Invitation Accepted: Integrating Invitational Rhetoric in Educational Contexts

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The transformative power of dialogue has the potential to serve as a healthful alternative to unproductive strategies for problem-solving in many communication contexts (Ryan & Natalle, 2001). Sadly, educational contexts emerge as contexts in dire need of such communicative reconstruction, evidenced by the alarming increase in incidences of hostile caregiver/educator communication. Offering a new paradigm for educators affected by hostile communication, this essay proposes the application of invitational rhetoric, a theory and practice developed in the field of Communication Studies, aimed at the civil "disarmament" of hostile communication, rooted in dialogue and openness. Illumining how the tenets of invitational rhetoric -- value, safety, and freedom – may be employed in potentially destructive caregiver-educator communicative exchanges, this essay provides relevant illustrations demonstrating how these tenets could diffuse hostile communication in educational contexts. The marriage of this theory from the field of Communication Studies with the field of Education is a sensible and productive step toward assimilating another strategy that educators may use to better serve students.

Keywords: invitational rhetoric, dialogue, parent-teacher communication, aggressive communication, communication strategies, bullying, teacher victimization, feminist theory, case study

The ability of educators and school personnel to communicate effectively with those involved in a student's "circle of support" is critical to the welfare of students, the efficacy of the educational experience, and the morale of the educational context and climate. Literacy professor Patricia Schmidt aptly notes that sentiments such as "We are all connected," and "It takes a village to raise a child" (2005, p. xi) undergird the belief that the creation of a supportive educational context is a collaborative endeavor that involves students, parents, school administrators, community members, and even state and national policy-makers. Federal policy such as that substantiated by the *No Child Left Behind Act* and programs like *Goals 2000* also encourage home and school collaboration, placing "great emphasis on increasing parental involvement in order to enhance student achievement" (Thompson, 2008, p. 202; Schmidt, 2005; de Carvalho, 2001; Keller, 2006; Lewis, 2002; Rogers, 2006). It is not surprising to note that research also suggests that schools must foster collaborative relationships with parents and communities, as these efforts will profoundly affect the welfare of students (Heath, 1983; Trueba, Jacobs, & Kirton, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995; Edwards, 2004; Stafford, 1987). Evidently then, educators' communicative skills are critically important to foster not only effective instruction and classroom management strategies, but also in regard to the relational duties involved with the profession of teaching.

Despite this need for communicative effectiveness, many educators are not well prepared or trained for communicative interactions, in particular, for

those interactions that occur with parents/caregivers (Dotger, 2009). Often times, communicative exchanges with caregivers occur only sporadically and rarely in a proactive spirit, as many communications are predicated upon a reaction to a situation that may be concerning and/or negative (i.e. a grade concern or a disciplinary measure enacted). Moreover, because the art and practice of teaching is often best developed "on the job," it can be difficult to anticipate the varying collection of communicative incidences for which an educator must prepare. This lack of training becomes particularly troublesome over the past decade as educators have faced a substantial rise in the level of confrontations between caregivers, teachers, and school administrators and an increase in documented reports of aggressive caregiver behavior toward educators (Jaksec, 2003, 2005). Such moments often incite "crucial conversations," or those in which stakes are high, opinions are varied, and emotions run strong; these communicative exchanges are a customary responsibility of the "communicative work" of educators, so it becomes imperative that educators have a burgeoning set of strategies for negotiating communication of this consequentiality (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, & Switzler, 2002, p. 3). Consequently, educators must recognize the need for strong communication skills are of critical importance and unprecedented urgency as incidents of aggressive caregiver communication are plausible and reoccurring regularities in public education.

While educational literature is replete with many suggested models and templates for the constructive handling of aggressive communication in educational contexts, this study posits an additional alternative approach: asserting that the interdisciplinary approach of invitational rhetoric, which stems from a rhetorical/feminist perspective in the field of Communication Studies, may be a tool that can help educators and school personnel more effectively navigate complex communicative interactions with parents and caregivers. This approach, embodied through the communicated tenets of value, safety, and freedom, is predicated upon civility and understanding as the ultimate communicative goals (Griffin & Foss, 1995). Though every communicative exchange is unique and no one tool is unequivocally successful, awareness of a variety of communication perspectives will only enhance educators' effectiveness in mediating and diffusing complex situations and interactions.

