SCHOOL AS COMMUNITY
From Promise to Practice

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Gail Furman

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CHAPTER 7

*Schools as Communities for Students*

Karen Osterman

Hargreaves, Earl, and Ryan (1996) echo the voice of many researchers and educators who believe that "one of the most fundamental reforms needed in secondary or high school education is to make schools into better communities of caring and support for young people" (p. 77). The term *community* is used in different ways in the literature, but common to many of these definitions is the concept of belongingness (Solomon et al., 1996). While there are differences in opinion on specific characteristics of organizations that constitute communities, as Furman (1998) explains, community is not present until members experience feelings of belonging, trust in others, and safety. Members of a community, according to McMillan and Chavis (1986), feel that they belong, that they matter to one another and to the group, and believe that their needs will be met through their commitment to one another.

This chapter focuses on schools as communities for students, and drawing on empirical research, considers the following questions: Why is it important for students to experience belonging in the school setting? To what extent do students experience school as a supportive community? And finally, in what ways do schools influence the development of this sense of community?¹

THE NEED FOR BELONGING

Drawing from the psychological literature, we learn that this need for belonging is a fundamental motivational need with critical implications for human growth and development (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Deci et al., 1991; Ryan, 1995). The need for relatedness involves the need to feel securely connected with others in the environment and to experience oneself as worthy of love
and respect. In essence, then, this need for relatedness is the need to experience belongingness, or a sense of community, in a particular context.2

A fundamental human motivation, according to Baumeister and Leary (1995), is one that applies to all people, operates in a wide variety of settings, and affects emotional and cognitive patterns. Based on an extensive review of empirical evidence from many settings, they determined that the need to belong is indeed fundamental and is associated with differences in cognitive processes, emotional patterns, behavior, health, and well-being. The experience of belonging affects people's perceptions of others; those who feel accepted view friends and group members more favorably and to think about them more often and in more complex ways. Being included or welcomed leads to positive emotions—happiness, elation, contentment, and calm. Being rejected, excluded, or ignored, on the other hand, often leads to anxiety, depression, grief, jealousy, and loneliness and is associated with a higher incidence of mental and physical illness and a broad range of behavioral problems, ranging from traffic accidents and drug and alcohol use to criminality and suicide. Being part of a supportive network reduces stress, while being deprived of stable and supportive relationships has far-reaching negative consequences. From their analysis of over three hundred empirical studies, the researchers conclude that "the desire for interpersonal attachment may well be one of the most far-reaching and integrative constructs currently available to understand human nature" (p. 522).

What is the relevance of this work in school settings? Current work in educational psychology tells us that students' experience of belongingness in the school setting is linked to important motivational, attitudinal, and behavioral factors that are associated with school success. Specifically, we find that this sense of belonging to a supportive school community is associated with emotional well-being, intrinsic motivation, prosocial behavior, commitment to school, engagement, and achievement.

Children who experience a sense of relatedness have a stronger supply of inner resources. They perceive themselves to be more competent and autonomous; but they are also more willing to accept social norms, values, and regulation and to assume responsibility for their own behavior (Deci et al., 1991; Grolnick & Ryan, 1989; Grolnick, Ryan, & Deci, 1991; Ryan, 1995; Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch, 1994; Ryan & Lynch, 1989; Wentzel, 1997). They have higher expectations of success and higher levels of intrinsic motivation (Anderson, Manoogian, & Reznick, 1976; Battistich et al., 1995; Goodenow, 1993a, 1993b; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Solomon et al., 1996; Wentzel, 1997; Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997) as well as a stronger sense of identity, self-esteem, and self-efficacy (Battistich et al., 1995; Bishop & Inderbitzen, 1995; Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch, 1994). These inner resources, in turn, predict engagement and performance.
The experience of belonging is associated with more positive attitudes toward self and others. Baumeister and Leary (1995) report that when people have social attachments or perceive themselves to be part of a group, helping behavior increases, with even the opportunity to talk with strangers leading to increased cooperation. People also view friends and members of their group differently: they think about them more, they think about them in more complex ways, and they view them more favorably. In schools, similar findings emerge: students who experience acceptance in the school community have more positive attitudes and relationships with others. They demonstrate more concern and respect for peers and teachers, are more accepting of those outside of their immediate friendship groups, and demonstrate more altruistic or prosocial behavior (Battistich et al., 1995; Solomon et al., 1996; Solomon, et al., in press; Watson, Battistich, & Solomon, 1997; Wentzel, 1997).

