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## For Whom the School Bell Tolls: Conflicting Voices Inside an Alternative High School

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### Abstract

This article is a study of conflicting voices inside an alternative high school in Arizona. Voices of alternative schools are, quite often, not included in the discourse of curriculum reform even though the number of alternative schools is growing every year. Bakhtinian novelness of polyphony, chronotope, and carnival are incorporated into an arts-based, storied form of representation to provoke empathic understanding among readers. Multiple voices (polyphony) of the school are juxtaposed within a certain time and space (chronotope) while all the different voices are valued equally (carnival) to represent conflicting views on public alternative school experiences. The purpose of the article is to provide readers with vicarious access to tensions that exist in an alternative school, so that they may engage in questioning the nature and purpose of these spaces. In so doing, the study aims to promote dialogic conversations about “best practice” for disenfranchised students who are subject to experiencing educational inequalities in the current era of accountability and standardization.

### Introduction

One of the school experiences that are available for teenagers who dropped out or were expelled from traditional high schools is the alternative school. One of its goals is to provide

students with a second chance at school success. Although definitions or characteristics of alternative schools vary by state or even school district, one of the commonalities they share is that students who attend an alternative school did not do well in traditional schools. These students tend to be labeled as “at risk” of school failure no matter how much potential they may have, and are likely to be excluded in the discourse of curriculum reform. As Oakes points out in the forward for Kelly (1993), alternative schooling tends to perpetuate social, political, economic, and educational inequalities and continues to be an undercurrent of education without scrutiny. While many alternative education programs serving the growing population of at-risk students are run by school districts, little research has been done to evaluate the success or the failure of the public alternative schools or programs (Conley, 2002).

This article is a case study of Borderlands Alternative High School (pseudonym) in Arizona, which is a public school that serves about 250 students. Five different voices of its inhabitants: the principal, the security guard, a teacher, and two students, are presented in arts-based, narrative inquiry. These voices reveal tensions and conflicts that exist inside Borderlands, which may reflect issues and problems that exist in other alternative schools. Rather than to provide a final solution, the purpose of the article is to promote dialogic conversations among educators about ways in which educators can better serve a growing number of students who are at risk of school failure. The article begins with a brief review of the literature on alternative education, then specific research methods are considered, next the theoretical framework of Bakhtinian novelness is briefly explicated, this is followed by the voices of the five protagonists, finally in the epilogue, the voice of the researcher is presented.

## **Review of the Literature on Alternative Education**

Alternative education proliferated in the United States in the late 1960s and the early 1970s as educational priorities shifted back to the progressive education movement. People who were unhappy with traditional curriculum hailed alternative public schools that subscribed to the ideas of progressive education, which called for a free, open policy that emphasized the development of self-concept, problem solving, and humanistic approaches (Conley, 2002; Goodman, 1999; Raywid, 1995; Young, 1990) These alternative schools attempted to offer places where students would have greater freedom and opportunities for success than in traditional schools, affirming that one unified curriculum could not be sufficient for all (Conley, 2002). Many disgruntled parents transferred their children to alternative schools that incorporated the concepts of “Free School” and “Open School” into the school curricula in order to meet students’ different learning styles, needs, and interests. However, most alternative schools of this era were short-lived for various reasons, e.g., internal financial mismanagement, public pressure for school accountability and the “Back to Basics” movement that followed in the 1980s (Marsh & Willis, 2003).

In the mid 1990s, alternative learning programs and schools including public and private voucher programs, charter schools, and magnet programs, started emerging in an effort to solve issues of poor student achievement, ineffective pedagogical methods, and the increasing inability to

meet the needs of diverse families (Conley, 2002). Alternative schools in this era “satisfy the need to provide choice and diversity within a monopolistic bureaucratic giant of public education” (Conley, 2002, p. 177). For instance, alternative schools in Washington State have been successful as an alternative to traditional public education, with schools effectively meeting students’ different needs (see Billings, 1995). Billings states:

Experiential learning, off-campus course work, learning contracts, democratic decision making, new learning environments, restructuring of time, outcome-based credit, parental involvement, project based learning, sensitivity to diverse learning styles, process focused curriculum, and small size are just a few of the features that have long characterized alternative schools in Washington. (p. 1)

Other recent research on alternative education, however, shows that the public views alternative schools as places for students whose behaviors are disruptive, deviant, and dysfunctional (see Dryfoos, 1997; Howell, 1995; Leone, Rutherford, & Nelson, 1991; Mcgee, 2001). Rather than being recognized as alternative solutions for students whose needs are not being met by traditional schools, alternative schools are believed to exist to keep all the “trouble makers” in one place in order to protect the students who remain in traditional schools (Mcgee, 2001; National Association of State Boards of Education, 1994). They also tend to work to keep the expelled students off the streets in order to prevent them from committing a crime (Sprague & Tobin, 2000). Furthermore, Nolan and Anyon (2004) raise a concern that some alternative schools serve as “an interface between the school and the prison,” calling it the “school/prison continuum” (p. 134).