In the spirit of inquiry then, this essay will briefly outline current research regarding communication in caregiver/educator relationships, exposing the need for further study of confrontation dynamics in these relationships, and it will then systematically ally this research with the communicative paradigm known as *invitational rhetoric* (Foss & Griffin, 1995). After introducing this approach, its application in the field of Education will be explored, illustrating how invitational rhetoric may be utilized as a tool for mediating challenging caregiver/educator interactions. These illustrations will be grounded in a discussion of the three most commonly cited tenets of invitational rhetoric: value, safety, and freedom -- and examples will be provided to demonstrate the application of these tenets in potentially hostile communicative exchanges.

No Teacher Left Behind: Impetuses for Aggressive Caregiver-Educator Communication

To effectively mitigate confrontational communicative interactions is undoubtedly important in any relationship. Miretzky (2004) argues that caregiver-educator relationships are no different, reinforcing student achievement as the primary goal of these relationships, recognizing that the importance of talk between parents and educators is critical to the maintenance and sustainment of democratic communities that support school improvement. As Risko and Walker-Dalhouse (2009) also demonstrate, the far-reaching effects of positive caregiver/educator communication are profound. When caregivers feel positive about their school involvement and relations with school personnel, their children's interests, learning, and aspirations are typically increased while the morale and self-confidence of school personnel are augmented as well (Fan & Chen, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Thus, teachers' professional communication skills are "important as they work with parents to promote the success of all children in the classroom" (Dotgers, 2009, p. 93). Despite these benefits of positive caregiver/educator communication, it is important to recognize that many societal and cultural dynamics have shifted which impact the nature of this communication.

To illustrate, whereas contact between caregivers and educators used to happen spontaneously as educators were more regularly a part of a family's community outside of the school (Rotter & Robinson, 1983), schools are now more centralized and computer-mediated communication has had to become firmly established within instructional contexts, thereby limiting face-to-face interactions between educators and caregivers (Thompson, 2009). Though computer-mediated communication does have advantages, it can be problematic from a communicative standpoint as cue restrictions cause difficulty in the interpretation of messages (Walther, 2008), and research demonstrates that this type of communication is often focused primarily on negative topics such as grade complaints or behavior issues (Thompson, 2008). Changes in the roles educators play in communities and the channels through which educational communication occurs are only a few of the potential factors which contribute to the rise in hostile caregiver/educator communication.

Garrett's (2009) study also reveals another important point of consideration: perception. Simply,

caregivers' and educators' perceptions of what constitutes "valuable communication" have significantly changed, creating larger gaps between what each party finds pertinent, useful, and meaningful. Additionally, perceptions regarding through which methods communication should occur are also variant, underscoring the need for increased dialogue and attention to the fostering of sensitivity in these complex communicative relationships.

In the face of such challenges, Savoy (2010) argues that just as in society, in the educational system, "our private and public discourse is becoming increasingly more hostile and rude; we are losing civility and respect for each other" (p. 4; see also Banathy, 2003). Warranting attention, this argument is supported on a consistent basis, as headlines assert the stories of caregiver/educator communication gone wrong; stories in which aggressive and sometimes violent interactions between caregivers and unassuming educators are cause for alarm.

To corroborate, a nationwide poll of school violence conducted in Canada reveals that the Canadian Teachers Federation learned that 59 percent of principals across the country had witnessed at least one parent verbally abuse a teacher, and 23 percent had seen a parent physically assault or intimidate a teacher (2001, Montreal *Gazette)*. The notion of "abuse," "assault," and "intimidation" cannot go unchecked. Similarly, educators in England cite an increase in work-related stress, asking for new training in communication and mediation after incidences dealing with parents who are "unacceptably rude," "increasingly aggressive and demanding," and even "physically aggressive" have resulted in the need to call local police into school contexts (Sharkey, 2008, p. 5). It is no wonder this training has been requested, as schools in London reported that over 140 parents had been arrested in the year 2001 alone "for assaulting teachers after their children had gotten into trouble" (Lee, 2001, p. 12).