They also have more positive attitudes toward school and classwork: they like school more and are more engaged, participating more in school activities and investing more of themselves in the learning process (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Connell et al., 1995; Leithwood, Jantzi, & Haskell, 1997; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999; Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch, 1994; Solomon et al., in press; Watson, Battistich, & Solomon, 1997; Wentzel, 1998). Through its effects on engagement, the sense of relatedness is also linked to academic achievement.

Conversely, students who do not experience support from teachers and peers are less likely to be highly motivated, to experience themselves as competent or autonomous, to be engaged in school activities, to internalize accepted norms and values, or to interact in positive and supportive ways with their peers and teachers.

While some students experience less support than others, there are some who experience not simply the absence of support, but rejection. Here, too, the findings are clear and consistent: the experience of rejection is also associated with a wide range of emotions, perceptions, and behaviors that are predictably linked with undesirable personal, social, and educational outcomes. Students who experience rejection from adults and peers have poor self-concepts and are unwilling to seek out or rely on others for support (Ryan & Lynch, 1989). They have less favorable perceptions of school, higher levels of school avoidance (Ladd, 1990), and are unwilling or unable to conform to norms and less able to act independently (Wentzel & Asher, 1995). Rejection, the sense of exclusion, or estrangement from the group is consistently associated with behavioral problems in the classroom (either aggression or withdrawal), lower interest in school, reduced participation in class or school activities, lower achievement, and dropout (Alemán, 1997; Allen, 1995; Altenbaugh, Engel, & Martin, 1995; Elliott & Voss, 1974; Jones & Gerig, 1994; Pietrucha & Erdley, 1996). More important are findings that link rejection to loneliness (Solomon et al., 1996; Sletta, Valas, & Skaalvik, 1996), anxi-
ety (Ladd, 1990), distress (Wentzel, 1998), as well as violence, suicide, substance abuse, and sexual activity (Resnick et al., 1997). Battistich and his colleagues (in press) also found that growth in students’ sense of community was significantly related to decreased use of alcohol and marijuana.

**STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCE IN SCHOOLS**

Research establishes that students’ sense of belonging has important implications for school success. As Deci and his colleagues (1991) indicate, when student needs are not satisfied in educational settings, the predictable outcomes include diminished motivation, impaired development, alienation, and poor performance. While few studies focus specifically on the quality of student relationships in schools, we can establish that many do not experience schools as supportive or caring communities, and that relationships with peers are particularly unsatisfying and problematic. Several studies of friendships in elementary, middle, and high school, for example, found that between 10 and 37 percent of students surveyed had no reciprocal friend (Kinderman, 1993; Bishop & Inderbitzen, 1995; Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997). Studies also suggest that boys are less likely than girls to experience a sense of belongingness in schools. Girls, for example, have significantly higher peer acceptance ratings (Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997), experience a significantly higher sense of belonging (Goodenow, 1993a; Goodenow & Grady, 1993), and have significantly more and better friends than boys. Males, on the other hand, develop significantly more negative relationships with classmates than females (Phelps, 1990) and are significantly less likely to turn to friends—or anyone else—for emotional support (Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch, 1994). Noting that the strength of the relationship between the experience of peer acceptance and various outcomes is stronger for boys led Moore and Boldero (1991) to conclude that, while boys apparently are less involved in friendships, they may be more important for their psychosocial development.

The absence of supportive peer relationships may be most problematic for boys with strong needs for affiliation. Wong and Csikszentmihalyi (1991), for example, show that students with high needs for affiliation spent more time thinking about social interaction than did those with lower needs and that needs and experiences differed by gender. Girls had higher needs for affiliation, spent more time interacting with others, and enjoyed that time. It was a different story for boys, however. Those boys with high needs for affiliation viewed themselves as feminine and felt worse whether they were alone or with others than did boys with lower affiliation needs. Boys with the strongest needs to be liked and involved with others were less likely to demonstrate the dominance characteristics associated with male status and popularity in the peer group, more likely to experience nonacceptance, and more likely to have the strongest emotional reaction to nonacceptance.
Other studies indicate that few students—even at the elementary level—experience schools as supportive communities and that students in low-income communities are more likely to experience schools as uncaring places (Battistich et al., 1995; Goodenow, 1993a; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Watson, Battistich, & Solomon, 1997). In a study of 24 elementary schools, Battistich and his colleagues (1995) report that none showed a high level of sense of community. Watson, Battistich, & Solomon (1997) noted that about twenty-five percent of these upper-grade students experienced school as an uncaring place and that this perception was stronger in schools serving poor children. Goodenow and Grady (1993) also reported that school belonging scores gathered from urban low-income schools were only slightly above the midpoint, with 41 percent disagreeing that they belonged or were supported. In contrast, in a study of classroom belonging in a suburban high-income school, student responses were well above the 3.0 midpoint (Goodenow, 1993a).