According to the first national study about public alternative schools and programs conducted by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), there were 10,900 public alternative schools and programs serving approximately 612,900 at-risk students in the nation during the 2000-2001 school year (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2002). NCES also reported that alternative schools were disproportionately located in urban districts, districts with high minority students, and districts with high poverty concentrations. This situation, in some cases, has rendered alternative schools as “enclaves for black, Latino, native American, and poor white students” (Arnové & Strout, 1980, p. 463), and “warehouses for academically underprepared sons and daughters of working-class families or single parents receiving welfare” (Kelly, 1993, p. 3).

More specifically, in the State of Arizona, the State Department of Education announced formal definitions of alternative schools in 1999. According to the Arizona Department of Education (ADE), the school must intend to serve students exclusively in one or more of the following categories: students with behavioral issues (documented history of disruptive behavior); students identified as dropouts; students in poor academic standing who are more than one year behind on academic credits, or who have a demonstrated pattern of failing grades; pregnant and/or parenting students; and adjudicated youth (Arizona Department of Education, 2002). Every alternative school must meet the “achievement profile” provided by the ADE in the information packet on Standards and Accountability. This profile includes: ninety-five percent (95%) of students

taking Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS), which is a state exit exam that all high school students have to pass to be able to graduate with a high school diploma; decreasing dropout rate; and increasing percentage of graduates who demonstrate proficiency on the Standards via AIMS. Every alternative school is expected to have 100% of graduates demonstrate proficiency on the Standards via AIMS by 2006 (Arizona Department of Education, 2002).

The research site, Borderlands Alternative High School, is one of the twelve public alternative schools in the East Valley school district in Arizona. Borderlands houses students from ninth through twelfth grade and accepts students only by referrals from principals of conventional public schools. Enrollment at Borderlands has increased every year since the school opened in 1999. One hundred and fifty-two students enrolled at Borderlands during the 1999-2000 school year, 291 students during the 2000-2001 school year, and 350 students during the 2001-2002 school year.

## Research Methods and Methodology

Fieldwork was conducted from August through December 2003. Data were collected Monday through Thursday, about five hours each day, by means of observation and participant observation. I took part in classroom activities, interacted with students and faculty, helped students with schoolwork, and invited them to talk about their school and life experiences while having lunch. A main approach to the fieldwork was "conversation as research" (Kvale, 1996), in which conversations about school experiences and daily life with students, teachers, and the school staff were made during break time, lunch hours, and in class. This approach not only helped me build informal relationships with each member of the school community, but also helped me understand the ways the school was perceived by them.

More formal conversations with students and staff took the form of semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. The five protagonists in this study: Mrs. Principal, Mr. Hard (pseudonym, school security guard), Holly (pseudonym, female student), Jose (pseudonym, male student) and Ms. Bose (pseudonym, teacher), were interviewed individually during their school hours except for Ms. Bose. Ms. Bose invited me to her home for dinner where the interview was conducted. Each interview lasted about an hour and a half. The interviewees were asked to talk about their backgrounds, views on the alternative schooling, and their school experiences. Interviews were tape-recorded and then transcribed.

In terms of research methodology, this study employs narrative inquiry, which has become an increasingly influential technique within teacher education during the last decade (Goodson, 1995). Using narrative inquiry, educational researchers interrogate the nature of the dominant stories through which we have shaped our understandings of education, and challenge the view of schooling framed in a predictable, fragmented, and paradigmatic way (Casey, 1993; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Goodson, 1995, 1992; Munro, 1998; Sparkes, 1994). In this study, data are analyzed through *narrative analysis* or *narrative configuration*. This is the "procedure through which the researcher organizes the data elements into a coherent developmental account" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 15). That is, in the process of narrative analysis, the researcher extracts an emerging theme from the

fullness of lived experiences presented in the data themselves and configures stories, making a range of disconnected research data elements coherent, so that the story can appeal to the reader's understanding and imagination (Kerby, 1991; Polkinghorne, 1995; Spence, 1986).

This narrative analysis creates arts-based research texts as an outcome of research. According to Barone and Eisner (1997), some qualities that make educational stories arts-based texts include: the use of expressive, contextualized, and vernacular forms of language; the promotion of empathic understanding of the lives of characters; and the creation of a virtual reality. A virtual reality means that the stories seem real to the reader so that the reader is able to identify the episodes in the text from his/her own experiences, and thus believe in the possibility or the credibility of the virtual world as an analogue to the "real" one (Barone & Eisner, 1997). Virtual reality is an important element of an arts-based text as it promotes empathic understanding of the lives of the protagonists.

In this article the five protagonists share their backgrounds, views, emotions, and reflections about their alternative school experiences using their expressive, contextualized, and vernacular language. Their stories are constructed in the first person. When stories are told in the first person, they can give the reader the illusion of spontaneous speech, that is, "the impression of listening to an unrehearsed, rambling monologue" (Purcell, 1996, p. 277), contributing to the creation of a virtual reality.

