Identity Border Crossings Within School Communities, Precursors to Restorative Conferencing: A Symbolic Interactionist Study

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Abstract

Our study uses an interdisciplinary theoretical lens to understand the complexity of community building as a precursor to restorative practices. Key to these measures is that offenders take responsibility for their actions and undergo reintegration into the school community. Yet, until these students feel they belong to the school community in the first place, "re"integration is moot. Thus, we interviewed 14 adults who had been school offenders, asking them what might have been done to make them feel a part of school, and then we focused analytically on the symbolic interactions they described. We first present their stories as vignettes using their own words to make illustrative points. Weaving interview data throughout fictional research writing (FRW), we conclude with classroom dialogical groups and restorative circles that illustrate how educators could develop communities where our participants could have seen themselves in others.

Key Words: identity, border crossings, schools, classroom, community, restorative conferencing, symbolic, interactions, interactionist, practices, responsibility, engagement, behaviors, offenders, fictional research writing, dialogical groups, teachers, shame, belonging, bullying, dropout prevention, social, emotional, development, culture, climate

Introduction

When school infractions occur, antithetical to retribution, restorative practices rely heavily on circle/conferencing group encounters. With pre-conference preparation, victims, offenders, and their supporters encourage a wrongdoer to take responsibility for the infraction. The group then determines how s/he can make amends (Braithwaite, 2000; Braithwaite & Mugford, 1994; Retzinger & Scheff, 1996). This is a social process, theoretically and practically, that intends to mend a school's cultural fabric. Yet flurries of scholars have debated the ennobling or debilitating role that "reintegrative shaming" and subsequent guilt can have on offenders before, during, and after restorative conferencing (e.g., Harris, Walgrave, & Braithwaith, 2004, p. 192; Stokkom, 2002).

Springing largely from Erikson's (1950) seminal work on identity development, some researchers remind readers that an infant's failure to experience autonomy and a toddler's inability to achieve initiative result in negative consequences: shame and guilt, respectively (Maxwell & Morris, 2002). Other scholars make distinctions between the two, claiming one or the other can lead to productive empathy, remorse, and subsequent restorative action (Harris et al., 2004; Moore, 1997; Parker & Thomas, 2009; Retzinger & Scheff, 1996; Scheff & Retzinger, 1991; Tangney, Wagner, Hill-Barlow, Marschall, & Gramzow, 1996). Initially Braithwaite and others painstakingly discriminate between effective and derisive shaming. The former focuses on the offense itself and reintegrates the recalcitrant student back into the school, whereas the latter results in stigmatizing (Braithwaite, 2000). Yet in later work, Braithwaite and other scholars acknowledge that the emotional volatility involved in a restorative conference *can* be hard to handle and devolve into both the offender or victim feeling negatively shamed (Harris et al., 2004; Morrison, 2006; Stokkom, 2002).

Irrespective of this debate, no restorative process can "re"integrate a victim or offender back into the classroom culture of which s/he *never* felt a part. In this article we select a group of 14 formerly disaffected students and uncover their stories of rejection and a few of acceptance to determine how educators might have encouraged an inviting classroom community. The reader will meet each of them through individual vignettes laced with their own words. Following the edicts of fictional research writing (FRW), we also use the participants' narratives or paraphrased statements, always nesting both within the original context, to create scenarios of a positive classroom community building circle and successful restorative conference (Spindler, 2008). In so doing, we answer Harris' (2001) call for more qualitative research on the restorative conferencing process and the multiple symbolic gestures of acceptance that could foster

belonging rather than isolation. We also echo Carr-Chellman, Beabout, Almeida, and Gursoy (2009) who contend that the perspectives from those rendered silent, such as the prisoner population in their study, can help schools create effective and just educational systems.

Theoretical Lenses

Various theoretical lenses emphasize these ideas and shed light on important details in our interviews. A healthy school culture evolves from continuous dialogue conducted on mutually constructed ground. Violence, bigotry, and hatred have no place within this safe clearing (Martin, 2002). With this in mind, planned or everyday interactions between and among teachers, administrators, and their students involve cultural bookkeeping where people continuously construct individual and group identities, minimizing liabilities and maximizing assets. Martin calls this "an exchange of gifts" (2002, pp. 133, 134, 139).

Although we are optimistic, achieving this goal is no small task. Giroux (1994) laments that at the twentieth century's end, "public schools have been unable to open up the possibility of thinking through the indeterminate character of the economy, knowledge, culture, and identity" (Modernist Schools section, para. 9). Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2008) point out that identity consists of multiple self-perceptions in a number of areas such as race, gender, ethnicity, and family or school, to name a few. Each person may bring one aspect of him/herself into a particular human interaction. Although, to understand how teacher–student identities can act in concert or be at odds, we also find a few singular identity development models helpful. For example, a Caucasian teacher has recognized her entitled upbringing and in the spirit of overcompensation she explains to an African American student that she understands his history of discrimination. Suspicious of what might be racism veiled as benevolence, the student recoils (Banks, 1994; Cross, 1978; Helms, 1995). In our newly reconstructed classroom communities, through self-reflection, both teachers and students are aware of their current identity development status and the potential conflicts that could result. In so doing, they could come to view each other as evolving in community (Zehr, 2009).

Methodology

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interaction provides the methodological lens for our study. It holds that humans construct themselves through continuous communication

with others. For example, Mead (1908/1909), a sociologist, and Dewey (Shalin, 1988, 2003/2000), a philosopher, see the "social situation [as] an organic whole in which both the individual and society are functional distinctions or two abstract phases of the same process" (Odin, 1996, p. 194). Cooley (1902) poetically sums, "Each to each, a looking-glass reflects the other that doth pass" (p. 184). Particularly relevant for us, Cooley (1902) holds that pride or shame are two potential outcomes in human interaction, the former contributing to a moral sense of self, the latter to self-effacement (Mead, 1908/1909). More contemporary restorative practice scholars might add respect to the positive column (Morrison, 2006). An examination of these guideposts determines what could bring together or divide an individual or group of students from others within any given classroom.