The experience of peer rejection is also problematic for students who have dropped out (Altenbaugh, Engel, & Martin, 1995), and several studies directly attribute this decision to students’ experience of isolation (Elliott & Voss, 1974) and peer rejection (Parker & Asher, 1987). One hundred Pittsburgh school dropouts, who eventually returned to complete their schooling in a job corps program, described feeling alienated and estranged from their schools—teachers and peers—as well as from their homes, neighborhood, and society in general. They perceived schools as uncaring environments; and conflict, teasing, harassment, and fights characterized their relationships with peers. Association with other potential dropouts increased pressure to reject school norms and values while association with more successful students led to feelings of inferiority and rejection (Altenbaugh, Engel, & Martin, 1995).

Research also suggests that relationships among peers are more problematic than relationships between students and teachers. A study of teacher teaming and sense of belonging (Arhar & Kromrey, 1993) assessed bonding to peers, teachers, and school. Responses from 4,761 seventh graders in 22 urban and suburban schools showed that peer-bonding scores were noticeably lower than scores on school or teacher bonding under all conditions in both low and high SES schools. Using the School Climate Survey developed by the Child Study Center School Development Program at Yale University, Osterman (1995) found that students’ perceptions of teacher support were noticeably higher than perceptions of peer support in data from 1,369 junior high and high school students in an affluent but diverse suburban district. Of eight climate factors, perceptions of student relationships were lowest and declined with increasing grade levels.

Within schools and classes, many students belong to groups but these groups tend to be exclusive. In classrooms, group boundaries seldom encompass the entire class. Peers tend to associate with those they define as “friends”; and these friends tend to be like themselves in terms of race, class,
gender, and most importantly, perceived academic ability (Cairns, Perrin, & Cairns, 1985; Johnson, Johnson, & Maruyama, 1983; Kagan, 1990; Kinderman, 1993; Urdan, 1997). These friendship groups are visible, highly stable (Cairns, Perrin, & Cairns, 1985; Kinderman, 1993), and exclusive with students restricting positive interactions to other group members in and out of the classroom.

Contributing to students’ sense of alienation from their peers is a climate characterized by bullying and harassment. McNamara and McNamara (1997) report that approximately 15 to 20 percent of students are involved in bullying, much of it at the elementary level, either as the bully or as the victim. From interviews and observations of more than 1,000 students in eight middle, junior, and high schools representing a suburban mix of middle-class, wealthy, and low-income families, Shakeshaft and his colleagues describe a pervasive environment of adolescent peer harassment that is often overlooked and tolerated by teachers and administrators (Hergenrother, 1999; Shakeshaft et al., 1997; Shakeshaft et al., 1998).

In general, then, from the research emerges a dark picture of the quality of student community that may contradict some assumptions about the cohesive nature of the “peer culture.” Peer harassment and bullying are commonplace. While some students do find support in friendship groups, these groups tend to be exclusive with members seldom having interaction with students outside their immediate friendship group either in the classroom or in the larger school community. Others have no friends and are not members of stable groups. There is little evidence that students generally experience their classrooms or schools as welcoming and supportive communities.

DEVELOPING STUDENTS’ SENSE OF COMMUNITY

Research establishes, then, that the need to experience relatedness has important implications for student motivation and behavior in school settings and that students, in general, do not experience schools as communities. How does this sense of belongingness develop, and what role, if any, does the school play? Much of the literature dealing with peer acceptance assumes that students’ ability to establish positive relationships is self-determined: children who are highly accepted by their peers are more sociable, more socially competent. Because of their personal traits or family upbringing, they may place more value on relationships with others or simply know how to get along and do what is necessary to be accepted. Consequently, rejection, while not condoned, is a predictable and reasonable response to certain behaviors—particularly aggression or withdrawal. This assumption is embedded in much of the research and implicit in policy recommendations that focus on remediating students’ social skills.
A social cognitive perspective on motivation, however, provides a different lens to frame the problem. This theoretical orientation incorporates several important assumptions: namely, that the social context plays a significant part in determining whether individual needs are satisfied, that needs are domain and situation specific, and that needs are ongoing. Contexts differ in the extent to which they address individual needs, and people (including students) can be expected to function optimally depending on the extent to which these basic needs are satisfied. Consequently, motivation and performance will differ depending on the specific context. As Ryan (1995) explains, students who experience belongingness in school but not in sports will function better in the context where needs are satisfied. Furthermore, the needs must be met on an ongoing basis. Within this theoretical model, then, what happens to students in school, their experience with adults and peers, should have a strong and direct relationship to their school-related motivation and behavior.