### **Theoretical Framework: Bakhtinian Novelness**

Through narrative inquiry, educational researchers try to understand the lived experiences of teachers or students and transform this understanding into significant social and educational implications (Phillion, He, & Connelly, 2005). Using Bakhtinian novelness as a theoretical framework is particularly important in the story-telling nature of narrative inquiry as it facilitates the understanding of human experiences in a social and educational context. It allows each protagonist to speak for him or herself while there is no single, unified point of view that dominates (Tanaka, 1997).

According to Bakhtin (1975/1981), all stories are not the same. Depending on what kind of purpose a story has, it becomes either an epic or a novel. In an epic, stories are told from one point of view in one language, outside of considerations of time and particular places. There is only one world, one reality that is ordered and complete. On the other hand, a novel represents many languages competing for truth from different vantage points. The world of the novel is incomplete and imperfect. There is not a sense of formal closure in a novel: "One may begin the story at almost any moment, and finish at almost any moment" (Bakhtin, 1975/1981, p. 31). This "impulse to continue" and "impulse to end" are found in novels and they are possible only in a world with openendedness.

Bakhtin posits three concepts to specify the nature of the novel, or "novelness": polyphony, chronotope, and carnival. First, polyphony, or a language of heteroglossia, refers to "a plurality of independent, unmerged voices and consciousness" (Bakhtin, 1963/1984, p. 6). The polyphonic,

dialogized heteroglossia of the novel involves a special multivoiced use of language, in which no language enjoys an absolute privilege. Different languages are used and different voices are heard without having one voice privileged over the others. Each language or voice is continually tested and retested in relation to others, any one of which may turn out to be capable of becoming as good or better a language of truth—if only tentatively, on a specific set of occasions, or with respect to particular questions (Morson & Emerson, 1990). In this way, the novel can offer rich images of languages. The creation of images of languages is, in turn, a form of sociological probing and an exploration of values and beliefs; and these images are tools for understanding the social belief systems (Morson and Emerson, 1990).

The second concept of novelness, chronotope emphasizes time and space. For Bakhtin, polyphony is not enough to promote dialogic conversations. A chronotope is a way of understanding experiences; it is a specific form-shaping ideology for understanding the nature of events and actions (Morson & Emerson, 1990). For the voices to reflect believable individual experiences, they should be put in particular times and particular spaces. Bakhtin (1975/1981) states that “time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movement of time, plot and history” (p. 84, cited in Morson and Emerson, 1990). Chronotope, therefore, becomes important in understanding our lives as individuals and social beings.

The third concept of the dialogic nature of “novelness” is the concept of carnival or “the carnivalesque.” Carnival, according to Bakhtin (1975/1981), is a concept in which everyone is an active participant, openness is celebrated, hierarchy is invisible, and norms are reversed, like in popular festivals. The carnivalesque novel, through “laughter, irony, humor, and elements of self-parody” (Bakhtin 1975/1981, p. 7), offers an unofficial truth, where the symbols of power and violence are disturbed and counter-narratives are promoted with equal value. The novel is indebted to the spirit of carnival in creating a genuine dialogue. Bakhtin believes that the novel should play the same role in literature that carnival is alleged to play in the real life of cultures (Morson and Emerson, 1990). One formal and privileged way of life or way of thinking is discarded but different views and styles are valued by representing the wide range of languages and experiences in the novel. In the carnival, voices of the marginalized or silenced are promoted and respected.

In brief, using Bakhtinian novelness of polyphony, chronotope, and carnival as a theoretical framework is particularly effective for the issues of power, resistance, tensions, and conflicts that occur in schools (Tanaka, 1997). As such, conflicting voices heard in a text with Bakhtinian novelness may “raise important questions about the topics under discussion, challenging the reader to rethink the values that undergird certain social practices” (Barone, 2001, p. 157).

In the following narratives, you will hear five different voices: first, Mr. Hard is the school security guard, a big, White, middle-class, former police officer, who has been working at Borderlands for two years; second, Holly is a ninth grader, White, working-class girl, who wants to be a lawyer; third, Ms. Bose is a White, Italian descent and ninth grade science and math teacher, who has been working with at-risk students for 25 years; fourth, Jose is a half-Hispanic and half-White male student, who wants to be a great musician; and finally, Mrs. Principal is a White, middle-

class administrator, who is devoted to making her school an “achieving” school.

## **The Voice of Mr. Hard, the Security Guard**

I am the security guard at this alternative high school. I got retired from a police department where I worked for 20 years before I came here. My wife is a director at a hospital here in Phoenix. Her job brought us here from Pittsburgh two years ago. I have two sons and a daughter. Two of them are happily married, and my youngest son is in college. My hobby is fixing and building stuff around the house on weekends, and Home Depot is my favorite shopping place.

