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Building the Bridge Between Home and School: One Rural School's Steps to Interrogate and Celebrate Multiple Literacies

Faith Beyer Hansen

In this paper, I examine one rural school's efforts to recognize and celebrate the multiple literacies of its students. Centered around the protagonist from Sherman Alexie's novel, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, I discuss the importance of home/school connections in building students' literacies. I detail the school's particular process—LINK UP—in creating a family night to bridge the cultural gap that too often divides parents, students, and teachers.

Sherman Alexie's autobiographical novel, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, is the story of Junior, a Spokane Indian who chooses to leave his reservation to go to the neighboring all-white school because he believes that to leave his former life is to "hope against hope" (Alexie 32). Throughout the novel, Alexie shows us the complexities and dichotomies that exist for a Spokane Indian trying to navigate an often hostile dominant culture. After the death of several members of his tribe and the full realization that he himself has "betrayed" his people by going to the all-white school, Junior evokes the "way-old dude" Euripides in the following lament:

Medea says, "What greater grief than the loss of one's native land?" I read that and thought... "We Indians have LOST EVERYTHING. We lost our native lands, we lost our languages.... We lost each other. We only know how to lose and be lost...." I was so depressed that I thought about going back to Wellpinit [the reservation], [but] I had cursed my family. I had left the tribe, and have broken something inside all of us, and I was now being punished for that. (Alexie 173)

Alexie returns again and again to this mediation between resistance to and acceptance of the majority position. In the end, Junior suffers the fate that Finn describes in his work on the education of working-class children: he has "not been fully accepted into mainstream society" and "[has] found [himself] alienated from [his] own communit[y] as well" (45).

For Junior and other such students who, if we believe Ogbu's assertion, embody the position of "involuntary minorities" (qtd. in Finn 41), the word resistance is one of power—the power to choose either to straddle the literacies

of home and school, as Junior chooses, or to resist the literacy of school to preserve the literacy of home. We can, as some teachers do, assume that a good majority of these students who take up the many facets of resistance all “lack motivation” or “parents who care” (which seems unlikely for such a large population). Alternatively, we can begin to investigate what fuels that resistance, as well as to seek out opportunities for schools to see students’ homes as “funds of knowledge,” and in so doing, build a bridge between the multiple literacies of home and school (Vélez-Ibañez; Greenberg; Tapia; Moll).

In this paper, I will explore the ways in which one small, rural school began to construct such a bridge through a community literacy night called LINK Up (Literacy Impacts Neighborhood Knowledge), which aimed to highlight the multiple literacies of the community through art, storytelling, and dance, and at the same time present the mainstream literacy of the school. However, before discussing the specific process involved in LINK Up, I want to begin by defining the terms I will be using.

What Do I Mean By Multiple Literacies?

In examining one’s social, cultural, and economic position as it relates to literacy, it is first important to define terms. I have adopted Au’s definition of students of diverse backgrounds to “refer to students who differ from the mainstream in terms of ethnicity, primary language, and social class” (392). While there is certainly a further argument as to the role of gender and sexual orientation in one’s social position, I will not engage with these aspects of diversity in this particular paper. I will also use the term *mainstream literacy* to represent those literacy processes currently privileged by those within the system of power, historically those from European American ancestry with middle—or upper-socioeconomic status. I have based this definition on Delpit’s understanding of this privileged language as “the codes or rules [...] relate[d] to linguistic forms, communicative strategies and presentation of self; that is, ways of talking, ways of writing, ways of dressing, and ways of interacting” (25). More specifically I am referring to mainstream literacy as the use of “standard English,” the privileging of linear narrative structures, the culturally-based meanings of words, and the expectation for early and sustained interactions with print. While mainstream literacy is indeed complex and rich, I refer to it not to demean its value but to define it in relation to other cultural literacies that may be more highly valued by many of our students.

However, in seeking to clarify terms, I am well aware that I have created a dichotomy—mainstream versus culturally diverse literacies. While such dichotomies are limiting and often false, they are difficult to escape. Therefore, it is essential to acknowledge the work of Bakhtin and the tenets of sociocultural theory that define *all* language as “culturally and historically situated meanings [that] are constructed, reconstructed, and transformed through social mediation” (Englert et al. 208). It is through this lens that I posit all literacies as those constructed and transformed by race, socioeconomic status, and gender and

sexual orientation, with an acknowledgment that while some of these literacies are privileged, others are not.