Emphasizing the importance of adult and peer support emanating from within the school community are several studies that have examined the relative contribution of support from family and school and from teachers and peers. In general, these findings suggest that support from school is as or more important as support from home and that support from teachers and peers affects students in very different ways.

In an early study of dropout and delinquency, Elliott and Voss (1974) found that approximately one fifth of dropouts were pushed out of school and few were prompted by problems at home. Their finding that delinquency contributes to leaving school but that delinquency rates decline after dropout also led them to conclude that “the school is the critical generating milieu for delinquency” (p. 203). Resnick and his colleagues (1997) also found that the school context accounted for as much or more of the variance in students’ experience of emotional distress and violence than the family context, particularly at the middle school level.

While support from family, teachers, and peers are all important for students’ psychological well-being, they contribute in different ways. As Wentzel (1998) explains, “Parents, peers, and teachers play relatively independent roles in young adolescents’ lives and the effects of having multiple sources of support on motivational and academic outcomes are primarily additive rather than compensatory” (p. 207).

In general, research shows that teacher and peer support have a stronger and more direct influence on student engagement than parental support (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch, 1994; Wentzel, 1998). Students’ sense of security with parents contributes to engagement primarily through its effect on students’ relationships with teachers and peers. Teacher support, in contrast, has the strongest contribution to student interest in, liking for, and engagement in school (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Connell et al.,
1995; Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch, 1994; Wentzel, 1998). Also documenting the important contribution of teacher support is a recent study by Freese (1999), establishing that perceptions of teacher caring accounted for 47 percent of the variance in student engagement in academic classes among high school juniors and seniors in a middle-income suburban community.

Peer support seems to have both a direct and an indirect relationship with engagement through its effects on students’ emotional well-being and on the quality of their interaction with adults and students. Specifically, students who experience peer support will be more emotionally secure and more likely to adopt prosocial goals and behavior. A study by Wentzel (1998) found that among the various sources, peer support was the only predictor of students’ adoption of prosocial goals and behavior. In contrast, both Wentzel (1998) and Sletta, Valas, and Skaalvik (1996) established that the absence of support was a significant predictor of loneliness and emotional distress. This, in turn, was significantly linked to perceptions of social competence, interest in school, and performance.

While widely accepted in organizational research, school researchers have only recently begun to explore the ways in which workplace conditions affect motivation, behavior, and performance. Thanks to the work of researchers such as Johnson (1990), Lieberman (1988), Little (1982), and Rosenholtz (1989), we now know, for example, that collegiality is perhaps the single most important organizational characteristic influencing teachers’ professional commitment, sense of efficacy, and performance. Accordingly school reforms have included various strategies to enhance this sense of community among teachers. Kruse and Louis (1997), for example, describe the importance of teaming as a basis for creating this revitalizing network to provide emotional and moral support, personal dignity, intellectual assistance, and personal encouragement. It is commonly accepted, and documented, that the interaction and dialogue that are central to the notion of collegiality not only satisfy emotional needs but lead to personal and professional learning. It is also understood that the organization can influence the development of this sense of community by the structural arrangements it utilizes, the processes it adopts, and the values it conveys.

These same lessons apply to the issue of community among students. When we examine the research, we find that the quality of student relationships in schools differs and that the sense of community can be strengthened through systematic change efforts. Cairns, Perrin, and Cairns (1985), for example, describe a small parochial school where only two of eighty girls were identified as isolates. This is consistent with other studies of Catholic schools that are often distinguished by their strong sense of supportive community (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993). Leithwood and his associates assessed school identification, a measure incorporating belongingness, in a large school dis-
strict with a strong equity policy. Overall scores were relatively high but the responses were still more positive at the elementary than at the secondary level (Leithwood, Jantzi, & Haskell, 1997). Studies emerging from the Child Development Project have also demonstrated that it is possible to change the culture of elementary classrooms in ways that affect students’ sense of community in schools (Battistich et al., 1991; Battistich et al., in press; Solomon et al., 1996; Solomon et al., in press; Watson, Battistich, & Solomon, 1997; Watson et al., 1989). Deborah Meier (1995) is another reformer whose work has demonstrated the possibility of developing school cultures that serve as communities for their members. In what ways, then, do schools influence the development of this sense of community among students?