Relying heavily on Mead's (1934/1967) "I" and "me" concepts, we identified crucial interactions and interpreted and displayed them. Engaging in continuous reformation, a person brings his/her "I," a symbolized object of consciousness, into every interaction. S/he reacts to another's perception of her/him ("me") and changes accordingly (Mead, 1934/1967). The new "I" is a "creative response" to the symbolized structures of the "me" (Mead, 1934/1967, p. 197). Within an environment, such as a school, each communicator takes "the role of the other" to grasp "the meaning of signs, symbols, gestures, and indications" (Blumer & Morrione, 2004, p. 28). It is therefore as social beings we become moral beings (Mead, 1913). In education this happens when "the school becomes organized as a social whole, and…the child recognizes his conduct as a reflection or formulation of that society" (Mead, 1908/1909, p. 328). Thus, for isolated students and remote educators, affirming each other encourages the "old self" to disintegrate and a new moral self to emerge (Mead, 1913, para. 15).

Participants

As youngsters, our 14 adult participants were disconnected from school and eventually dropped out. With one exception they fall into what we believe are the most endangered group of students, those who are both aggressors and victims (Ahmed, Harris, Braithwaite, & Braithwaite, 2001; Morrison, 2006). They range in age from 19 to 46 and are all from working or underclass backgrounds. However, their race and/or ethnicity vary: two Native American, two African American, one Mexican American, and six Caucasian women; and one Hispanic and two Caucasian men (see Table 1). Through their words and insights, at the end of this study, we imagine and write about what might have been successful classroom symbolic interactions.

Table 1. Chart of Participants

Pseudo Names of Participants	Age	Ethnicity	Educational Status
Bradley	25	Caucasian	Pursuing GED
Pam	30	Native American	Pursuing GED
Matt	late 30s	Caucasian	Pursuing GED
Keisha	20s	African American	Pursuing GED
Frances	late 30s	Caucasian	Pursuing GED
Lena	37	Caucasian	Obtained GED
Maggie	31	Caucasian	Pursuing GED
Susan	20	Caucasian	Pursuing GED
Alexandro	22	Hispanic	Pursuing GED
Star	19	Native American	Pursuing GED
Maria	46	Hispanic	Pursuing GED
Beth	25	Caucasian	Pursuing GED
Paige	32	Caucasian	Pursuing GED
Sidney	32	African American	Pursuing GED

At the time of our investigation, our participants were part of a General Educational Development (GED) and post-secondary coursework program at a facility in one small Midwestern city's Community Resource Center (CRC), but they had lived all over the United States. Some had committed crimes, were on probation, and court ordered to the CRC. In other cases, the state's Department of Human Services (DHS) required attendance to receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), a time restricted program to prepare parents to support their families. (This accounts for the predominance of females in our sample.) Never having received a high school diploma, a few participants were voluntarily pursuing a GED with an eye on further vocational or college education. To some degree, all were engaged in an identity reconstruction process.

All three of us authors are aptly suited to conduct this study, but we also come from "positions" of authority (Tisdell, 1999) and personal biases that we better understood after engaging in researcher reflexivity (Salzman, 2002). Striving to prevent potential bias or an inability to hear what the participants

said, we shared our own experiences with each other. That helped us identify threats to the study's trustworthiness or goodness.

Although each of us is associated with higher education, there is some variation among us. The first author is a married, Caucasian mother of three, two sons and a daughter. She is a PhD candidate who has 22 years of combined experience as an adjunct college instructor and educator/administrator in elementary, secondary, and adult education. She has worked in the CRC and battles her desire to evaluate the program of which our participants were a part. Also a PhD student, the second author has 16 years experience in the social service field with the last 5 spent working as an adult transition educator for incarcerated offenders. She writes from the lens of being an African American, middle-class female who is shaped by being a Christian, first generation college student, and divorced mother of three daughters. For this study, her challenge was to remember her researcher—not practitioner—role: to listen, not instruct. Our third author, a Caucasian woman, has taught in inner city and rural high schools and spent 32 years in higher education working with educators from numerous geographic school settings. Long since removed from social service practice and having interviewed hundreds of participants from murderers to schoolchildren, she has extensive practice in listening and not judging (Patton, 1980). Our working- to upper-middle class backgrounds from African American and Caucasian neighborhoods led to many lively debates when interpreting the data.

Method

We conducted the interviews in a dialogical manner, asking participants to speak about their upbringings and school experiences. Bohm, Factor, and Garrett (1991) explain, "Dialogue is a way of exploring the roots of the many crises that face humanity today. It enables inquiry into, and understanding of, the sorts of processes that fragment and interfere with real communication between individuals, nations, and even different parts of the same organization" (p. 2). Dialogue also lends itself to unstructured conversations that provide safe communication (Bohm et al., 1991). This communication method further enhances trustworthiness by unearthing our participants' heartfelt experiences that we sought not to judge or influence but listen to and understand (Patton, 1980). Of course the participants could only represent their own perspectives, not those of the educators and other students' about whom they spoke. But their stories illustrate how they negatively interpreted "me's" from teachers' and other students' middle-class signs and symbols that stressed being well dressed and poised, for example. In the spirit of equity we also answered any questions about our lives that the participants asked (Mead, 1934/1967).

Analysis and Overview

We all reviewed the transcribed interviews, teasing out key interactions that formulated the participants' identities and dialectical self-perceptions (Patton, 1980). They came to school with only fragmented senses of self. Throughout their young lives, like pinballs they had bounced back and forth, living with different family members and in foster homes. In most of these settings they saw pejorative "me's" (Mead, 1934/1967): "You are poor, dumb, unlovable, inconvenient, or bad." They came to school more needy than most, longing for a secure connection "with others in the environment" and an experience of themselves "as worthy of love and respect" (Osterman, 2000, p. 325). After numerous meetings we compared our independent interview codes (Patton, 1980) and decided that there was one overarching theme or outcome of the participants' key encounters: *invisibility*, manifesting itself as shutting down, acting out, or quitting school. However, one other subtheme did thread some of the interviews. Similar to Carr-Chellman et al.'s (2009) prisoners, our participants sometimes wished for or remembered a caring teacher who might have squired them through a personally connective process. These themes are laced throughout the following vignettes.