Sadly, incidences such as these are not limited to foreign ground. Documented incidences of parental aggression toward educators in the United States are also numerous. A study reveals that Philadelphia public schools reported 57 instances of parental assaults against teachers in just one six-month period of observation (May, Johnson, Chen, Hutchinson, & Ricketts, 2010). Another study of school administrators in a Florida county finds that 70% of respondents had been threatened by a parent through one of three primary types of threats: verbal threats accompanied by intimidation, non-contact threats accompanied by intimidation, and intimidation with physical contact (Trump & Moore, 2001). It is not surprising to recognize, then, that the strain of dealing with parents has been cited as one of the primary reasons new teachers elect to leave the profession (Phillips, 2005).

With these implications in mind, in a cultural moment where the demand for student success is ever-increasing, the pressures for teacher efficacy are mounting, and confrontational communication can be cultivated and enacted through a multitude of channels, it becomes imperative to first understand the impetus from which this type of communication may stem.

May, Johnson, Chen, Hutchinson, and Ricketts (2010) tackled this very question in an extensive study prepared for *The Journal of Current Issues in Education*, designed to unearth the causes of adversarial parent-teacher relationships. This longitudinal, exploratory study revealed that, "Most teachers are likely to experience somewhat regular, if primarily verbal, conflict with parents" (p. 23). Coupling this conclusion with a more specific evaluation of other factors influencing parent-teacher communication conflict, it is acknowledged that, "Younger teachers were more likely to experience incidents of parental aggression or other problematic interactions than their older counterparts, as were teachers working in larger communities," and:

> teachers with more advanced degrees were more likely to experience incidents of parental aggression or other problematic interactions than their counterparts without those advanced degrees [because] …teachers who return for additional graduate courses are more willing to experiment with innovative educational practices and theories that…may make parents that are unfamiliar with these strategies uncomfortable and thus more likely to confront these teachers. (p. 25-26)

Frustratingly, this information reveals that novice educators are most likely to become targets of hostile communication and that those educators who explore alternative and/or creative approaches to teaching and learning should be poised to anticipate opposition. Certainly, we must utilize this information to provide a framework through which school personnel can begin to proactively anticipate potentially aggressive communicative exchanges between caregivers and educators and diffuse these situations before they become inappropriately inflammatory.

Jaksec (2003) also contributes to the body of extant research on aggressive caregiver communication behavior, claiming that several factors are generally recognized as main contributors to parental aggression. These factors include:

> Financial stress, patterns of family violence, unstable family environments, previous negative school experiences, school personnel attitudes, a parent's mental instability, or even a fear that he or she is losing control of his or her child. (p. 19)

Unfortunately, as is clearly demonstrated, the myriad of reasons a caregiver may become hostile toward an educator create challenge when surmising the impetus for such behavior. However, Jaksec (2003) and Brandt (1998) illumine that paring down these generalized triggers in lieu of a more specific evaluation of the following few factors could prove fruitful in better understanding the dynamics involved in these types of exchanges; this includes addressing the lack familiarity some caregivers have with school personnel and/or school activities which postures a caregiver in a "stranger" identity when dealing with potentially emotionally charged issues, addressing the inaccurate perceptions caregivers may have of school personnel and the accompanying skepticism that often ensues, and addressing the lack of civility policies that should regulate and govern behavior and communication in academic settings.

With these characteristics sensitively located at the forefront of an educator's communicative barometer, it can be readily seen that the myriad of reasons caregivers may engage aggressive communication toward school personnel are vast and complex. Thus, educators who have the disposition, abilities, and skills to sense, monitor, mediate, and proactively engage and empower diverse families and communities will be able to contribute most effectively to students' academic and social development, fostering healthful communicative exchanges wherever possible. The ability to elucidate and craft a communicative relationship predicated upon trust, vision, credibility, service, and influence will mitigate those inevitable occasions when caregivers and educators disagree about curriculum, assignments, peer relationships, homework, and/or teaching approaches (Kozik, 2005). It is clear, then, that a strategy predicated in open, civil, and equitable communication could be invaluable for resolving differences in educational contexts (Katz, Aidman, Reese, & Clark, 1996; Willis, 1995).