More specifically within this project, *diverse students* and *multiple literacies* refer to ways of communicating meaning within one rural community with rich Mexican and Basque traditions. However, it is important to note that while both the Basque and Mexican people have undergone similar demands to assimilate—specifically the emphasis on speaking English and the marginalization of Euskara (the language of the Basque people) and Spanish—the Basque diaspora, occurring primarily before the 1921 Emergency Quota Act, appears in this particular rural town to be less threatened. In other words, because the majority of the Basque people in this region have been here for generations, unlike the larger Latino population, and speak English as their first language and Euskara as their second, there appears to be less resentment towards embracing the Basque culture.

It is, then, through my experience as a literacy coach working closely with teachers and students in this community for nearly a year that I am defining the mainstream literacy of this community, like many others, to be representative of white, European American, middle-class ways of speaking, talking, writing, and acting. I base this judgment on such factors as the number of staff who are Spanish-speaking (only 3 of the 24), as well as comments made by teachers about low-income and/or Spanish-speaking parents and students. I do not make this comment lightly or thoughtlessly, and with it I am not suggesting that the majority of teachers and staff at this rural school do not care about the success of all their students. However, it is important to state that this school, like many schools, is struggling with how to transform what Kozol refers to as a system of “savage inequalities” between majority and minority students.

With diverse students and multiple and mainstream literacy defined, I turn to why—with all schools are expected to do—such bridge-building between home and school literacy practices is important. It is my argument that such work is not only valuable but essential in moving towards, and perhaps beyond, mere tolerance to impacting both mainstream literacy and the literacy of diverse students and families in our school communities.

Moving Beyond Tolerance

I once heard someone define tolerance as an “I am red, you are blue, that’s okay I still dig you” way of thinking. In other words, I am red (normal), you are blue (abnormal) and even though I declare a willingness to accept these distinctions, I do not have to consider in any meaningful way what makes you blue (or for that matter, what makes me red). In short, tolerance is a product of an unexamined system. If I am “tolerating” my students’ diversity, I am certainly open to learning more about my students’ culture and language, but am I really engaging with the resistance these students are emanating? Freire reminds us that such tolerance, such lack of examination, is rarely benign:

In their unrestrained eagerness to possess, the oppressors develop the conviction that it is possible for them to transform everything into objects of their purchasing power. [...] [W]hat is worthwhile is to have more—always more—even at the cost of the oppressed having less and having nothing. For them, *to be is to have* and to be the class of the “haves.” (44)

Such desire to be “a have” often results in a dehumanization that posits students and families as being lazy, unmotivated, and unwilling to “become American.” With such an underlying deficit-model towards some students, it is difficult for school systems and individual persons to gain (or even desire) a deep understanding that the “oppositional behavior students of diverse backgrounds show in school may result from their families’ experience that education does not necessarily lead to a better life” (Au 396).

I am not, by any means, saying that the best school environment is one that simply affirms a student’s resistance to mainstream literacy and ends the discussion there. Nor do I believe that school systems should strive to create a harmonious red/blue world that pretends that resistance does not exist. Rather, I agree with Au that resistance should be met by a culturally responsive way of being that grows out of a deep understanding that the “purpose of culturally responsive instruction is to promote academic achievement, not just to build self-esteem or cultural identity” (405). It is not a simplistic privileging of one over the other but instead a complex dialogue.

Delpit speaks clearly to this call for a culturally responsive way of being when she warns “liberal” educators who are unwilling to recognize that there is a system of power in place that gives them—as white, middle-class females, say—instructional power over their diverse students. She reminds us in no uncertain terms that the liberal idea of “I dig you” tolerance is not only nonproductive for diversity, it can be harming:

Students must be taught the codes needed to participate fully in the mainstream of American life, not by being forced to attend to hollow, inane, decontextualized subskills, but rather within the context of meaningful communicative endeavors; that they must be allowed the resource of the teacher’s expert knowledge, while being helped to acknowledge their own “expertness” as well. (45)

Within Delpit’s call is not simply an understanding of the resistance demonstrated by involuntary minorities, but a call to action. This call is an instructional philosophy, or way of being, that works both inside and outside the system to “[address] student achievement and cultural identity while challenging the inequities that exist in school (Au 406). LINK Up night was one such opportunity.