Vignettes

Bradley

Bradley is a large man—over six feet tall. Reviewing his conversation, we saw both gentility and anger, confusing emotions for him. He had no criminal history but dropped out of school in the ninth grade, being diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and bipolar disorder. At 25, he decided to get a GED and adopt a new attitude about learning. He claims to have once had a childlike enthusiasm for school, but its beginning and end was encapsulated in a dramatic elementary school incident with a teaching intern.

Bradley's parents were not overtly abusive but bestowed on him little attention. In first grade he was supposed to have a special education teacher but was mainstreamed instead. However, a student teacher spent extra time with him, and he was devastated when she told him her time at the school had come to an end. The day she was slated to leave, Bradley sneaked out of the classroom to hide in the backseat of her car. When she drove away, she caught a glimpse of him in her rearview mirror. Bradley looked back at her through the same looking glass and saw ("me"), regret but rejection (Cooley, 1902). She took him back to class, and he never saw her again.

His successive days at school were scattered with fights and self-destructive acts like punching his hands through walls. He sought attention in other ways.

One year on Halloween, Bradley tied his ankle to a tree limb. Hanging upside down, he acted like a ghoul as neighbor children passed by and threw candy at the "crazy white boy." A testament to the human spirit the following day, he recounts,

> they had this thing in the park the next day for little kids who didn't get some, and I went there and said, "candy for sale," but it was really just, "come up and get what you want." I had four big trash bags full….They were all sweet kids.

Pam

In her early 30s, Pam began attending classes at the CRC "to make a better life for her four children." Her own home life had been abysmal. In her early elementary school years, the state's DHS removed Pam from her alcoholic mother's home. The young girl's situation went from bad to worse when she moved in with her maternal grandmother who was abusive in every way.

Nevertheless, as a Chickasaw, Pam constructed an identity based on collective rather than individualistic cultural settings (Chavez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999), so the small rural school she attended was a lifesaver. The teachers nurtured her personally and emotionally. But the moment she entered a large high school in her ninth grade year, Pam began suffering from acute anxiety. In search of comfort she filled the next two years with promiscuity and drug use. She rarely asserted herself in class and felt invisible to school personnel unless she had a violent outburst. Pam repeated the ninth grade and after a semester "just quit going….I don't even think anyone missed me. I don't remember anyone from school contacting me or my grandmother," she recalled.

Before Pam dropped out she had begun dating a popular wrestler who would come by her grandmother's house and give her personal hygiene products and other essentials. "His family was really nice to me," she said. They eventually married and had three children, but heavy drug use, primarily on his part, lead to violence, and Pam had no hope of reconciling with him.

Matt

At the time of our interview Matt was in his mid- to late-30s and lived in a compound with his parents and two uncles, none of whom graduated from high school. Matt's home life appears to have been unremarkable. Nevertheless he dropped out of school in junior high, working construction and other types of manual labor for a time. A felony conviction earned him probation, but he was court ordered to attend the CRC.

When asked about his high school experiences he focused on being a special education student. This confused Matt as he struggled not to absorb the special education "me" (Mead, 1908/1909). "I guess they thought I was stupid

or something. It didn't bother me, but it made me feel dumb." "Did you ever make friends with any of…the kids?" we pressed. "No, they were dumb; my friends were in the smart class," he replied.

In other respects Matt perceived himself an outsider. As a Caucasian minority in a junior high school he fought constantly with African American and Mexican youngsters for whom he had great disdain. Even so, his second wife was an African American. "That's the worst thing I ever did, marrying her," he recollected. When we asked if multicultural courses might have given him a less racist attitude he replied, "I don't care to learn Spanish." He needed much more than Martin Luther King Day in January and *Cinco de Mayo* in May to even begin to broaden his horizons (Banks, 1994; Cross, 1978; Helms, 1995).

Keisha

For Keisha home life was trying. After her stepfather left, her mother began dealing drugs to support the family, was arrested, and sentenced to several years in the penitentiary. At 12, Keisha began living on her own and taking care of her younger brother until their maternal grandmother took them in. It is no surprise that Keisha went to school with a "mother" identity that she was conflicted about shedding. Once, she went in tears to the only teacher "who didn't take my shit" and confessed she lived alone with her brother. The teacher told her to concentrate on school, but Keisha woefully responded, "I can't abandon my family." Keisha asked the educator not to tell anyone about her situation but suspected this was not the case. When asked how she knew, Keisha said, "You can just see it in *their* eyes" (Mead, 1934/1967; Cooley, 1902).

Although Keisha felt responsible for her brother, she hated it when the students called her a "goody two shoes," because school authorities constantly called her out of class to calm her disruptive brother. Tired of being picked on, she began fighting back and never quit. Anyone who "messed" with her felt the force of her fists and feet, actions for which she was constantly suspended. Although two Caucasian girls paid her to beat up boyfriends, it appeared that Keisha, an African American, accosted fellow students without prejudice. When she was not in combat she sat on the back row of class and did not say a word. By her 10th grade year, the road to the back door was paved. Keisha walked down it and never looked back.

Frances

Frances's life had been similar. "I went to 13 high schools.…My dad did road construction, and when he would finish a job we would move." She therefore made no connections in school only to say "hello" and "goodbye." Then she added, "My mother didn't care. She was off cheating on my dad. So you know…I didn't care." Youngsters like her, Frances believed, should remain

in school and receive "one-on-one" attention. She also suggested that "good" teachers reveal themselves as people and talk with students about their problems (Palmer, 1998). Giving an example, Frances remembered one teacher who listened to her and confessed that his parents had also parted ways when he was a boy. Frances also praised one of the CRC teachers for helping her individually and caring about her life. Small as it seems, that was all Frances really wanted.