Proposing New Communicative Paradigms: Invitational Rhetoric, an Overview

As demonstrated, many aggressive communication exchanges that occur between caregivers and educators stem from issues that relate to the exertion of power and/or the forcing of change. Inevitably, much of the content of these exchanges is unproductive and often detrimental to all parties involved: caregivers, educators, school personnel, and most importantly, students. Embedded in efforts to exert power or force change is the innate desire for control and domination, which, if left unchecked, may result in forms of violence – in its literal, discursive, and/or rhetorical sense(s) (Foss & Griffin, 1995).

Responding to this growing concern of the implicit conceptions of rhetoric and persuasion that are manifested in daily communication exchanges, feminist Communication scholars recognized that a new approach to understanding the role of persuasion and rhetoric was long overdue. Offering the concept of "invitational rhetoric" as an alternative communicative option, Foss and Griffin (1995) theorize that invitational rhetoric is an "invitation to understanding as a means to create a relationship rooted in equality, immanent value, and self-determination" (p. 5). Through this paradigm, communicators are invited to enter into one another's world to see it as the other does (Foss & Griffin, 1995). This communication paradigm suspends judgment and denigration in lieu of openness, civility, respect, and validation of others' opinions, experiences, and world views. Because of the "nonhierarchical, nonjudgmental, non-adversarial framework established for the interaction," understanding becomes the ultimate goal for the process of communication and product of communication exchanges, engendering appreciation, value, and a sense of equality (Foss & Griffin, 1995, p. 5).

This form of rhetoric differs from attempts to win over an opponent or to advocate the correctness of any one particular position (Bone, Griffin, & Scholz, 2008). Rather, it is based in an earnest desire to exchange with one another, in the spirit of dialogue, utilizing thoughtful, civil language, through the creation of an environment where growth and change can occur naturally. As Bone, Griffin, and Scholz (2008) argue, "to engage invitational rhetoric is to exchange ideas from positions of mutual respect and equality" (p. 437). Gaining currency through the past decade, this form of rhetoric proves valuable in a variety of contexts and mediums ranging from public discussions and deliberations, to work-place communication, to the construction of visual artifacts that may evoke dialogue. Its essence, however, must stem from individual communicators' choice to abandon their tendencies toward hierarchy, defensiveness, and/or argument in lieu of the desire to listen, learn, and understand others' perspectives.

To further clarify, Foss and Foss (2012) offer the following eight "key assumptions" which characterize invitational rhetoric, helping to provide a framework for the ways moments of communicative difference can be transformed into occasions of resource:

1) understanding is the purpose of communication in invitational rhetoric;
2) participants in invitational rhetoric listen with openness;
3) in invitational rhetoric, speaker and audience are viewed as equals;
4) invitational rhetoric involves power-with instead of power-over;
5) participants change only when they choose

6) to change in invitational rhetoric;
7) participants enter invitational rhetoric wiling to be changed;
8) invitational rhetoric creates a world of appreciation for differences;
9) invitational rhetoric is one of many options in a communicative "toolbox." (p. 10)

This framework illumines the three most commonly cited tenets of invitational rhetoric: safety, value, and freedom, which can be seen as external conditions that must be created by a communicator for the promotion of a successful invitational communication exchange (Bone, Griffin, & Scholz, 2008). This framework helps to situate invitational rhetoric as a viable tool for the mediation of potentially conflicting communicative exchanges between caregivers and educators. Clearly, proponents of invitational rhetoric would acknowledge that this is one potential communicative paradigm that should traverse disciplinary boundaries, as its institution in educational contexts may assuage many of the hostile communicative exchanges that strain the relationships between and among school personnel and caregivers.

