

Book Review of (Mis)Understanding Families: Learning from Real Families in Our Schools

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Readers who believe that families are an essential part of any school community and therefore should be understood, respected, and included in order to serve the best interest of students will be interested in a volume edited by Monica Miller Marsh and Tammy Turner-Vorbeck and published by Teachers College Press in 2009. The editors intend to help educators recognize and question their understanding of families in a way that will help them develop productive relationships with the wide array of families they inevitably encounter in their work. Each chapter ends with a series of discussion questions with which to guide these purposes. Any teacher or teacher educator is likely to find at least some, if not all, of the chapters valuable.

One valuable and unique contribution of Marsh and Turner-Vorbeck's blueprint for the book is that they ground it in Bakhtin's theory. Wertsch (1991), a sociocultural scholar, embraced and introduced Bakhtin's ideas to social scientists, but few scholars have applied Bakhtinian concepts to understanding school-family relationships. Yet, several of his ideas about identity are enormously helpful in framing an understanding of how we come to understand ourselves and others. For example, like others, Bakhtin believed that individuals incorporated how others perceived and talked about them (or members of their group) into their identity. He privileged discourse and multivoicedness as the primary form of interaction and reaction through which individuals construct and reconstruct ideas about self. Further, Bakhtin saw the act of creating and reading texts as a form of dialogue between the author, those who had

influenced the author, and the reader. Clearly, most chapters can be interpreted using a Bakhtinian framework, although the connections are not explicit in each chapter.

Following an introduction by the editors and an opening chapter by Pushor, the book is organized into two parts. The purpose of the five chapters that comprise part one is to describe and critically consider how families are represented in both formal (school documents and curriculum) and informal (film, television) texts. Part two, which also consists of five chapters, intends to use understanding derived from such a critical approach to comprehend and construct beneficial home–school relations.

In the first chapter, Debbie Pushor contrasts a conventional beginning of the yearly “Meet the Teacher” night for parents with a visionary “Meet the Parents” night. In doing so, she brilliantly and clearly conveys a vivid impression of what could be and how a simple but fundamental shift in thinking and practice could profoundly improve home–school trust and relationships. She explicitly identifies the taken for granted assumptions, stories, and beliefs embedded in “Meet the Teacher” night. She then suggests alternate conceptions to replace those including believing in the value of (a) what children bring to school, (b) parents knowledge about their children, and (c) engaged parents. This chapter is a must-read for teacher educators and both preservice and practicing educators.

Part 1: Representations of Families in Formal and Informal Curriculum

Next, Lopez and Stoelting set out to examine traditional representations of parent involvement as those pertain to Latino families and to provide better alternative representations. Accordingly, the authors critique Epstein’s framework as being school-focused and exclusive of Latino parents’ culturally based understanding of the parental role. On the other hand, they endorse Hoover-Dempsey’s model, which emphasizes the importance of how parents perceive their role, and suggest that educators need professional development that involves getting to know and understand families of students in order to genuinely work collaboratively with parents. While the chapter may be helpful, readers hoping to learn specifically about Latino families are likely to be disappointed. Although they use several examples of how Latino parents understand their role, their critique of parent involvement models and practices as well as their case for rearticulation applies to any culturally distinct group and perhaps to the mainstream population of parents as well.

In Chapter Three, Shirley Steinberg writes about television families that have served as an informal text for teachers, students, and parents over the 60 years that television has been “the media weft within the fabric of American society” (p. 38). Steinberg, a leading voice in critical pedagogy and media in the lives of children and adolescents, classifies and describes various types of television families: (a) suburban middle class, (b) poor working class, (c) child point of view (i.e., *Beaver Cleaver*), (d) motherless, (e) single father, (f) blended, (g) historical, and (h) animated. Her description and critical analysis of television families is very interesting to consider as a form of hidden curriculum. Unfortunately, she does not present evidence that this does impact teachers, students, or parents, or how it does and with what consequences. Rather she assumes this is obvious. The reader is also left wondering whether the pre-1990s shows are relevant to current K-12 or college students and, most importantly, how to best address these texts with teachers, parents, or students.