Lena

Very similar to Frances and the other parent/participants, Lena was under reconstruction. However, she was far from that goal. At 37 she had lost custody of her three children, ages 12, 14, and 16 years old. She explains that she left them with her sister when she moved out of town, because the youngsters wanted to stay in the same school. While Lena was gone her sister "went crazy," drove to the school, and "threaten[ed] to kill" Lena's children. Before that time, Lena seemed to have educationally advocated for her youngsters. "I told the teachers every year that my oldest daughter had to have one-on-one help, but they do not listen." Early in her children's lives, after they went to bed, Lena spent hours trying to figure out their schoolwork to little avail. Sadly, at the time of our interview, Lena was even unsure what grade her children were in.

Her own educational experiences were not much different. She had to "do over" the third and fifth grades. Lena argued that teachers knew her older disruptive sister and "held it against me." One of Lena's fifth grade teachers just "passed me to sixth grade just to get me out of there; I didn't know the material. I was lost," Lena explained. However, she did describe one history teacher who "actually listened.…This teacher would work one-on-one with the student who needed the help," even in subjects like math. He listened "to our questions and concerns," she continued, and "he would explain it again and again if the students did not understand." For Lena this was too little too late. A junior in high school at 18, she was already the mother of two, divorced, and remarried. Her mother would not keep her children while she attended school, so Lena dropped out. It took 11 years and 6 attempts to earn a GED, but she achieved her goal and hoped to become a licensed practical nurse.

Maggie

At 31, Maggie was similar to our other participants but had enough innocence to tell us, "You must love what you do [helping students learn]." Maggie lived in a homeless shelter with three of her five children. She had given her twin daughters up for adoption. Maggie's own school years were drab, but she recalled one teacher who "loved what she was doing.…She cared about all of us. You don't see her mad. If she had been we would have known, because you can see [how the teachers felt about you]. It's in their eyes; the eyes tell everything," she added (see Cooley, 1902).

Suspicion was a part of her everyday life. She had been raped and stalked and was so hypervigilant that when a man once looked suspiciously at two of her children she scurried them away. Desperately trying to get her life directed, a few years ago she got a job as a cook, but an altercation with a coworker lead to dismissal. To receive DHS aid she had to attend the CRC for adult education classes. At least there Maggie saw acceptance in her teachers' eyes (Cooley, 1902).

Susan

Susan was already reflecting at age 20 on how she became a high school dropout. "If I had it to do over I would enroll myself in school and finish." At 17, "I moved to a different town to live with my mom, [and] she never enrolled me in school. The days became weeks; the weeks turned into months; and then it just seemed too late to return." Before that time, Susan had been in special education. The struggle to learn became so unbearable that she "started not socializing with other students. I felt bad that the others got it, and…I never felt like I fit in anywhere. I was an outcast. I just never really had friends."

When we asked about her teachers, Susan flatly stated, "They didn't like me. When I was in fourth grade, my teacher would help everybody but me." Illustrating the stigma of poverty on identity development (Phillips, 2007), Susan continued, "But when it came to me, she would get all stuck up and mean. She would get mad at me if I didn't understand it. She didn't like it because it would take up her time." Teachers also brought bags of gifts for other students, Susan maintained, but never for her. There seems to have been one exception: "The math teacher was the best teacher I have ever had." According to Susan, this teacher knew "how to have fun. If you had a question, she would be right there to help you. She would take you to the board and show you. She would show us that she cared about us by buying things for everybody. No one was left out." Concurrent with our study, Susan voluntarily attended CRC classes to study for the GED test. "This is all for my daughter. She is my motivation… and I [also] want to go to college."

Alexandro

Alexandro, a 22-year-old Hispanic, had a tumultuous and violent criminal past. However, his goal was to earn a GED and pursue a college degree, quite a noteworthy ambition given his childhood environment. He was brutalized by stepfathers and in the eighth grade defended himself against one of them in what could have been a death match. But Alexandro just stabbed his mother's husband in the leg. The older man responded by saying, "Don't wound what you can't kill." Alexandro continued to live by that code.

He learned similar messages from school but did not give up until his senior year. A crucible for Alexandro was his "no touching rule." Despite teachers being keenly aware of this in elementary school, they poked him to wake him up and directed him physically in other ways. Even so, Alexandro was still reachable. He had one eighth-grade teacher who "respected me, and I respected her." This teacher even stopped by Alexandro's house to bring him homework when he missed school and took time to talk to him about his problems. Alexandro said he could really trust her and that she encouraged him to graduate.

Nevertheless, eventually he dropped out and supported his mother and siblings through illegal activities. One day he returned home to find his mother's boyfriend beating his brother. Alexandro retrieved his gun and killed the man. "Don't wound what you can't kill" were words he had never forgotten, although the teacher who went to his home lived on in the heart of this broken young man.

Star

A 19-year-old mother, Star was also working toward her GED. Her attitude had evolved substantially since her own school days. As a teenager she changed to a school where all the students seemed to belong to their own cliques. Star tried to "fit in" by moving from one group to another. Although a Native American herself, the Indian student clique excluded her, depriving Star of social nutrients needed for a healthy racial identity (Bryant, 1998). Ignominy turned to violence in the eighth grade. She even travelled to other schools to find someone new to taunt. Finally, "I found a White girl that I (became) friends with." Although Star dropped out of school because she got pregnant, she still called this young woman her friend. Possibly she was the only one, because Star felt shamed by everyone else, especially when she became pregnant. When we met Star she had found a job in a daycare center, and, pregnant with her second child, had begun working on a GED.

Maria

It seems like quite a contradiction that Maria, a 46-year-old mother of three, commented, "I loved school, but I left…before I graduated." A Mexican American with a thick accent, Maria relished approval in her school's Caucasian middle-class culture. She achieved this by never getting into trouble, and teachers often chose her to run errands and perform other bureaucratic tasks. Even so, at 19 Maria quit after she had her second baby. "I have to blame my son. I went into delivery right there" in school. Probably drawing attention to what had been a well behaved but imperceptible young women, school officials told her she was too old to continue school. She enrolled in another institution for student parents but never graduated. Despite being marginalized

herself, Maria did not speak or correspond with her incarcerated brothers, because they were "dumb…I don't even talk to my children. If they don't call me; I don't call them."