To this end, the three conditions of invitational rhetoric serve as an appropriate foundation for the exploration of several brief examples and illustrations whereby invitational rhetoric could be utilized in educational contexts in order to allay tensions between caregivers and educators. The illustrations serve as a modified form of holistic, multiple case analysis (Yin, 2012). By employing this methodological framework, everyday educational phenomenon can be illumined, in hopes that consumers of this research may be able to generalize from these instances and create meaning that is applicable to their particular contexts and situations (Yin, 2012).

Recognizing that sharing individualized accounts of educators who have used invitational rhetoric in their communicative encounters may inappropriately showcase or compromise the relational work that has been done to nurture these relationships, anecdotal examples will instead be provided to illustrate instances that may be "common" instigators of aggressive caregiver/educator communication. After the provision of a relevant anecdote, one of the three conditions of invitational rhetoric will be discussed while suggestions are provided for the integration and maintenance of invitational rhetoric as a suitable strategy for de-escalating aggressive communication in educational contexts. In these illustrations, the role, response, and responsibility of the educator is emphasized, as educators ultimately have little control over the behaviors of their communicative counterparts. More productively, educators should always strive to model healthful, positive communication

in the genuine spirit of learning and growth. With this, I invite all communicators to be immersed in a new communicative perspective through these illustrations, seeking to open doors for understanding and the enhancement of the relationships between and among those we serve.

Illustrations of Invitational Rhetoric: Value, Safety, and Freedom

Value

With anticipation and palpable excitement, a teacher prepares her Honor's English students for an upcoming unit where they will be exposed to and immersed in various forms of Holocaust literature. Convinced that the typical apathy displayed by many students in regard to reading is partially the product of a lack of engaging curricular materials, she is eager to expose students to visceral first-person accounts and narratives of survivors from concentration camps, using these texts to anchor an engaging study of figurative language, point of view, and the genre of memoir. Thankful that the school district for which she works not only supports, but requires the study of such literature, she was remiss to the notion that these curricular choices might be met with hesitation. As such, she is literally stunned to open her email inbox at the onset of the unit, only to be welcomed by an aggressive and accusatory message from a parent concerned about the "political agenda" of the unit of study. This parent, armed with her own interpretation of the learning goals for the unit as well as staunchly engrained political perspectives, demands an immediate meeting, and has spared no time in copying the email to school administrators, district literacy coordinators, and even the Superintendent. Without warning, the excitement of launching an authentic and engaging unit of study transforms into an elevated fear-filled journey into an already hostile communicative situation which has drawn the attention of many officials within the educational context.

If exercised appropriately, educators who wish to operate from an invitational perspective will prioritize the condition of *value* that must be present within invitational exchanges. Bone, Griffin, and Scholz (2008) argue that:

> *value* is the acknowledgement that audience members have intrinsic or immanent worth…and when value is present, rhetors recognize that the views of the other person or people, although different from one's own, have inherent value; that is, rhetors communicate that they will step outside their own standpoint in order to understand another's perspective. (p. 437)

Simply, this is what Benhabib (1992) calls "the principle of universal moral respect" (p. 29) and what Barrett (1991) describes as "respectfully affirming others" while at the same time "one affirms oneself" (p. 148; also

cited in Foss & Griffin, 1995).

As illustrated, one prominent example where the condition of *value* may play a critical role regards opinions surrounding curricular programming, which are among the most frequently cited impetuses of confrontation between caregivers and school personnel. Caregivers may resist a particular text being utilized in a classroom, a unit of study at large, a curricular requirement, or an assessment strategy. At times, these concerns are warranted as some educators have not thoughtfully engaged the parameters of appropriateness and/or purpose that should undergird every curricular choice. In other instances, even in light of the most thoughtful intention and the support of district and state policies and standards, educators can become the target of unwarranted and sometimes vicious communication regarding the curricular "happenings" of their classrooms. These attacks are often unleashed with very impassioned, assuming language and may represent a mobilized cohort of caregivers banned together in an effort against a particular teacher and/or school.

This case illustrates a tenuous, but common situation. At the heart of the case are often unknowing students who are trapped between the preferences of their assertive caregivers and the expectations of a school's curriculum. Clarification and justification may not suffice to satisfy the caregiver, as no amount of rational explanation can combat the staunchly embedded mores and values that inform the caregiver's opposition. This is precisely where the paradigm of invitational rhetoric and the condition of *value* may become particularly useful.