Interaction

According to Baumeister and Leary (1995), the need for belongingness is so powerful that people will develop social attachments very easily and strive to maintain relationships and social bonds even under difficult circumstances. When people have a chance to develop a relationship, the natural response is to move toward a communal orientation even in the face of previous biases. The primary condition necessary for the development of relationships is frequent and affectively positive interaction. Theoretically, then, students’ sense of community should be directly related to the availability of opportunities for frequent and supportive interaction. In schools, students develop a sense of community through their interaction with adults and with peers; and school and classroom policies and practices affect the quality and frequency of these interactions.

Perhaps surprisingly, some research suggests that schools provide few structured opportunities for student interaction, and students have little interaction with peers, in or outside of school. Goodlad (1984) for example, observed little interaction among high school students in the classroom. Phelps’s (1990) study of one middle school found few opportunities in school for students to get to know one another and that peer interactions were almost exclusively limited to out of school activities. Observing six students in an affluent suburban high school, Osterman, McLeod, and Ostrovskaya (1997) reported that peer interactions during class were very infrequent but differed by academic level, with more frequent interaction occurring in special education classes. In midlevel and advanced classes, students averaged fewer than two interactions per fifty-minute class. Typically these were extremely brief, consisting of a single comment or question. Interactions outside the classroom were also infrequent. During the course of the day, only one of the six students ate lunch in the cafeteria (several went through the entire day without eating lunch); and in only two cases did students (both females) spend more than five minutes with friends in a social situation.
1991) found that, at the end of a five week cooperative learning experience, cliques were no longer evident, friendship patterns had widened to include more students of other races, and 73 percent of the students had more positive peer ratings.

Several action research studies have also found positive changes growing out of a more general emphasis on cooperation in the classroom. Solomon and his colleagues (1997) demonstrated that teachers' encouragement of cooperation within the classroom, as well as their emphasis on prosocial values, were directly and significantly linked to supportive peer behaviors. In another case, encouraging peer support through cooperative learning and bonding activities led to a 71 percent drop in behavioral referrals (Johnson et al., 1995). Students also indicated a higher level of comfort and satisfaction with the group as well as greater ability to make friends easily and naturally, to express their ideas and feelings, and to make mistakes in the group without worrying about being put down. Observers also noticed that, in informal activities, students tended to stay in the larger group rather than separating into factions as they had in prior years.

In contrast, just as the "silent" students longed for small group activities, high school dropouts described the depersonalization of traditional classrooms with desks lined up in rows (Altenbaugh, Engel, & Martin, 1995). These structural arrangements in the classroom, with strict rules limiting movement and talking, according to Johnson, Johnson, and Maruyama (1983), prevent students from getting to know their classmates on any but a superficial basis and allow stereotypes to continue unchallenged and unexplored.

Dewey (1958) and Vygotsky (1981) (as cited in Wertsch, 1985) both emphasize the importance of social interaction as a basis for learning. Dialogue facilitates the development of ideas, but it also helps students to develop a better appreciation of others and to experience themselves as part of a supportive community. Explaining their rationale for emphasizing collaborative discussion as a strategy to enhance prosocial behavior, Battistich and his colleagues (1991) maintain that expressing personal opinions in a supportive community helps children to develop feelings of trust, mutual respect, and solidarity. Gamoran and Nystrand (1992) similarly affirm that "regardless of the activity in which students participate, discourse is a critical indicator of the extent to which school offers membership" (p. 40). Observational studies, however, show that there is little, if any, time devoted to discussion within classes (Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Goodlad, 1984). Gamoran and Nystrand's (1992) study of discourse in 54 high school classes found that the group discussion incorporating student contributions averaged 15 seconds per 50-minute period. Thirty-three classes had no discussion time at all; only 4 had more than a minute. These patterns were unaffected by class size; when classes were smaller, students spent more time in individual seatwork. Observing 36
classes over a six-day period, Osterman, McLeod, & Ostrovskaya (1997) noted only four instances of cooperative learning ranging from 6 to 15 minutes. One 12-minute segment accounted for 77 percent of one student’s peer interactions for the day.

**Teacher Support.** Students develop a sense of community through their interaction with adults and peers. Teacher support plays a very direct role in students’ experience of community. When they experience support from teachers, they are more likely to experience themselves as valued members of the community. Research also suggests that the quality of interaction between students and teachers has an important influence on the development of positive relationships among students.

To experience relatedness, students must feel that they are worthy of respect and that the others in their group or social context care for them. Their beliefs about themselves develop through their interactions. If interactions are positive and affirming, students will have a stronger sense of relatedness. This, in turn, reinforces and encourages similar behavior. On the contrary, if experiences are negative, if students receive information that they are not valued, their sense of relatedness suffers. Because they feel unwelcome or rejected, they are less likely to initiate “prosocial” behaviors, adopting instead patterns of withdrawal or aggression. The student’s experience in the classroom, then, shapes self-perceptions and behavior.