Enacting Culturally Responsive Ways of Being

At a critical point in Alexie's novel—after Junior has lost his dad's best friend, his sister, and his grandmother, all to alcohol—his white classmates stage a walkout on Junior's behalf to protest a white, female teacher's treatment of Junior for numerous days of missed school (105). (No surprise that the teacher is white, as Delpit reminds us that white teachers make up 90% of the teaching force.) But here is the funny part: Junior, their *cause célèbre*, doesn't walk out with them, in fact stays rooted to his seat. It does not occur to Junior to participate in such an act of resistance until after the others have already left the room. As Junior explains:

It would have been more poetic. It would have made more sense. Or perhaps my friends should have realized that they shouldn't have left behind their FRICKING REASON FOR THEIR PROTEST!...It was like my friends had walked over the backs of baby seals in order to get to the beach where they could protest against the slaughter of baby seals. (Alexie 176)

What is the connection here to establishing a culturally responsive school environment? It is tempting to believe that as a white educator and a white researcher—even one who belongs to a family shaped by adoption and biracial siblings—I can somehow understand, through reading and observation, the literacy of my students' homes. However, when considering the role of home literacy in the teaching of the mainstream codes, we must not walk over the backs of those adults who can best inform our instruction. Delpit reminds us that “[g]ood liberal intentions are not enough. [...] Black parents, teachers of color, and members of poor communities must be allowed to participate fully in the discussion of what kind of instruction is in their children's best interest” (45). It is through a coming together of stakeholders and a willingness to listen without fear of resistance that the creation of a culturally responsive environment can progress.

In other words, it is not enough to celebrate a student's ability to use their family language or to insist that mainstream literacy is of more value. Under this dichotomy, there will always be a disconnect between majority teachers and culturally and linguistically diverse parents and students. It is also not acceptable to carry on as if mainstream literacy and the codes of power it represents do not exist. Too many students know all too well that to pretend “that gatekeeping points don't exist is to ensure that many students will not pass through them” (Delpit 39). Rather, the definition of literacy should be expanded to include “a rich tradition of literacy behaviors and other funds of knowledge that, although different from mainstream literacies, if understood, acknowledged, and appropriately built upon,” can turn conflict between home and school on its head (Paratore 56). But what would such a literacy program look like?

Laying the First Beam of the Bridge: LINK Up

I offer my experience in facilitating our LINK Up night as a beginning step in creating a culturally responsive school environment that welcomes all parents to participate as full partners. Clearly, one evening of honoring students' multiple literacies is a long way from creating a climate that doesn't simply sing to the culturally responsive choir. In fact, in order for change in classroom practice and overall school environment to occur, much more time, training, and support are needed for teachers to study homes as sites of true and diverse funds of knowledge (Moll et al. 137). Again, I posit this LINK Up evening as a beginning into the inquiry. It would be disingenuous of me to imply that this was the school's first attempt to create such a climate, as numerous efforts have been enacted throughout the years by many teachers and administrators before my time with this school. Rather, I share this experience because it is what I know as one way to lay a beam between home and school.

LINK Up grew out of a federal mandate. As a Title I school—with over 60% of our students receiving free or reduced-price lunches we easily surpass the federal guidelines of at least 40% “low-income” students—we were required to hold a parent's night to explain our Title I designation. But though the night was mandated, what we did with it was not. Unwilling to see this night as a mere bureaucratic hoop where we talked *at* parents about how their poverty or the poverty of their neighbor allowed us to provide additional services to their children, the original planning group—the school principal, the ELL coordinator, and myself—began talking about this night as an opportunity. Throughout the year, we had looked for such chances: that September, for example, during National Hispanic Heritage Month, we had talked about bringing in a muralist to work with students and families to represent the rich cultures of our students. But in the end, the month passed, and talk was all we accomplished. This, then, became our opportunity.