In this sense, an educator faced with a caregiver who is resisting a particular curricular choice need not abandon his/her own perspectives regarding the value of a chosen curriculum, but should additionally place emphasis on understanding the resistance from a more visceral level, asking questions that are not steeped with the undertones of defensiveness, but rather enlightened with the spirit of inquiry. Priority should be placed on affirming and valuing alternate opinions and perspectives, seeking to listen as much as seeking to be heard.

Foss and Griffin (1995) assert that *value* is created when "rhetors approach audience members as unrepeatable individuals" and eschew "distancing and depersonalizing…attitudes" (p. 11, as cited in Walker, 1989, pp. 22, 23). When communication is enacted in this way, communicators feel their identities are not "forced upon or chosen for them" and the technique of "absolute listening" (Gendlin, 1978) can be employed, whereby communicators do not interrupt or insert anything of their own perspective as others tell of their experiences, ideas, preferences, and choices (Foss & Griffin, 1995).

Educators wishing to enact the condition of *value* in their invitational exchanges with potentially aggressive caregivers will model and prioritize listening and moral respect, allowing caregivers to express the deeply personal preferences that motivate their visceral reactions to aspects of the educational process, while looking for synonymous moments where values may, in fact, be aligned. Sometimes, the simple act of reserving face time for a concerned caregiver and the provision of a genuine forum through which concerns may be openly expressed and honored is enough to diffuse a potentially aggressive situation.

Safety

Tired and worn from a long day at school, a group of literacy teachers gather together for their monthly collaborative meeting. Nervous about the impending news he will report, the department chairperson tentatively reveals that the district for which they work has decided to institute additional standardized testing measures for all students in literacy-based classes. Groaning with despair and panic, a lengthy and heated conversation ensues whereby the teachers question how they will incorporate time for yet another test and how they will defend the validity of instituting yet another assessment measure outside of curriculum. Predicting the onslaught of student and parental disapproval in a district where state tests already consume over two weeks of instructional time, the teachers feel blindsided, undermined, and confused. The seemingly endless battery of required standardized tests is quickly becoming one of the most frequently contested issues in this community as it regards public education. Adding additional days of required assessments will certainly push the pot to its boiling point, rendering defenseless teachers as targets for public ambush.

A second condition embodied by the invitational process is that of *safety*. In their seminal work, Foss and Griffin (1995) argue that *safety* involves "the creation of a feeling of security and freedom from danger," and communication contributes to a feeling of safety when it "conveys…that ideas and feelings…will be received with respect and care" (p. 10). Additionally, rhetoric that contributes to a feeling of *safety* also provides a means of coherency for communicators, such that they can be open to new perspectives and ideas, trusting that their communicative counterparts are working with and not against them (Foss & Griffin, 1995).

It is clear to see how much of the hostile communication that occurs between caregivers and educators could stem from a lack perceived *safety*. In many instances, school personnel are unknown or known only superficially by caregivers, with quick meetings at back-to-school nights or parent-teacher conferences providing the only real introduction to one another. Often, the communication between caregivers and educators occurs electronically, thereby reducing the personal nature of the relationship as well. This is coupled with the reality that a student may have as many as seven or eight different teachers in a given school day, and the roster of teachers may change each semester or

each school year, rendering families with the responsibility of placing trust in literally hundreds of educators over the course of a student's career in K-12 settings. These relational factors culminate, contributing to the delicate structure that surrounds caregiver-teacher relationships.

Beyond this, several other factors exist in educational settings where communicative *safety* may be a concern. The swinging pendulum of educational policy renders many caregivers and educators with a sense of constant change. It can seem that each school year is accompanied with a set of new policies, standards, programs, best practices, assessments, and initiatives that are often mandated by local and state governing bodies. Lack of control, and frequently, lack of information, can create a tenuous relationship between schools, school districts, and caregivers. Inundation is never a means through which to gain compliance, yet the subversive nature of educational policy sneaks up on all those affected, causing panic, frustration, and angst for many. Educators negotiate the anger and confusion of caregivers who do not understand the rationale for policies that have been implemented, and in some cases, as illustrated in the preceding anecdote, educators themselves have not been communicated with appropriately in order to be the liaison necessitated. Educational policies may be as simple as the institution of a new summer reading program or an application process for gifted and talented programming, or as complex as the introduction of a new battery of mandated state standardized tests, as demonstrated above. Regardless of the specific nature of the policy, when order is threatened and individuals do not feel they have a *safe* space to express voice, the reaction is often opposition.