This is my second year in this school, and I’ve been enjoying my job so far. My main responsibility is to make sure that our school is a safe place. As you know, kids these days can be dangerous. Especially kids in this school have a lot of problems that regular schools don’t want to deal with. That’s why they are here. A lot of kids have a criminal history. Some kids have already been to jail. My previous career working as a cop has helped me a lot dealing with these kids who have a potential to commit a crime. That’s why I got hired so quickly. Our principal whom I’m closely working with gave me the authority to be in charge of the student discipline. My position here is to be a hard-liner. I’m the final set of rules that students have to abide by. That’s my background. I spent a lot of money on my education at the police academy and I’m bringing that knowledge to discipline these kids. That’s what I like about my job. I try to help them succeed by using my resources. If a student fails to go by rules, then he or she has to deal with me. You know, they’re here because they can’t control their attitudes. They can’t control what they’re saying. They are violent, throw temper tantrums, and talk back. There are different ways to deal with them and they are not in the textbook.

Teachers can be flexible. When they don’t want to deal with disruptive students, they can send them to me. My job here is to inculcate rules to kids. Some of you go to football games Sunday afternoon. When there are no referees, what kind of game is it? It’s going to be a mess, right? With referees and rules, we have an organized game. Likewise, I’m the referee here. I’m the rules. Students have to face me if they don’t follow the rules. I’m the one who keeps the game organized, and keeps the game from getting out of hand. My responsibility is to maintain the rules. We’re trying to help these kids become successful young adults in the society. In that sense, we’ve been very productive. I’ve seen a lot of difference among students since I started working here.

Kids try to avoid me at school. Out of sight, out of fight. I know they don’t like me. That’s fine with me. I don’t want to be liked. I just want to be respected. Don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying that I don’t have sympathy for them. I do feel sorry for these kids because they have a lot of baggage. They come from broken, poor, and abusive families. They don’t fit the mainstream. They have lost the idea of where the main road is. So, our job is to put them back on the right track. It can be done only by strict discipline. They need to learn how to behave so that they can function in a society as a cashier or something. If they don’t follow the rules, we kick them out of school. In fact, we suspended a lot of students this year. It’s our way of showing them they are wrong.

As you can imagine, we have a zero-tolerance policy for students who violate school rules.

Holly has been my target these days. She is just impossible. I don't know what she's gonna turn into in the future. She's violent and gets into trouble every other day. She smokes, violates dress codes, and talks back to teachers, just to name a few. We have given her several warnings. She's quite smart, but being smart doesn't count here. What matters is whether or not one obeys the rules. On the first week of October, I caught her smoking in the restroom again. When I asked her to come with me, she wouldn't. So I tried to call the police, but Holly picked up a handful of rocks and started throwing them at me. She was ferocious! We gave her a five-day suspension.

And then, our school threw a Halloween party for students three weeks later. Teachers and staff donated money to buy hamburger patties, sausages, and other stuff for students. I brought my own barbeque grill and tools from home and took charge of barbequing. I was happy to be the chef of the day. I was happy to see students relaxing, having fun, and enjoying food that I cooked. It was so nice to see students and teachers mingling together, playing basketball and other games. It was a nice change. The party was going well for the most part. But, right before the party was over, Holly got into an argument with this Black girl, Shawnee. Holly got mad at her and mooned Shawnee who was with other ninth graders. This incident was reported to the principal, who called Holly's mom to ask her to appear at the school the next day. Holly got expelled after the "happy" Halloween party. Hope this expulsion will teach her something!

## **The Voice of Holly, the Goofy Snoopy**

My name is Holly. I just turned fifteen in July. I was born in Mesa, Arizona, and have never moved out of Arizona. I'm a White girl with a little bit of Native American descent from my mom's side. I heard my mom's great-grandma was some sort of a Native American. I don't know what tribe, though. I'm tall, about five feet seven inches, and have long blonde hair with red highlights. I like to wear tight, low-rise jeans and a black "dead-rose" shirt that has a picture of a human skull surrounded by roses. I used to wear the Gothic style of clothes in my junior high, all in black from head to toe, wearing heavy, clumpy army boots. But I got tired of it, so, now I'm into Punk. I have a tattoo on my lower back and have a silver ring on the center of my tongue. I got my tongue pierced on my 15<sup>th</sup> birthday. I like it a lot. My mom hates it, though. But I don't care. She hates whatever I do, anyway. She's a bitch. She works at a car body shop, buffing and painting old cars with her boyfriend who is living with us. I can't wait to leave home. As soon as I turn 18, I'll say bye to them and leave home. I'm tired of them ordering me to do this and that.