Teachers play a major role in determining whether students feel cared for and a welcome part of the school community. Not all students, however, experience teacher support. Research consistently establishes that students receive differential treatment from teachers on the basis of characteristics such as race, gender, class, ability, and appearance, and that differentiation begins early in the school career and increases as students progress through school. Research reviewed here suggests that teachers’ perceptions of student engagement, as well as ability, also influence the level of support that students receive.

One illustration of this process comes from high school students in the Altenbaugh, Engel, and Martin (1995) study. Describing teacher favoritism, they explained that the favorites were “the kids that were real smart in class. The other ones, they just ignored altogether.” Those teachers who had favorites would show it in different ways but “They was always nicer to those students and always mean to the others. . . . If a kid missed a day of notes, he would give it to him and help him out, but he wouldn’t the other students” (p. 87).

Other studies also find differential treatment among lower tracked students. Elliott and Voss (1974) described an alienating tracking system for troublemakers and failures. Schwartz (1981) observed teachers distancing themselves from low-ranked pupils and found an increasing polarization between teacher perceptions of low- and high-track students. Gamoran and Berends
(1987), reviewing research on tracking, also found that teachers were more positive toward high-track than low-track students and that prosocial behavior of high-track students seemed to have more influence on teacher perceptions than actual achievement. Connell and his colleagues (1995) found that student engagement directly predicted the level of perceived support from adults. Their conclusion: students receive support "depending on their level of engagement, with more engaged students receiving more support" (p. 58).

These studies suggest that teachers' perceptions of student ability, engagement, and academic performance influence the quality of their relationships with students. Other work suggests that teacher preferences and patterns of interaction with students also influence the nature of peer relationships, with peer acceptance mirroring teacher preferences. Multiple studies show a relationship between teacher preference, peer acceptance, engagement, and academic performance from kindergarten through high school (Green et al., 1980; Kinnerman, 1993; Ladd, 1990; Schwartz, 1981; Swift & Spivack, 1969; Wentzel & Asher, 1995). In general, they demonstrate that peers, like teachers, prefer students who are academically competent and engaged and shun those who are perceived as less capable or less engaged. These preferred students experience more support from teachers and have more frequent and more positive interaction with peers. Rejected children, in contrast, are perceived as poor students by teachers and peers and experience less support from teachers. Their relationships with their peers are less frequent and less positive, and they are less likely to maintain friendships.

What comes first? While none of the studies establishes causality, embedded in most is an assumption that teacher and peer acceptance are predictably contingent on student behavior. Either because of inadequate social training or impulse control, students are unable to develop satisfactory relationships with adults or peers. In fact, behavior does play an important part in peer acceptance (Coie, 1990; Taylor, 1989); but, in light of other research and theory, one could easily interpret the correlation data in a different way: that student behavior is a predictable response to teacher and peer acceptance. An early experimental study by Flanders and Havumaki (1960) cited in Schmuck and Schmuck (1997) demonstrated that communication and supportive responses from teachers directly affected peer-group friendship nominations. In classrooms, teachers directed supportive comments only to selected students and not to others. At the completion of the week, these students received significantly more friendship group nominations than did those students who had not received support.

Hymel, Wagner, and Butler (1990) attribute this type of response to "reputational bias." Basically, they argue that status differentials influence how group members perceive and interact with their peers. "Popular children acquire a 'positive halo' and unpopular children acquire a 'negative halo,' which
colors how their behavior is perceived, evaluated, and responded to by others." These biases "serve to maintain positive and negative reputations ... ensuring that status distinctions are preserved" even when behavior of the rejected children shows improvement (p. 157). Anderman and Maehr (1994) provide additional support for this position, telling us that children develop self-concepts based on information received from social comparisons with other children, especially as they move into adolescence.

Status differentials emerge from the time children enter kindergarten (perhaps before) and solidify as they progress from class to class. By the time they enter secondary school, their status has been clearly defined by school authorities. Emphasis on academic accomplishment intensifies as students progress in school, and secondary schools, in general, are less supportive and more impersonal than elementary schools (Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Eccles et al., 1993; Hargreaves, Earl, & Ryan, 1996). For less successful students, these conditions may be aggravated as "they receive direct messages in terms of track placement regarding their relative position in school" (Altenbaugh, Engel, & Martin, 1995, p. 92). That students internalize these messages in ways that affect their relationships with peers is particularly well illustrated in the following study.