Planning LINK Up

Exemplary schools for all students—but especially language minority students—communicate frequently with parents in their native language and honor the multicultural quality of the student population (Minicucci et al. 78). We were determined that whatever the night entailed it would focus on these two important qualities. We envisioned a night that celebrated the multiple literacies of home and school and could begin to bridge the two.

After much discussion, we decided that the night would have two parts. The opening part of the evening would be a fairly traditional presentation and discussion on the various literacy programs and supports within the school system. This presentation, held in both Spanish and English, detailed the services available to students and families under the federal guidelines of our Title I funding. It consisted of a PowerPoint presentation, again bilingual, that detailed our school's Title I reading program, our Response to Intervention model, and our school's current scores on the state's standardized tests.

Even though this part of the night was the most restrictive in terms of what had to be said, we were determined to challenge a broader notion of literacy and make a connection to the multiple literacies of our families. In the end, we accomplished this by securing a traditional Mexican American folk dancer, through our state's Commission for the Arts, who at three various points in the presentation, performed a traditional folk dance from a different region of Mexico. We hoped that by detailing school programs aimed at mainstream literacy alongside cultural dance (which is often undervalued), we could illustrate through movement our desire to connect with the diverse literacies of our students. With our ultimate goal being in part to privilege the culture of our Mexican American students, it was our hope that we could visually indicate to our families that they and their children were at the center of our school.

Directly following the initial large-group presentation, the second part of the evening was an open-school format with numerous stations throughout the school set up with literacy activities. In our planning, we conceived of stations that represented our students' homes and their school, their present life and their future promise. To that end, we decided we would reach out to local families, our town's library, neighboring universities and artists from both the Basque and Mexican cultures. The night was a tapestry of diverse people and rich ways of communicating meaning; we featured a storyteller, the local librarian, two representatives from admission departments of two separate universities, our own Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (Gear Up) coordinator, several Mexican American families who hosted their own Mexican Cultural Room, a native speaker of Euskara, and a muralist. We also contracted with a popular local Mexican restaurant to provide delicious food for all in attendance.

Challenges in Planning

The majority of organizing for the night was fairly straightforward. Inquiries explaining the purpose of our "family night," as it came to be known, were sent out via email to local universities; we contacted local artists to arrange the storyteller, the dancer, and the librarian. The Euskara speaker was our principal's mother, which made her perhaps the easiest participant to secure. Follow-up letters with additional information about the night were sent ten days in advance.

The majority of the planning was time-consuming yet manageable, but there were some challenges. Ultimately, coordinating the participation of both the Mexican American families and the muralist resulted in the greatest rewards, but both, in two very different ways, required careful thought and attention.

Creating A Safe Place

Nieto reminds us that, all too often,

[s]tudents who speak a language other than English are viewed as "handicapped," and they are urged, through both subtle and direct

means, to abandon their native language. The schools ask parents to speak English to their children at home, they punish children for using their native language, or they simply withhold education until the children have mastered English, usually in the name of protecting students' futures. (215)

With news stories about students being suspended from school for speaking Spanish and a growing body of research that non-English-speaking students and their parents are often the target of discrimination because they are Spanish speakers (Zehr; Nieto), it is not surprising that despite the school's previous attempts to reach out to their Spanish-speaking parents, many were hesitant to take part in our LINK Up event.

In order to encourage these parents to participate, the committee reached out to the district's Limited English Proficient (LEP) Outreach Coordinator, who among her various roles, coordinates and oversees the school's English class for Spanish-speaking parents. As a trusted insider to this group of parents, the Outreach Coordinator was instrumental in creating a safe space to dialogue about concerns, past injustices at the hands of this or other school districts, and questions the parents had about sharing their experiences and culture with the larger community. While I was not privy to these essential conversations and cannot speak to their depth and character, I can say that during the planning meeting between myself and the LEP Outreach Coordinator, she spoke at length about how important it was that the school felt like a safe place for parents to speak Spanish openly, without fear of judgment. In the past, Spanish-speaking parents did not feel they had a place at the table in our school (or other schools). In the end, six families shared their Mexican culture through *dulces* (sweets), traditional handmade wares, and art.