Anyways... My nickname is snoopy. I got it in eighth grade for jumping and dancing like Snoopy at the Fiesta Shopping Mall. I just felt like doing it. People gathered around me and shouted, "Snoopy, Snoopy!" I did that for an hour. I didn't feel embarrassed at all. Since then, my friends started calling me Snoopy. They think I'm goofy. Yes, I am goofy. I don't care what others think about me. If I feel like doing something, I just do it. No second thought. But at school, I get into trouble because of that. Teachers don't like my personality. They think I'm just acting out. In fact, I was very upset when Ms. Bose told me the other day to change my personality. Do you know what she told me? She said, "I don't like your personality. You need to stop acting out. You need to

change your personality. Then, your school life will be a lot easier.” I said to myself, *‘Bullshit!’* Change my personality? It took me fifteen years to develop it, for Christ’s sake! I don’t care if she likes it or not. I’m unique. I’m different. I have my own opinions unlike other kids. But teachers think I’m acting out, disruptive, unruly, and rude. Because I like to speak up, I have a history of being kicked out of classrooms and sent to ALC (Alternative Learning Center) where other “disruptive” kids are isolated, supposedly working on their individual assignments.

My friends like to talk to me about their personal issues because I give them a solution. Having said that, I think I have a leadership personality. I want to be a lawyer. I like to argue with people: my mom, her boyfriend, teachers, and my classmates. I win them all. Teachers are actually my worst enemies, but I’m not scared of them. A lot of times, they don’t make sense. Last week, for example, I whistled in Ms. Bose’s math class because I was happy to finish my work sheet earlier than other kids. Well, we’re supposed to be ninth graders, but we were learning things that I had already learned in seventh grade. So this worksheet was super easy for me. So, I whistled to let everybody know that I finished my assignment. But here goes Ms. Bose. “Holly! Stop whistling. You’re getting a zero point for today for being disruptive.” “What? I’m getting a zero point even though I finished my assignment? That doesn’t make sense!” “Yes, you’re getting a zero point no matter what, because you are being disruptive.” “Fine! If I’m getting a zero point for the day, I might as well keep whistling. What the hell!” I just kept whistling. Ms. Bose started yelling at me, “Holly, stop whistling right now! Otherwise, I’m gonna call the office.” “Whatever!” It was one heck of a yelling match. Finally, Ms. Bose called the office. Five minutes later, Mr. Hard came to our classroom to get me. He took me to the ALC. So, the day became another “do-nothing-at-school” day.

This school sucks, if you ask me. They put a bunch of “bad” kids here all together like a warehouse. There is nothing attractive here. Look at these ugly portable buildings without any windows. They are called “classrooms.” We don’t have a cafeteria, so we have to eat our lunch at outdoor picnic tables near the restrooms. We get to enjoy this picnic every single day even under the hot temperature of one hundred five degree heat of the desert. Go figure. We use old, “hand-me-down” textbooks that came from a neighboring high school. It’s like we are the disposables of education. We don’t mean much. Our classes have six or seven students. I like this small class. But we don’t really cover all the stuff in the textbook. We learn easy stuff, and I get bored with that. I had to do the multiplication table again because our Mexican boy, Guillemo, didn’t know how to do multiplications! When I run into difficult stuff, I just copy answers from the textbook to fill out the worksheets without understanding. And I get a good point for that as long as I behave. I want to be a lawyer. But I don’t know if I will ever be able to achieve my dream. I know I’m not stupid. But there is no counselor I can talk to about it.

There are more rules and regulations here than regular schools. Look at Mr. Hard, the old, fat, security guard who retired from the police department. I hate that guy. He is obsessed with rules. He goes, “Follow the rules, follow the rules. That’s the rule number one here, otherwise you deal with me.” We try to avoid running into him because he will make sure to find something wrong with us. He randomly calls one or two kids into his office and starts searching their backpacks. We hate it.

It's such an insult. Recently, Mr. Hard has been watching me like a hawk. I don't know when I became his target. Somehow, he decided to pick on me. On a gloomy day in October, I felt like smoking. The weather was weird, and I had a fight with my mom again that morning. I was having a bad day, you know. I needed to smoke to release my stress. When I was smoking in the restroom, Mr. Hard caught me on the spot. He asked me to come with him to his office. I said no. He asked me again. I said no again. Then, he started calling the police. I quickly grabbed some rocks on the ground and threw them at the son of bitch. He ran away like a chicken with his head chopped off. I beat him finally! That night, I had a dream of him. I had a screw driver and shoved it into his neck, saying, "Leave me alone!" He was scared of me!

### **The Voice of Ms. Bose, the Boss**

"Hey, guys. There are times when I'll be asking you to leave the classroom if you get on my nerves. When I say 'Leave', I want you to get out of here. Get out of my sight for five minutes or so, go walk around or something and come back in, instead of fighting me. I'm the boss here. I'm the dictator. It's me who makes a decision for you guys. So you have to follow my order. They pay me a lot of money to keep me here. I get paid more than any other teachers here. Yes. I make a lot of money for educating you to become a good person. So when you and I have an argument and when I say to you to get out of here, you need to leave the classroom for five minutes."