Schwartz (1981) conducted an ethnographic study to examine the impact of tracking on student social organization. Earlier studies cited by Schwartz determined that as high and low tracks are academically differentiated, they become socially polarized as well. High tracks develop a proacademic subculture that links social status to academic achievement. In low tracks, status comes from defiance of school and teacher norms. This study sought to better understand the processes leading to these outcomes through systematic observation of teacher and student behavior. The study focused on third- and fourth-grade classes in three elementary schools and seventh- and ninth-grade classes in a junior high school. The schools differed in size and ethnic composition, yet, despite organizational and demographic differences, interaction patterns in the four schools were similar. During teacher-directed activities, top-track students engaged in "sneaking behavior," appearing to conform to behavioral expectations while actually interacting covertly with peers. Low-track students engaged in openly disruptive behavior, blatantly defying the classroom rules. In informal class time, while students were working on their own or in groups, high-track students worked cooperatively with their peers in academic classes, but adopted challenging behaviors in nonacademic classes where their behavior wouldn't jeopardize their academic status. In conversations with peers, the high-track students provided a lot of support to one another and expressed their feelings of identity. Students in the low tracks, however, criticized one another and tried to differentiate themselves from their low track peers whom they labeled as stupid.
From this data, Schwartz (1981) theorized that the tracking system constitutes a formal hierarchy in which rank predominates. The students’ understanding of their own status in this system affects how they evaluate their classroom situation and their classmates, how others rank them socially and educationally, and how teachers perceive and interact with them. “The higher the rank, the more likely they are to be satisfied with academic placement, to choose like-ranked peers as friends, to be popular with grade mates as well as classmates, and to be the object of their teachers’ positive expectations” (p. 109).

Probably the most important finding and unique contribution of the study deals with relationships among lower-track students. As Schwartz (1981) explained, “their perception of the worth and attractiveness of these peers determines if and how they choose to interact with them” (p.110). As sociogram data indicated, high-track students chose others of the same rank. Those in the lower track also picked peers from the higher track, but these choices were not reciprocated. High-track students clustered into dense reciprocal groups and exclusive cliques, while low-track students were linked, not in groups but in reciprocal pairs. Consistent with other studies just cited, academic rank and peer acceptance went hand in hand:

High-tracked students come to view their classmates as individuals whose high social status is linked to their own academic success. Group identification and solidarity become equated with academic superiority. Popularity with peers and their treatment by teachers set them apart from others socially as well as academically. Students see themselves collectively as individuals whose prize position is both demonstrated and maintained by their social grouping into exclusive cliques (p. 116).

Low-track students, in comparison, found their social worth by distancing themselves from their peers, just as teachers did. Students seemed to incorporate negative teacher messages into their interactions with each other, and the lack of esteem that they receive from teachers and students in other tracks affected their ability to establish positive relationships with their own peers. They rejected those who were like themselves, separated themselves from the group, and satisfied their social needs by seeking out a single friend, like themselves but unlike the others. Their lack of popularity with even their own classmates promoted competitive, disruptive, and largely dyadic interaction. “Group activity” Schwartz (1981) commented, “would belie the very label they seek to deny” (p. 117).

While not conclusive, these findings in context of theory suggest that teachers influence peer relationships by establishing values, standards, and norms in the classroom. According to Maehr and Midgley (1996), a predominant focus
in schools is on ability. We prize academic success; we reward those who are successful. Unfortunately, this orientation, which teachers convey through their interaction with students, fosters competition and differentiation rather than collegiality.

If some teachers inadvertently undermine students' sense of community in the classroom, the reverse is also true. Prosocial behavior can be learned and is best learned in an environment that encourages, explains, and models caring (Radke-Yarrow & Zahn-Waxler, 1984). The research of the Child Development Project, cited previously, has demonstrated this in convincing ways. Several assumptions shaped their effort. One was that teachers indirectly control peer socialization experiences by determining the conditions under which children interact. Another was that adults can encourage prosocial behavior by communicating and enforcing prosocial norms and values and by providing opportunities for students to exercise autonomy, work collaboratively with others, and participate in group problem solving and decision making. In a multischool and multyear change effort, they encouraged teachers to facilitate dialogue about democratic values, provide opportunities for supportive interaction in and out of the classroom, and support students' autonomy within and outside of the classroom. In schools that had successfully implemented these changes, there were significant changes in students' sense of community, with corresponding growth in various indicators of motivation. These findings are particularly interesting since student motivation normally shows steady declines beginning in the third grade.