The next two chapters pertain to fiction about families. In Chapter Four, Lindsey and Parsons content analyze representations of families in award-winning young adult literature from several recent years (2005-2007). They identify five themes about families in these books. Prize winning books tend to be well represented in the curriculum and in young adult library book collections, yet a limitation of the chapter is that a very limited range of books are analyzed. Huber, Graham, Orr, and Reid then describe a literature circle they participated in as a way of exploring their identities as teachers. They shared their own family stories as they read stories of families. They report that their discussion process led them to ask how they might use their family stories in order to attend to the family stories of students and educators and how curriculum can be designed to allow for inquiry into family stories.

Marsh and Turner-Vorbeck collaborate to write Chapter Six about their own experiences as adoptive parents. They relate the difficulties that adoptive and foster families face and illustrate those with numerous school discussions, projects, and homework assignments which require students to consider family background. Using a Bakhtinian perspective, they sensitize the reader to ways in which family stories contribute to identity. Importantly, they present possible ways to adapt school activities to make them inclusive of adopted and foster children.

Part Two: Family–School Collaboration

Part Two of the book opens with a chapter by Graue and Hawkins about the perspectives of fourth grade students’ parents on what schools know and should know about their families and their values. This chapter is rich with

ideas about why and how to support a two-way flow of information between schools and homes and to develop instruction that incorporates family experience. The chapter includes powerful quotations from parents that were masterfully chosen to make the case for meaningful home-school relations. To their credit, the authors acknowledge the time and effort that would be required to forge such partnerships. The voices in this chapter rang true and were enlightening

Chapter Eight, written by Brock, starts with a letter to the reader setting the purpose and background for the chapter. A short theory section introduces black feminist theory and critical pedagogy. The remainder of the chapter is a fictional dialogue about urban schools and families between Professor Brock and her students on the first day of class. It is a very clever and, according to Brock, culturally attuned method of presenting her research. The dialogue was, indeed, an interesting way of learning about different myths and assumptions about urban students and families, which were subsequently debunked by the professor's voice. This dialogue is uneven, however. It is believable and smooth in portions, but seemed contrived in others.

In Chapter Nine, Jaime and Russell present an excellent summary of the history and legacy of Native American families and schools. They cogently discuss parental support and the very nature of education from an indigenous perspective. Their examples are compelling. They conclude the chapter with a set of concise practical ideas that could go far to redress past mistakes and advance current practice in a way that would benefit parents, teachers, and most importantly, students.

Chapter Ten by Li pertains to low socioeconomic status immigrant families. Case studies of two Sudanese and two Vietnamese families and their relationship with schools illustrate how these parents struggled to be involved with their children's education. For example, time and financial constraints impeded the parents' engagement with their children's school work and schools. As well, the parents culturally based understanding of how to raise children was inconsistent in some basic ways with child rearing patterns in the United States. The parents, who lived in high crime neighborhoods because that was where they could afford housing, worried about their children's safety and exposure to negative role models which led them to isolate their children. Although Li's recommendation that educators need to learn about their children's lives outside of school is well taken, it is not clear to many educators how to do so. The chapter ends with several excellent unconventional ideas about how schools might foster more involvement with low-income immigrant and minority families.

The final fascinating chapter, by Chung and Clandinin, is a narrative inquiry focusing on the family stories of one newcomer third grade child from Korea, her mother, and her teacher. Six story fragments are used to show how family lives and stories intersect and reverberate in classrooms and how these could be used to generate a co-constructed living curriculum. The authors make a compelling case for the importance of relational knowledge and, notably, described how they intentionally created a project through which children's family stories were used in a classroom for "cocomposing a curriculum of lives alongside children, families, and teachers" (p. 193). This chapter is an excellent finale because it aggregates the purpose, theoretical underpinnings, and practical value of the volume.

Conclusion

This recent book should be welcomed by teachers and teacher educators alike. Anyone who is looking for resources to help them understand their own assumptions about family involvement, the perspectives of diverse families, or how to construct meaningful home-school relationships will be well served by this book. In the spirit of Bakhtin's regard for polyphony, the contributions should spark lively dialogue and exchange between the voices of readers, authors, and families at the heart of each chapter.

References

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