Dedicated in other ways, Maria worked at a convenience store for four years but became disgusted with part-time workers who "wouldn't pick up the slack." She quit to become a clerk in the county jail and can keep that position if she earns a GED. But she has set her sights on more professional positions where she could capitalize on her bilingual abilities in Spanish and English. Perhaps she will find a border crossing between the two cultures after all (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993).

Beth

Beth's earliest educational memories went back to the third and fourth grades on the mainland and fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth grades in Guam. They were not good. A Caucasian teenager, she was a minority among Pacific Islanders. She was teased and bullied and finally decided to fight one girl. For that she was suspended. Beth did make friends with two Black girls but still felt like an expatriate. The academic curriculum was also a challenge, because Beth struggled with reading and math. To her, the teachers seemed caring, but, she reasons, really did not help her much because she was quiet.

In the ninth grade, Beth got pregnant and dropped out. After a succession of violent episodes within her family, her mother relinquished custody, and Beth moved in with the baby's father, a 21-year-old Pacific Islander. The relationship survived 10 years, and Beth bore two more children. She eventually moved off the island and is continuing her education at the CRC.

Paige

Likewise, at 32, Paige was in the CRC program to make a better life for her two children. With no high school diploma, her employment opportunities had always been limited to low-level nursing home work, but she dreamed of becoming a registered nurse. She was highly involved in her 11- and 13-year-old children's education and was hypervigilant about them being treated fairly. "[I just want] the teachers to teach, and that's all," she stated.

Her own school experiences were mediocre to bad. She was teased and bullied because she had shabby clothes, again substantiating that being perceived as poor inhibits positive identity development (Phillips, 2007). Giving an example, she explained, "Teachers were mean, and they had their little pets. If you didn't do it just right, and if you needed extra attention, then you were put to the side." Yet Paige remembered a third grade teacher who worked with her and seemed interested in her home life. As with the other participants, this was not enough. Forced into a motherly role at an early age, Paige dropped out of school in the tenth grade:

> I was the one who took care of my younger brother and did the house cleaning, because my mother had a controlling husband….I was holding down a job and the house and school…I had to choose to either not do things around the house or work or not do school.

She proclaimed that she was now ready to earn a GED.

Sidney

Like all of our participants, as a child Sidney was academically and socially needy. She said school officials attempted to retain her in fourth and eight grades. By the second time around, she quit trying. She felt invisible, explaining:

> One day in class, I had my hand up, and the teacher just kept bypassing me and acting like I was non-existent. She looked straight at me and straight bypassed me. When I took it to the principal, the principal told me I was just seeing things. It is remarkable that there were a couple of White students, and I'm not racist, she kept bypassing them too. She was only paying attention to the ones she thought would make it.

An African American herself, it appeared that class and aptitude trumped race in Sidney's case. However, Sidney's soccer coach listened to her struggles at home and seemed to care, but that was not enough to keep her in school.

Her life after school could be described as one tragedy after another. She was in violent relationships, did time in jail, and abused drugs and alcohol. At 32, Sidney was enrolled in GED classes and wanted to be a juvenile detention officer helping young people "not to go down the criminal path. I want to talk to the juvenile inmates while they are in jail. You can be one-on-one with them… If I can get through to one kid, it would make me happy." Sidney's criminal record will probably prevent her from accomplishing this goal, but that she even aspired to it was commendable.

Building Community Classrooms

Reversing our participants' negative school experiences and capitalizing on a few of the good ones, we now recommend constructive ways that a teacher can forge and sustain a classroom community where identities evolve in context and students feel accepted. To do this we offer two fictional scenarios of class meetings that the interviews inspire—one in a third and one in a ninth grade class. We use participants' exact words or devise quoted remarks that reflect the context and spirit of their thoughts and beliefs. In addition, we place seven of our participants' former selves in either an elementary or high school classroom, based on the preponderance of primary or secondary school recollections in their interviews. Our ficitional John Barnes, an elementary teacher,

and Bella Dupree, a secondary American history teacher, are composites of the few educators who touched our participants' lives in positive ways. The high school class meeting paved the way for a fictive restorative circle group in the high school classroom.

Related to symbolic interactionism, fictional research writing (FRW) guided our pen. FRW is a multigenred approach to presenting data that may be displayed in a play, poem, or short story, to name only three examples. Generally, such "dramaturgy is…the study of how human beings accomplish meaning in their lives" through acting out everyday encounters (Brissett & Edgley, 1990, p. 2; Goffman, 1959). The intent of our dramaturgies reflects a preference for "texts that imagine how the world could be different through presenting specific problems anchored in their historical, cultural, and biographical contexts" (Denzin, 2000 as cited in Spindler, 2008, p. 9). In our case, the conversations stem from the students' youthful experiences, but now the teacher guides the youngsters toward connectedness, not invisibility. In the elementary and secondary conversations we begin to see positive "I" to "me" (Mead, 1934/1937) reconstructions of each student's identity that reflect the group's collective mission to learn, grow, and appreciate each other.

Scenarios

Mr. Barnes' Third Grade Class

Driving to school on a crisp Friday morning in November, John Barnes relives the telephone conversation he had earlier this morning with his ex-wife. He has not seen his children in two months, and this weekend's visit is cancelled. However, much of the frustration and pain melts when he pulls into the parking lot of a campus of buildings, an elementary, junior high, and high school. He smiles as he looks at them, then exits his car and walks to his third grade classroom. The children will soon come streaming in. After working in the corporate world for decades, Barnes left to be a teacher. For the first time in his life, he feels like he is making a social contribution (Palmer, 1998). He has become addicted to the smell, sounds, and tussle of that old but throbbing-with-life elementary school building.