To an extent, educators can work both proactively and reactively to manage hostile communication that could be the result of a breach in *safety*. From a proactive perspective, relationship-building is paramount. The spirit of invitational rhetoric would propose that working to establish trust and familiarity with families will create a *safe* encasement through which communication can thrive. Being an educator with credibility who has built ethos with other community members and demonstrated character will also assist in buffering potentially aggressive communication exchanges.

Beyond these proactive measures, as complex situations arise, invitational communicators will strive to acknowledge the potential fear or dis-ease that may permeate a crucial conversation, quelling the fear with an assurance that open communication will be maintained and all ideas will be respected and listened to. By affirming that fear or anxiety is natural and defining the parameters of the communication exchange so that all parties will have voice, individual communicators will

feel less threatened and more open to the exchange of ideas and eventual reaching of understanding.

Freedom

Scanning the room, a History teacher notices the stealth movements of a student quickly averting his glance away from another's test paper at a neighboring desk. After issuing a global verbal warning regarding integrity, the same suspicious behaviors ensue. Repeatedly, the teacher observes a pattern indicating that the student is clearly "borrowing" answers from a classmate's test, and this suspicion is confirmed when, upon seizing the documents in question, both students have identical answers and identical errors. Saddened and frustrated by this incident, the teacher decides to conduct an individual conference with the student in question, but is met only with resistance, tears, and denial despite the concrete evidence provided. The student is dismissed, with indications that further consequences will be pursued by school administration, as per school policies on academic integrity. Within a matter of hours, the teacher's classroom telephone rings, and upon answering, he is greeted by an enraged parent demanding to know why her son is being accused of cheating and victimized in such an unjust manner. Regardless of the evidenced presented, she is convinced that her son has been wronged and his reputation is stained, demanding immediate apology.

A final tenet upon which invitational rhetoric is predicated is *freedom*, also known as *self-determination*. *Freedom*, or the power to choose or decide, is a condition whose presence is a "prerequisite for the possibility of mutual understanding" (Foss & Griffin, 1995, p. 12). By removing restrictions and opening dialogue to all ideas, all participants are able to, in Barrett's (1991) words, "speak up, to speak out" (p. 148; also cited in Foss & Griffin, 1995, p. 12). *Freedom* is further cultivated when communicators provide opportunities for others to develop and choose options, facilitating rich and complex dialogues that foster the co-creation of meaning.

An invitational communicator who subscribes to the condition of *freedom* recognizes that it should not be a communicator's responsibility or desire to force, mandate, or require the upholding of a particular ideology, belief, or choice. Rather, an invitational communicator acknowledges that we are each the experts of our own lives and will freely follow the courses that seem most appropriate to us, based on our own motivations and information sources. Releasing the responsibility to persuade and instead offering information for voluntary consumption, an invitational communicator gives others the space and choice to choose for themselves without coercion, force, fear, or pressure.

This condition may feel contradictory to the nature of order that must prevail in an educational context. Clearly, there are rules that need to be adhered to, and obviously, certain facets of behavior and student

productivity are non-negotiable. The condition of *freedom* does not insinuate that anything is universally acceptable, nor is invitational communication the appropriate form of communication for every communicative encounter. However, there are many communicative instances between caregivers and educators where the proverbial butting of heads could be easily avoided by utilizing principles of *freedom* and *self-determination* in an invitational manner.