This is what I usually say to my students in the first day of class. It is important to let them know who is the boss here. Otherwise, they will be out of control. I've been teaching for almost 25 years including five years of teaching at a prison in St. Louis before I moved to Arizona. After taking a break from teaching for a couple of years to raise my boys, I volunteered to teach at the poorest and worst school where there was nothing but gangsters. I never wanted to teach at a "nice" school where all the good kids attended. It is my strength that I can easily be sympathetic with kids who have issues and problems, like gang members, because I have been there. I myself came from a poor immigrant family background from Italy. I grew up in a poor area where crimes took place every day. I know what it is like to live in poverty. My father was a cop, but his paycheck was not thick enough to feed seven family members in the 50s and 60s. I still remember those days when our family had to skip meals as often as we ate. From that kind of environment, I learned to be tough. I needed to be as tough as iron to be able to survive. I also learned to control rather than being controlled.

I enjoy teaching at-risk kids. I have never been afraid of those kids even though some of them are gangsters. I believe that we, human beings, are basically the same, no matter how stupid or how smart we are. We are all vulnerable and fragile. We all make mistakes and regret. We tend to repeat the cycle. But I need to teach these kids to break the cycle. I have to be a therapist first rather than a teacher in order to be able to do that. Teaching how to read and write can't be a main focus. What they need is a mental therapy, not an education, because they are "emotionally handicapped." It is their poor emotional well-being and low self-esteem that causes them to get into trouble.

But under the No Child Left Behind of 2001, terms like achievement, accountability,

standardization, and testing, have become our every day language at schools. Alternative schools are not an exception. In the year 2003, we got a new principal who believed that these kids needed to be taught to standardized tests. According to Mrs. Principal, my therapeutic method was not helpful in raising students' test scores. She said teachers need to focus on teaching kids how to take the standardized test, especially AIMS, if we don't want our school to be shut down under the NCLB. But, look, these kids are former drop-outs from regular schools. They are way behind their grade level because they have been skipping classes. There is no way we can make them pass the AIMS test until we subdue these kids' acting-out behaviors first. That's why Mr. Vee, our former principal, left this school. He couldn't stand the pressure from the school district about these alternative kids meeting the standards. He was kind of liberal educator—too liberal for me, by the way—who emphasized students' personal growth. Portfolio assessment was one of his initiatives that tried to help students to reflect on their growth. But Mrs. Principal got rid of that. I didn't care for the portfolio assessment anyway, but it just shows how our school is changing under this accountability and standards movement.

My perspective on educating these kids is different from both principals. My focus here is to get them to listen, that is, to make them behave and make them be positive. A lot of kids have ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder). A good example is Holly. She cannot sit still for a minute; she's loud, annoying and disturbing. She's pretty smart, at least smarter than other kids here, but her problem is that she likes to argue with everybody. She knows it all. She tries to get tough with me, but I am tougher. I let her know who is the boss here. I have a firm belief that resistance from students like Holly needs to be controlled by strong authority. I can be as warm as freshly baked bread when students listen to me, but I can also be as tough as iron when they don't listen. I believe that a good education for these kids is to teach them to behave and have a good positive attitude, so that they can function well in this society. I mean, what kind of boss would want to have an employee like Holly who talks back and is disobedient? It's my responsibility to teach my students to have good attitudes, which will eventually lead them to get a job after graduation. Here's my phrase for my students: "Attitude, attitude, attitude. You gotta have a good attitude."

## **The Voice of Jose, the Silent Rebel**

I am 17 years old, about five feet ten inches tall. I was born in California on April 23<sup>rd</sup>. I'm half-Hispanic, half-White. My biological dad is Hispanic from Mexico. I haven't seen him since my parents got divorced when I was three. My mom got remarried when I was five, and that's when we moved to Arizona. Since then, my mom went through two more divorces, and now she's with her fourth husband. Right now, I'm living with my mom, my older brother, my fourth step-dad, and two of his children. My mom changed jobs several times, and she currently works as a gate-keeper for a housing company. Her current husband is a construction worker. I'm supposed to be a senior but am taking junior classes due to the lack of credits. I have attended Borderlands for two years to catch up with credits. I was in and out of school during my freshman and sophomore years because I was struggling with a lot of personal issues. My mom's frequent divorces and remarriages have

badly affected me. I went to jail a couple of times for doing drugs, which I started when I was fifteen, and I'm on probation because of that. In addition, I was in a rehabilitation center for eight weeks for being depressed and suicidal. I used to be in serious depression, and used to cut myself with a razor. But the rehabilitation program didn't do much good for me because I'm still depressed most of the day and not talking to anybody.

There is one thing that keeps me going, though. It is music. Whenever I feel frustrated and depressed, I play the guitar. Bass guitar. That's what keeps me sane. I express myself through music. I write a song, sing, and play. I also organized a band with my friends like six months ago. The garage of my house is our practice room. We get together once a week, sometimes twice a week for practice. We're planning to play at a bar on Saturdays when we play better. Actually, some kids at school asked us to play at the Halloween party. We asked Mrs. Principal for her permission, but she said 'no' after she examined our lyrics. Her reason was that our music was not appropriate for a school environment. She said there were too many cuss words in our songs, so students would be badly influenced by our music. We were pissed off when we heard it. Kids would have loved it! What does she know about pop music, hard rock, or punk rock? Nothing!