Barnes is working on a master's degree with Bella Dupree, a high school teacher on the same campus. In their programs of study they have read many articles on restorative practices and learned that an appreciation for community building, effective teaching, classroom meeting, and social and emotional learning (SEL) literature leads to classroom climates crucial for restorative practices' (such as circle groups) success (Edwards & Mullis, 2003; Frey & Doyle, 2001; Landau & Gathercoal, 2000; see also CASEL, http://casel.org/). In the spirit of collegiality and working through traditionally isolated classrooms,

Barnes and Dupree visited each other's classrooms often. They decide that because many class sessions end with students' idle chatter, they would use a portion of that social time to create weekly community building and socially satisfying group dialogues. They reason that these encounters also complement Barnes's authentic constructivist curricula, including inquiry-oriented mathematics (Cassel, Reynolds, & Vaughn, 2002), science (Martin, 2006), English, and both Barnes's and Dupree's social studies curricula. In each subject, students make meaning through real world experiences and conceptual reasoning (Greene, 1988; Osterman, 2000; Ryan & Stiller, 1991) which pave the way for academic success (Fuller, Wood, Rapoport, & Dornbusch, 1982).

An example of this type of teaching: Barnes greets all 20 of his students as they file in his classroom. Knowing what to do, the children scurry to a carpeted area of the largely linoleum floor and sit in a circle. Bradley has a difficult time getting there. With the medical condition of ADHD, he is easily distracted. Often, he shows Barnes "one more thing" before he gets settled. However, the teacher knows how devastated Bradley is since the student intern left and gently nudges him into the group. Soon they are both sitting in the circle where all the students are wriggling back and forth on their bottoms, eagerly anticipating hearing and being heard (Osterman, 2000).

Thinking of his own situation, Barnes says, "Today I would like to select the topic. I am upset and sad because…." He then picks up from the floor a wooden bear the size of a small chopping board. It signifies that he will be the first to share and then pass it on to the person on his right. He explains, "I am not going to see my children this weekend, and I am very disappointed." There is a moment of silence. Bradley is sitting next to Barnes, so he takes the bear from his hand. "I feel sad too, Mr. Barnes. I miss Ms. Brooks, that teacher from the college. She said she would come back to see me and hasn't yet. I think she has forgotten me." Lena then recovers the talking piece. "At least Ms. Brooks acted like she liked you. I am mad, because my sister's teacher don't like my sister, so she don't like me. I don't like her back." Taking her turn, Susan says, "I know what you mean Lena. Teachers don't treat everyone the same. Last year, Ms. Johnson brought treats for everyone but three of us. That's not right. I think it may be because I just don't have the right kind of clothes."

Unconsciously, some of the students begin to nod their heads in agreement. These symbolic gestures begin to dissipate many students' loneliness (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934/1967). Paige soon reaches for the bear, saying, "My clothes aren't always as nice as the other kids either." Barnes then allows, "I will say something the next time the teachers are all together. I won't mention any names. I'll be really cool about it," he assures them.

Alexandro, one of Barnes' more hostile students, then takes the bear and his turn. The preceding event has not quelled his anger. "I'm mad because teachers touch me. I've told the PE teacher, the music teacher, and all the rest of them that's my rule, but they just keep touching me. Last week a teacher touched me in the hall. Then she said a big word like I was 'uncontrollable,' because I got mad. Mr. Barnes goes by my rule, but he helps me with my work. You can do it both ways."

He pushes the bear toward Frances. Without touching Alexandro's hand she quickly passes it to the next person. Frances is a quiet loner. Barnes knows his students (Nichols, 2006) and says not a word, as Keisha takes the bear. Barnes has had several conversations with Frances about her parents' divorce and shared with her his similar experience. "Frances is about ready to talk," he thinks, as he smiles at her and then directs his attention to Keisha.

Keisha addresses Alexandro, "I think I kinda' know what you mean, Alexandro. I wish teachers would just do their jobs. I will be working in class and doing my thing when a teacher will come and get me to talk to my brother who is causing trouble." Scanning the circle with her eyes, she says, "When that happens you all quit callin' me 'goody two shoes.'"

Some of the students cast their eyes to the ground. Then several shake their heads up and down in agreement. "I am proud of you all," says Barnes. "You have explained your angry feelings without fighting. Do you see how some of you feel the same way?" he asks. Some say, "Yes," while Alexandro and a few of the others begrudgingly breathe deeply and say, "yeah, I see." Barnes comments to himself, "Man they've come a long way since September. They're beginning to understand that they're not alone" (Finn & Voelkl, 1993; Greene, 1988).

Mrs. Dupree's American History Class

That same morning, Bella Dupree walks into the high school and starts her ninth grade American history class with a group dialogue. This class extends two semesters with the same students. Her class is sitting on chairs they arranged in a circle. Seated among them, Dupree notices a slightly perceptible flutter in her stomach. It had come and gone ever since she first stepped into a classroom almost 20 years ago. These sessions remind her how important her job is to the school community and to the larger society as well. "These students will be tomorrow's adult citizens," she thinks. "I think they just might make a difference. This year they're beginning to put themselves in the others' shoes" (Landau & Gathercoal, 2000).

The history teacher has issues of her own today. She has a growth on her neck and does not yet know her biopsy results, but she takes a deep breath and begins. Many times she asks the students to select a topic, but, like Barnes, today she rhetorically requests, "Let's talk about fear today." Sidney, the student

to Dupree's left, begins, "I was afraid I was going to have to go back a grade. But my coach stood up for me and didn't let them hold me back a year." Dupree and other students purse their lips and slightly nod, because they also highly regard the coach. Matt has a similar experience. "I was afraid that I would be kicked out of school, too, but that new principal, Mr. Beeler, told me to go to in-school suspension, because he liked seeing me around the school," he adds. "Some kids don't get no help there, but a teacher was there to help me pass that math test. If I didn't get it, then I'd have to go back to ninth grade again next year," Matt explains.

Dupree is glad to hear these positive responses but has studied bullying and relational aggression in some of her graduate classes and wants to find out if students are getting support when that happens (Morrison, 2006). Dupree asks, "Do teachers help you when you are afraid of other students?" Pam, who had not said anything yet, blurts out, "There was this one girl that two girls picked on, and I knew how she felt so *I* stuck up for her. I fought those two girls. They tried to jump me in the bathroom, but I surprised them. Now everyone says, 'leave Pam alone.'" "Do you think you went too far, Pam?" asks Dupree. "Well I don't know. It's just better than being beat up or having your friends beat up." "Could Pam's story have gone another way?" Dupree asks the group. "Oh, I guess maybe it coulda' gone another way if someone like you, Mrs. Dupree, had seen it coming, and asked Pam and those other girls to come to your room and talk it out," says Paige. "Yeah," Beth says, "I liked it when I told a teacher I was being picked on, and she made them stop."