Creating A Common Vision

The other challenge of planning such an event was the decision to mark the event by commissioning a piece of art to remember the spirit of multiple literacies rooted in multiple cultures. The committee decided upon the work of Bobby Gaytan, a young muralist in the area who had recently been named the Progressive Arts Pioneer of the Year, awarded by a statewide coalition of grassroots organizations fighting for social, economic, and environmental justice. A young Latino artist, himself raised as a migrant farm worker, Gaytan's work represented the vibrancy and promise that we hoped to capture.

While we initially thought we would do the actual planning of the mural during our LINK Up event so as to have greater family/school involvement, the committee, under Gaytan's guidance, ultimately decided to create the design of the mural with input from teachers and students prior to the night's events. While this did not allow for input from the families, the benefit of this decision was the opportunity for families, students and staff to see the actual creation of the mural and its progress throughout the LINK Up event. In the end, this was perhaps the most powerful part of the evening—to see a representation of

hope and promise created through art, as families, students, and staff shared an evening together of cultural investigation and appreciation. However, like most worthwhile endeavors, there were several challenging moments to this pinnacle.

In the end, the logistical challenges of creating a mural in one evening were small compared to the more pressing challenge of creating a common vision for the mural, which speaks directly to the mediation and negotiation of culture and literacies that this project had to engage. We began the process by sending out information about the purpose of the LINK Up event, the work of Bobby Gaytan, and how we hoped these two things could come together. We asked teachers to share this information with their students, to talk with their colleagues, and ultimately, to e-mail their ideas back to the committee.

The majority of e-mails asked us to consider the diverse ethnicities that “made this desert bloom” or pushed us to represent our students’ futures with “a portrayal of each ‘kind’ of student wearing graduation caps and gowns with thoughts coming from their heads of their futures—representing a variety of professions” (personal e-mail correspondence). However, through this dialogue an e-mail conversation emerged that was concerning to both myself and the committee because it seemed to represent what we were pushing against. The dialogue began when one teacher, claiming to speak for two entire grade-levels, wrote:

Fifth and sixth grade would like this to be a patriotic mural. Maybe it could show a multicultural crowd of students underneath a huge American flag. We certainly do not want any particular ethnicity or special-interest promoted since we already have some serious issues. We think that patriotism is the key here. Any American motif should be non-partisan, and there should be an eagle in it somewhere. Thanks for listening. (personal e-mail correspondence)

While there is certainly an aspect of inclusion and celebration expressed here, we struggled with the seeming erasure of the rich differences in our local community and school, even with the suggestion of the “multicultural crowd of students.” As a rural community struggling with a new identity through the relatively recent increase in population of Latino students (who are far less willing to simply assimilate than generations before), the committee saw this call for patriotism as another claim on “what counts as legitimate knowledge” and an opportunity to disallow “the struggles by women, people of color, and others to have their history and knowledge included in the curriculum” (Apple 44).

The above correspondence was never discussed in person, and several e-mails later—the teacher often referring to “the serious issues” she spoke of in her initial email and continuing dialogue regarding the larger decision to focus the mural away from patriotism and towards education—the correspondence ended with this, her final statement of dissent:

These are all important aspects of what the mural should contain. We just felt in our wing that there had been too many “brown-white” clashes lately. Maria had mentioned to us that she had to

correct one boy who asserted that he was a Mexican. She assured him that while he had ties to Mexico, he was an American first of all. While our mission is education—and we are fine with that theme—it certainly is an American school nurturing citizens for the future of this nation. (personal e-mail correspondence)

Clearly, there is much more here to unpack in terms of this and other teachers' feelings about what it means to “nurture citizens for the future of this nation,” but the committee felt that to base this conversation solely on the events of LINK Up would marginalize it as a brown/white event. Future sustained dialogue is needed. However, so as not to present a false image of this or any teacher at this school, it is important to note that despite her concerns, this teacher was one of nine (out of a faculty of 24) to attend the event. When I thanked her personally for her support, she was clear that she had a deep commitment to her students and their families and felt that this was an excellent opportunity to reach out to all of them.



