school leaders do to help students returning from alternative placement?