Star is listening intently but is always hesitant to speak. She wants to talk but instead looks down and wrings her hands as she contemplates her words. Dupree, who rightly assumes that Star has something to contribute, gently tries to engage her by first complimenting her newly manicured nails. Smiling, Star thanks her and tells the class, "this is a special type of design," as she dangles her hands in front of her. Then Star says, "Mrs. Dupree, I know you like my nails, but do you still like me even though I'm pregnant?" Not waiting for an answer, Star looked around the circle and admitted, "I'm scared all of you will hate me." "I don't hate you," Maggie assures her. "In this class everyone just gets treated the same. Just come here if you get afraid, girl. I can just tell Mrs. Dupree likes you too. You can see it in her eyes. The eyes tell everything," Maggie concludes (Cooley, 1902).

Maria had been thinking about Dupree's motivation for asking about fear and asks, "Mrs. Dupree, are you ok?" "Yes and no," Dupree admits, "I had to go to the doctor, and I didn't like it either. The waiting room had a lot of old magazines and a bunch of people who looked kinda' distant." "Don't worry, Mrs. Dupree," Maria reassures her, "my daughter went to the doctor and didn't

like it either. I was scared too, but it was alright in the end." "What a responsibility Maria has," Dupree thinks. "And yet here she is comforting me." Dupree smiles at Maria and says, "Thanks, Maria." These symbolic gestures are signs of trust where a student and teacher accept each other's good intentions (Mead, 1934/1967; Freire, 1970).

A Successful Restorative Conference

During the spring semester Matt and Maria have an altercation in Dupree's class. Diagnosed as mentally challenged, Matt is struggling with one assignment, so he asks Maria to help him. He could have asked Dupree and usually felt free to do so, but this time he wants to show her he can do it without her. "I don't get it either, Matt," Maria says. Matt is frustrated and lashes out. "You dumb girl. You never know any of the answers. That's why I don't like to hang out with you. You're dumb." Maria shoots back, "All I want is to be accepted by people like you, and you're no better than me, a stupid Mexican." Dupree rushes into the fray and quiets the two students. She then reaches for her cell phone and texts Barnes, "I need your help with a couple of kids." "I'll be right there," he responds. Then Dupree calls the principal to request a cover for their classes while they talk to Matt and Maria separately in empty rooms. Before deciding to create restorative practices in each of their classrooms, Dupree and Barnes had talked to their respective principals about the process. The administrators had agreed to do everything possible to enable this innovation. This included, whenever possible, providing a counselor or teacher with a planning period to supervise their respective classes while Dupree and Barnes prepared for a restorative circle encounter. As soon as Barnes's substitute arrives, he walks to the high school building and Dupree's classroom. Her replacement is already there, and the two friends and colleagues walk Matt and Maria into the hall. "Will you talk to Matt?" Dupree asks Barnes, "and I'll talk to Maria?" "Sure," Barnes answers.

Barnes and Dupree work with his and her respective students, encouraging them to remember the common feelings they had revealed in many classroom dialogues. Matt agrees to take responsibility for starting the argument, and both students agree to participate in a restorative circle. Running out of time before the bell rings, both teachers plan to direct the circle session the next day in Dupree's history class. In graduate classes, each teacher has learned that even administrators at some of the nationally known restorative practice schools, found in at least 21 states, do not hold restorative circles within the classroom (Haney, 2008). Believing this alienates all those involved, Barnes and Dupree have decided, whenever possible, restorative conferences will be held in class.

The following day Dupree and Barnes are ready. They are eager to facilitate a real life restorative circle session. The two teachers and the students arrange the chairs in a circle. "Thank you for being here. You have all told me privately that you want to be part of this process," Dupree says to the group. "We are here today to discuss yesterday's disruption." Aware of Matt's low self-esteem at the beginning of the school year and the progress he has made, Dupree is direct but nonjudgmental (Umbreit & Coates, 2000). She resolves to do this although, as an African American, she is personally troubled by Matt's racism but has seen it lessen with time. "And, in the end," she ponders, "this class will come up with the solution to its own communal problem. I need to stay out of that. They will do fine." Dupree continues to engage the class, "We are not here to decide whether Matt is good or bad but to address what happened yesterday and come up ways Matt might make right what he did" (O'Connell, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 1999).

"Matt," she says, "what did you do yesterday that you've told Mr. Barnes and me that you regret?" "Well, I needed help with an assignment. I feel stupid a lot of the time, and I'm ashamed that I don't understand some things. The teachers seem to like Maria, so I asked her to help. When she didn't know either, I guess I just saw myself in the mirror, and it made me mad" (Cooley, 1902). "I called her a 'dumb girl,' and that was really wrong. She's a decent person. She's heard me knock Mexicans before, and she hasn't gotten in my face. Maria, I really dissed you bad. I'm sorry."

"Maria," Dupree then says, "what was the hardest thing about Matt's outburst for you to take?" (O'Connell et al., 1999). "It brought up all the feelings I had about Matt at the first of the year." Turning to Matt she explains, "You used to hurt my feelings, 'cause I knew what you thought about Mexicans. You don't know that even though the teachers like me, sometimes I have trouble keeping up with the class. I saw you were a lot like me, just mad at the world. We both just want people to accept us. Don't get me wrong. What you said was bad, but I shouldn't'a yelled back at you."

"Pam, you are one of Maria's supporters. What would you like to say?" Dupree asks (O'Connell et al., 1999). Pam was painfully shy at the beginning of fall term but, learning to feel a part of something, when Maria asked her to be a supporter, Pam had agreed. "Matt," she tentatively begins, "I know that you're mad at kids who've jumped you in the hall, and I understand when you want to take it out on someone, but if you can't treat us right you won't have nobody on your side. We've been here for each other in the class all year. I felt hurt when you hurt Maria."