*The finished mural welcomes all visitors as they enter our school.
(Photo used with permission by the artist.)*

Outcomes

It is always difficult to measure if any event has the outcomes for which one hopes and plans. Ultimately, many of the important aspects of our LINK Up—like valuing the multiple literacies of our students by moving aside and creating a safe and welcoming place for community members and families to tell their own stories—are very difficult to measure. I can tell you that we had more than 100 students and their families for our first LINK Up (our entire student body is just over 400). In comparison, last year's event had just six people in attendance. It is also important to note that approximately 75% of those in attendance were

Latino students and families. While we were pleased that the event reached out to those families in particular—especially since we had asked our high school Future Hispanic Leaders of America to call and invite those families personally—we had hoped to get an equal percentage of non-Latino participants.

Future Implications

In retrospect, we realize that several of our choices—for example, asking a Mexican American dancer, as opposed to a Basque traditional dancer, to perform—may have signaled to parents that this event was solely for Latino parents. While we feel justified in making such explicit choices for this first LINK Up—the committee felt we had more work to do to make Latino families, in particular, feel welcome—we will work next year to highlight a more diverse cultural heritage by drawing on a significantly smaller but equally impactful Japanese and Slovenian population that helped settle the area.

Additionally, we know that in order for such events to have any real meaning, they must go beyond a one-hit wonder of a cultural celebration to more sustained conversations with teachers and parents equally positioned at the educational table. Perhaps the real work is ensuring that this event does not simply stand for “[f]alse charity [that] constrains the fearful and subdued, the ‘rejects of life,’ to extend their trembling hand,” but rather sparks “[t]rue generosity [...] extended less and less in supplication, so that more and more they become human hands which work and, working, transform the world” (Freire 28). To this end, our immediate goal is to establish a Parent-Teacher Committee; a seemingly common thing, no school in this particular district has established such a committee. It is our hope to not only do so, but to ensure that it represents the diversity of our students’ socioeconomic, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. Even this small step will require us to facilitate a conversation that not only reaches out to those parents who were, initially, hesitant to participate in LINK Up, but to honor their participation through actions undertaken by administration, teachers, and students.

We also want to build from events like LINK Up to a more sustained and meaningful conversation between teachers and teachers, teachers and students, and students and students about the various “five knowledges” we want students to draw upon (Banks 6). If it is our vision that *nurturing citizens for the future of this nation* means encouraging them to “identify ways in which the knowledge they construct is influenced and limited by their personal assumptions, positions, and experiences” (Banks 11), then we as an administrative committee, and ultimately a school body, need to encourage and facilitate opportunities for students and their families to engage with other ways of knowing and being. To that end, we must be committed to expanding our own notions of the funds of knowledge from which students come as we plan future LINK Up nights that interrogate those varied assumptions, positions, and experiences.

We must also be committed to pushing dialogue amongst teachers as to how the seeds of experience brought forth by nights of cultural exchange

can blossom in tandem with classroom curriculum and instruction. While it is difficult to know at this juncture what form these conversations will take, we have already begun to unpack wider school practices—from tracking and language instruction based on a data analysis protocol that is not satisfied with the attitude that “well, that is just the way ELL or poor students perform,” to “these are explicit practices that we, as a school, have barred some students from accessing due to the literacies we privilege and those we don’t.”

When considering the weight of creating a bridge between a school and the homes of all its students—those enacting resistance and those in positions to stifle it—it is easy to feel that it is all too daunting. It is easy to see even the smallest of towns as too complex, too diverse, and to retreat to what is most familiar. It is easy to see diversity as something that needs to adapt, to melt into something white. But at the end of his novel, Alexie reminds us what will be lost:

The reservation is beautiful. I mean it. Take a look. [...] Some of the pines are ninety feet tall and more than three hundred years old. [...] We were more than one hundred feet in the air. From our vantage point, we could see for miles. We could see from one end of the reservation to the other. We could see our entire world. And our entire world, at that moment, was green and golden and perfect. (219, 226)

For one night in one rural town, despite the challenges, I too say we saw our world—and it, like Junior’s, was green and golden and (almost) perfect.

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