Simply, as educators navigate aggressive communication with caregivers, relinquishing control and placing control back into the hands of the caregiver can be a surprisingly effective technique for diminishing hostility and working toward a productive outcome. For example, if a caregiver is upset with a particular discipline technique exercised in a classroom, an educator may simply ask, in the spirit of inquiry, "Do you have suggestions for discipline techniques that you have utilized in the home that I might employ?" If communicated in a genuine, civil manner, this simple question places *freedom* back into the hands of the caregiver, allowing s/he to demonstrate the right to contribute to the appropriate course of action. Typically, many caregivers are not necessarily in disagreement about the offense committed by a student, but may be in disagreement about the consequence or manner in which the offense was handled. This could be due, in part, to caregivers' desire to exercise right to freely choose how their children are raised, especially as it pertains to instances of misbehavior or right versus wrong.

In a similar example as described previously, navigating the difficult discussion of students caught plagiarizing or cheating may be arduous as parents often experience a combination of shame, anger, and confusion regarding such incidences. Even when all evidence corroborates student wrongdoing, some parents may resist this conversation or the consequences therein, even shifting blame back onto the educator. In this instance, an educator might again propose a series of questions that allows the caregiver to exercise the right to assist in creating the appropriate course of action for the guilty party. Such questions might include: "Given the evidence we have gathered, what might you suggest as an appropriate consequence?," or "Do you have ideas regarding the way we might address this?"

In short, when *freedom* is exercised in invitational communication, the "principle of egalitarian reciprocity" can exist, which allows communicators the same "symmetrical rights to various speech acts" (Benhabib, 1992, p. 29). Either an acceptance or rejection of a perspective is a viable outcome, and regardless, the relationship remains intact and mutual respect is prioritized. At worst, both parties have gained insights into one another, developed new perspectives, and have established a positive, civil foundation for the process of

continual advancement toward agreement if agreement is necessitated.

Toward an Invitational Future

The transformative power of dialogue has the potential to serve as a rational alternative to increasingly violent and unproductive strategies for problem-solving in many communication contexts (Ryan & Natalle, 2001). Sadly, educational contexts do emerge as contexts that are in dire need of communicative "reconstruction." As presented, the variance in student populations, the inconsistent nature of student home lives, the increasing demands placed on students and educators, the cultural tendencies to shift away from personal communication toward computer mediated communication, and the unique nature of the educational process all posit educational contexts as complex sites of inquiry that have the potential to cultivate both rich and meaningful communication exchanges, as well as unhealthy and destructive communicative exchanges.

This essay has chosen to focus on the latter by offering a new paradigm for the consideration of those affected by aggressive or hostile caregiver-educator communication. After justifying the urgency for this evaluation and reviewing some of the possible impetuses for aggressive caregiver-educator communication, the essay proposed the introduction of the theory of invitational rhetoric, a theory developed by feminist scholars in the field of Communication Studies. Though this theory is not, in and of itself, new, the marriage of this theory from the field of Communication Studies with the field of Education is a sensible and productive step toward assimilating another strategy that educators may use to better serve students.

Illumining how the tenets of invitational rhetoric – *value, safety,* and *freedom* – may be embodied in potentially destructive caregiver-educator communicative exchanges, this essay provided relevant illustrations demonstrating how these tenets could diffuse hostile communication in regard to curriculum, parental lack of familiarity with school personnel, inconsistencies of educational policy, generalized angst regarding educational change, disagreement over discipline policies, and management of student academic integrity: all fodder for potentially charged caregiver-educator communication.

Certainly no one technique will be fool proof in mediating all types of aggressive communication, and at times, some communicative exchanges need to follow certain parameters that may not align with the spirit of invitational communication. This proposal is not intended to suggest that invitational communication is the appropriate form of communication for all aggressive caregiver-educator communicative exchanges. It merely proposes another viable tool from which educators can glean suggestion regarding ways to mitigate some of the

less desirable moments of the teaching and learning journey, and it does this by embodying some of the most revered tenets of education itself: dialogue, inquiry, civility, and understanding.

As Foss, Griffin, and Foss (1999) argue, "interaction with others produces change" (p. 125). It is my hope that interactions among caregivers, school personnel, and community members will foster positive change and growth for all, so that our students may see us as living examples of that which we allege to teach.

<div align="center">References</div>

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