I bet she doesn't know who Jim Morrison is. I'm sure she has never heard of the legendary band, the Doors. Morrison is my idol although he died even before I was born. Morrison and his music influenced me so much. It was Jim Morrison who taught me how to see the world, not the teachers, not my parents. I see the world through Morrison's eyes and his music. I wanna be a great musician like him. He wrote songs and poems. I love his poetry. Through his poetry, some of which became the lyrics of his songs, he criticized the society for destroying people's souls with money, authority, and momentary pleasure. His songs are about the feeling of isolation, disconnectedness, despair, and loneliness that are caused by the problems of society. He was a free soul who was against authority. He taught me to stand up for myself to be able to survive in this world. He taught me to stand against authority. Maybe that's why I cannot stand Mr. Schiedler, our social studies teacher. I call him a "lost soul." Whenever I say something that challenges what he says, he goes, "Be quiet!", "Shut up!" He is a BIG controlling dude. He has to make an issue about everything I do. He doesn't understand students at all. He just thinks we are bunch of losers.

In fact, many teachers are lost souls. I've been attending this school for two years, but I find teachers to be so annoying. They are only interested in keeping their job, so they just regurgitate the stuff they are supposed to teach and show no compassion. A lot of things they teach are biased and pointless. Just straight facts that have nothing to do with life. There is so much going on in the world, and there are so many other things we need to learn about. But all we do, like in Mr. Schiedler's social studies class, is to copy a bunch of god damn definitions of terms from the textbook and take a test that has 150 questions on it. One hundred fifty questions! I don't even read the questions. I just choose answers in alphabetical order: A, B, C, D, A, B, C, D....

Teachers expect us to believe whatever they say. It's like going against them is a sin. I think it's propaganda that brainwashes and pollutes students' minds. But not mine. Jim Morrison taught me not to believe everything that adults say. That's why I get into so many arguments with teachers. I give them a piece of my mind. I have gotten suspended and kicked out of school many times, but I

don't care. Schools don't mean much to me. I have a tattoo on my right arm. It is one red word, "Revolution."

## **The Voice of Mrs. Principal**

How did I get here? Umm, it was last year, November 2002, when my district office contacted me and asked if I wanted to transfer to Borderlands as principal. I was told that Mr. Vee had to resign because he was having some issues with the district office. At that time, I was an assistant principal at a junior high which was also an alternative school for 6<sup>th</sup> thru 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Of course, I happily accepted the offer because it was a promotion for me. For 20 years of my involvement with education, I always liked working with those at-risk kids who were struggling in every way. It's a challenge, but it's a good challenge that I enjoy because I feel much more successful and much more needed.

I started my job here in January this year. My district superintendent told me that our school would be a "referral basis only" starting spring semester. It means that our school is not a choice school any longer. If there are students who are deviant, unruly, disruptive, skipping classes, and violating school rules, a school principal refers them to me. It has made my job more difficult especially under the NCLB because we have to spend a lot of time dealing with students' behavioral problems when we can use that time for preparing them for the tests.

I brought several teachers with me from my previous school because it's easy for me to work with teachers whom I know and trust. They are like my buddies. And they know me well. They know I have a ranch home far away from the school with three horses. They know my 15-year-old daughter is into horseback riding and enters a horse race every spring. Actually my husband and I took her to a horse show held in the West World close to Scottsdale two weeks ago. Yea, we like horses. That's an important part of my personal life.

Sorry about the digression. Anyway, the teachers who came with me are very cooperative in making the school run smooth. They are not only teaching subject matter but also teaching kids social and life skills. They work on disciplining the students. We have a zero tolerance policy for anybody who violates the school rules and regulations. Mr. Hard has been playing a key role in implementing the policy. He's really good at taking care of kids who have issues of drugs, violence, smoking, fighting, etc, all kinds of problems our students have. Since he started working with us, discipline issues got a lot better. Kids are scared of him. They try to follow the rules as much as they can, so that they don't need to face him. Holly and Jose have been exceptions, though. They tend to act out too much, making a bad influence on others. The other day, Jose was trying to bring his band to school for the Halloween party, but I flatly said no. Their songs were full of "F" words, talking about getting high, going against authority, and revolt, all kinds of bad stuff. And I know his band members do drugs. No way we would allow them to play at school.

On September 23, 2002, two months before I got a phone call from the school district office, Arizona Department of Education announced the achievement profile formula that will determine which school is underperforming, maintaining, improving, and excelling in terms of

standards and accountability. We have to have ninety-five percent of our students take AIMS, and make 100% of our graduates demonstrate proficiency of the Standards via AIMS by 2006! With the NCLB, our state standards and accountability, and AIMS, we, as an alternative school, have to cope with two main issues. It's like a double-edged sword. While trying to correct students' bad behaviors, we also have to strive to improve their academic skills. We recently got rid of the portfolio assessment that Mr. Vee started. In our monthly faculty meeting two weeks ago, we had a vote on whether we would keep the portfolio assessment or not. Our teachers said it was putting a lot of burden on the faculty's shoulders because they had to read students' essays, give them written feedback, read their revisions again and again until they improved. In addition, we had to invite three community leaders to interview our graduating students to see their personal growth. It's a good thing to do, but this Achievement Profile doesn't give us time to do such an "ideal" thing. You know what I mean. So after a short debate, teachers decided to abolish the portfolio. They came to an agreement that what our students need is to focus on basic skills that will help them pass the AIMS test such as basic vocabulary, reading and basic math skills. And that's what our district wants us to do any way.