Matt had asked Star to be one of his supporters (O'Connell et al., 1999). They had both identified with each other's feelings of isolation, Matt because

he felt "dumb" and Star because her own racial clique of Native Americans had rejected her. As the dialogical conversations had evolved in Dupree's class, Matt had realized that minorities were not all an amorphous group scheming to get him. Star was an outcast, too.

Star spoke. "What Matt did was wrong, but I know how he feels when we leave Mrs. Dupree's class. I know what it's like to be ignored, and sometimes you just want to hurt someone. None of us really have anyone to talk to at home. This is just all there is for us, this class." Looking around the circle, she pleas, "We can't let it fall apart."

"Matt, what do you think about what has happened here today?" asks Dupree (O'Connell et al., 1999). "I feel bad I let you guys down," he says. Looking down at the floor, Matt is fighting back tears of frustration and sadness.

Dupree then asks, "Mr. Barnes do you have anything to add?" "Well, yes," he says, "what does this group think Matt should do?" (O'Connell et al., 1999). A bit of empathy is now surging within Maria's heart, and she knows that Matt is devastated. She doesn't want the other students to see him cry, so she makes a little joke, "Why don't he say 10 Hail Mary's?" The other students know she is Catholic, and a slight chuckle ripples through the room.

"Ok," says Mr. Barnes, "we can put that on the list" (O'Connell et al., 1999). "What else?" "Why don't he work with Maria on another assignment with Mrs. Dupree there to help them?" Pam asks. "That would show him that they can work together, and Matt don't have to get mad when he don't get it. Mrs. Dupree can help." Then Sidney adds, "Maria, I know you're sorry about yelling back at Matt. I think it would be a good idea for you two to work together and get it right."

"Do we have other suggestions?" asks Dupree. Students just shake their heads "no," and Dupree gives that decision time to sink in. "Ok, let's take a moment to congratulate each other on a great meeting, and then we can get back to work" (O'Connell et al., 1999). "You know we are looking at the Civil Rights movement from several different perspectives. You each have one to study and write about, but why don't you all work together today? I'll put some of you at different tables and will walk around to help. Matt, you and Maria work together." Dupree thinks, "We have made progress toward becoming a community, had a successful restorative circle group, and the students' social studies assignment was born out of experience" (Greene, 1988; Osterman, 2000; Ryan & Stiller, 1991). Addressing the group, Dupree says, "Thanks so much, Mr. Barnes, for being with us." "You're welcome." he says. "I'll be in again," he tells the group, "but just to visit next time, right?" he asks them. "Right," most of them respond. The others nod their heads and seem satisfied as well.

What We Have Learned

As just illustrated, restorative school practices stress the importance of relationships over and above absolutist (retributive-laden) rules. Many schools have repaired their school communities after student infractions by implementing restorative circle group encounters where owning responsibility takes precedence over placing blame and providing punishment. To achieve this goal, a culture of respect, inclusion, and accountability are paramount. But if a perpetrator never feels membership in the school community s/he cannot experience the necessary restorative practice of "reintegration"—thus the need for our study.

Our 14 formerly disaffected students gave us profound insights into student offender-victims. They shared compelling tales of invisibility. The interviews were heavily laden with negative "I" to "me" symbolic interactions (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934/1967): "I don't get one-on-one attention from teachers;" "I got jumped by Black guys, because I am White, so I hate all African Americans;" "students and teachers put me down or ignore me, because I don't have the right clothes;" "Teachers have their favorites;" "My stepdad beats me, so I isolate myself from others;" and "I had a baby, and I want to make life different for him than it was for me, in school and at home." A few of the participants' caring teachers guided us to construct positive solutions. These educators interacted with them in affirming ways and remained close to their hearts. Even if they were not aware of the theory that supported such actions, they practiced it. Of course even the most concerned teachers cannot solve all youngster's problems, but our participants showed us the way to envisage situations that could have made a difference (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2008), the chance to see inviting reflections of self in another's eyes (Mead, 1934/1967). Without such teacher-led dialogical sessions, relational knowledge of each other (students and teachers) are impeded, and teachable moments remain illusive. The situation then goes from bad to worse when a retributive (punish the offender and isolate the victim) classroom becomes the only recourse.

While cognitive behavior and other psychological course work are necessary to undergraduate teacher education curriculum, preparing our fictional classes for later restorative circle encounters convinced us that another cadre of theory and practice is also crucial. Teacher education and continuing professional development must emphasize theory and practice that emphasizes relationships that lead to healthy community building. They are represented in the broad areas of study that inspired Barnes and Dupree (see CASEL, http://casel.org/; Edwards & Mullis, 2003; Frey & Doyle, 2001; Landau & Gathercoal, 2000) and the more pedagogical calls for contextual learning in any

number of academic areas (Cassel, Reynolds, & Vaughn, 2002; Fuller et al., 1982; Greene, 1988; Martin, 2006; Osterman, 2000; Ryan & Stiller, 1991). The holistic teaching vision inspired by the above scholars and many others offer fledgling and seasoned educators alike a magnifying glass to highlight the hidden spaces wherein connected identity development can flourish—a place where wide-eyed enthusiasm and a hunger for community brings the desire to feel and know with the passion to see (Greene, 1988). Armed with that type of teacher and continuing professional education, our teachers, Mr. Barnes and Mrs. Dupree, encouraged students to feel they mattered to the group, which in turn promised to meet their needs (McMillian & Chavis, 1986).

We understand that teaching and administration can be an arduous task, and it is difficult to know the intimate details of each student's life. But it is crucial that educators try. School administration must support occasional scheduling modifications, giving time for all classroom members to participate in restorative circle groups (Haney, 2008). Moreover, any recalcitrant educators must commit or perhaps recommit to the fact that without belonging, nothing else worth learning can happen in schools (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). To do this educators must be aware that some students do not feel membership in the school community for any number of reasons, and, like Barnes and Dupree, have faith that educators can reverse this by providing opportunities for students to see themselves in others. Once individuals feel they have a relationship with the group, the restorative goal of reintegration into the community can be achieved. If we commit to just try, what do we have to lose?

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