Right now, our school is rated as "Improving," according to our state report. It's amazing, isn't it? Well, in order for us to get there, we had to "bribe" our students to come to take a state test which took place early this spring. The formula for deciding a school as performing or underperforming is quite complicated. It is not just about how well students did on the test. But students' attendance plays a huge role in that formula. We did a campaign for a week before the test, telling students that they have to come to school to take the test. We told them we would provide lunch and snack and play time the next day if they came to school to take the test. You know what? We had almost 98% of students who showed up for the test! It was crazy but it worked. You know what I mean.

## **Epilogue: The Voice of the Researcher**

Listening to all these "unmerged voices" (Bakhtin, 1963/1984, p. 30) among different power relations and subject positions about pedagogical practice, readers may find themselves trying to understand each protagonist's standpoint. Further, readers who view "their existence as multiple selves" (Noddings, 1990, p. x) may find themselves left with more questions than answers.

While respecting and valuing the voices equally, I am reminded of an Aesop's fable, *The Fox and the Stork*:

At one time the Fox and the Stork were on visiting terms and seemed very good friends. So the Fox invited the Stork to dinner and put nothing before her but some soup in a very shallow dish. This the Fox could easily lap up, but the Stork could only wet the end of her long bill in it, and left the meal as hungry as when she began. "I am sorry," said the Fox, "the soup is not to your liking." "Pray do not apologize," said the Stork. "I hope you will return this visit, and come and dine with me soon." So a day was appointed when the Fox should visit the Stork; but when they were seated at table all

that was for their dinner was contained in a very long-necked jar with a narrow mouth, in which the Fox could not insert his snout, so all he could manage to do was to lick the outside of the jar (Aesop's Fables, 1975, p. 66).

It is obvious that Mr. Hard, Ms. Bose, and Mrs. Principal care about their students in their own terms. As an act of “caring,” they invite students like Holly and Jose “to dinner” as a favor. The “dinner table” is filled with their favorite dishes of control, rules, authority, discipline, irrelevant teaching and learning, and test scores, without considering the guests’ appetites. They believe their guests are well-fed. Unfortunately, constant conflicts, tensions, resentment, and resistance at Borderlands reveal that students are not happy with what is served and how it is served, just as the Stork could not eat the “soup in a very shallow dish.” Students seem to penetrate what is going on in schools (Willis, 1977), as we heard from Holly, “This school sucks, if you ask me,” and from Jose, “Schools don’t mean much.” Students return the favor with dishes that teachers cannot enjoy: acts of resistance such as talking back to the teacher, violating the rules and regulations, or being disruptive in class. In the different power relationship between the teacher/administrator and the student, however, it is the latter who has to leave “the meal as hungry as when she began.” Students’ hunger for caring, hunger for meaningful, relevant education, hunger for respect and being valued, and hunger for success, still remain unsatisfied. As a result, our students’ at-riskness of school failure remains unresolved, if not exacerbated, causing them to be farther left behind.

Under the No Child Left Behind legislation, all schools in the nation feel the pressure of increased accountability, and Borderlands is not an exception. It seems that teachers and administrators at Borderlands are working hard to make the school accountable. But for whom are they trying to make the school accountable? Why does it seem that students’ “appetites” and “needs” are not taken into consideration in that effort? Why do I see a clear line of distance, disconnection, and dissonance between the administration and the students? What happened to the ideas of progressive education to which alternative public schools in the late 1960s and 70s subscribed? Why are these “unmerged voices” heard as a cacophony, rather than, as Bakhtin would call it, “an eternal harmony of unmerged voices” (1963/1984, p. 30)? Ultimately, for whom does/should the school bell toll? I wonder.

In this article, I have presented different voices of an alternative school employing Bakhtinian novelness of polyphony, chronotope and carnival. Although they are synopses of what is going on in the alternative school, the five voices of Mr. Hard, Holly, Ms. Bose, Jose, and Mrs. Principal, may be considered a metaphor of the possible life inside other public alternative schools experiencing similar tensions and struggles. The carnival of these multiple voices, including the epilogue, remains openended as it serves as a starting point of genuine dialogue among educators. A dialogue in which our taken-for-granted thoughts are disturbed, and counter-narratives that challenge one dominant view are promoted with compassion. I hope that this, in turn, will encourage questions as to the nature and purpose of alternative schooling that serves disenfranchised students, and to work together to provide true, meaningful, and equitable education that students like Holly and Jose deserve.

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