**Authority Relationships.** Autonomy, along with competence and relatedness, is also identified as a basic psychological need. In a previous section, we explained that the experience of relatedness has a positive impact on the sense of autonomy. According to Ryan (1991), it is important to remember that autonomy does not imply detachment from others but, instead, refers to the individual's sense of agency or self-determination in a social context. Students who experience autonomy will perceive themselves to have choice and will also experience a connectedness between their actions and personal goals (Connell & Wellborn, 1991). This conceptualization incorporates a sense of agency or what deCharms (1976) describes as being an origin as well as the sense of efficacy, the belief that one is able to have a positive impact on the environment. Like relatedness, this sense of being an “origin,” in deCharms's terms, is associated with a number of positive attitudinal and behavioral outcomes.

In school settings, as in families, adults influence children's experience of autonomy by the control strategies that they utilize. According to Connell and Wellborn (1991), there are two essential strategies to developing children's sense of autonomy: providing choice and helping children to connect their
behavior to their own personal goals and values. Studies of children in family settings find, for example, that parents’ expressions of value for autonomy as well as the use of techniques such as reasoning, encouragement, empathic limit setting, and including children in decisions and problem-solving, are significantly correlated with students’ perceptions of autonomy, as well as competence. Conversely, parents’ emphasis on obedience and conformity, punishment and the controlling use of rewards, and the unilateral imposition of the parental agenda are associated with a reduced sense of autonomy and competence (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989; Grolnick, Ryan, & Deci, 1991).

Studies of children in school settings yield similar findings. Deci and his colleagues (1991) found that children in classes of teachers who were autonomy-supportive were more intrinsically motivated and had higher perceptions of their cognitive competence and self-worth than did students in classrooms with controlling teachers. DeCharms (1976) also convincingly demonstrated that modifications in teacher practice designed to provide greater choice to students led to positive changes in student behavior and performance.

In general, when children experience autonomy in relations with adults, their relationships with those adults will be stronger. They are more likely to accept adult authority, internalize norms and values, and adopt acceptable social behaviors in the home and classroom. They perceive themselves as more competent and are perceived by teachers as more competent; and, because they are intrinsically motivated, are more engaged in classroom activities. In contrast, when children experience themselves as pawns, they tend to be less social, more hostile, more alienated, and less well adjusted.

As students experience autonomy, they develop a greater sense of themselves as individuals who are capable of making choices that affect different dimensions of their lives. As with relatedness, when student needs for autonomy are addressed, they are more likely to feel competent and confident, more engaged in school, and more responsive to authority. This psychological well-being affects behavior in a way that engenders teacher support and facilitates positive relationships with peers in the classroom setting.

Regarding control strategies in schools, we know that students are well aware of their influence in the classroom (Allen, 1995) and that teacher control orientations affect students’ motivation and self-perceptions (deCharms, 1976; Deci et al., 1991). We also know that, despite adolescents’ growing needs for autonomy, opportunities for student autonomy within the classroom actually decrease as students move from elementary to secondary schools (Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Eccles et al., 1993; Goodlad, 1984; Hargreaves, Earl, & Ryan, 1996). In another interesting paradox, we also find that parents and teachers are more controlling—as well as less involved—with students who are disaffected (Connell & Wellborn, 1991). While not surprising, it is
important to note that this combination of external control and noninvolvement is associated with low social competence, low esteem, and aggressiveness (Kagan, 1990; Battistich et al., 1991, 1995).

In general, then, the experience of autonomy has a wide range of positive motivational and behavioral effects. These factors, in turn, should have a direct influence on both the frequency and quality of interaction with adults and with peers.

School Policies and Practices

While classroom practices are extremely important, the culture of the school as a whole plays an equally or more important role in shaping students’ experience. Anderman and Maehr (1994) show, for example, that as students progress from elementary into secondary schools, characteristics of the school itself—its culture and practices—have a relatively greater impact on students than their experience in individual classrooms.

If supportive interaction is a keystone for the development of sense of community among students, schools may influence the development of a sense of community through the policies and practices that they adopt and, more broadly, through the values that they express. There is a strong and continuous literature that addresses the importance of developing schools as communities. Dewey and Vygotsky, for example, both view education as a social rather than individualistic process. Recognizing children’s interpersonal needs and the importance of collaborative activities for experiential learning, Dewey (1958) promoted the idea that students should function as a social group. The quality of education, he argued, “is realized in the degree in which individuals form a group” (p. 65). It is the teacher and school’s responsibility to encourage the development of this sense of community by designing communal activities to which all contribute. As Dewey envisioned it, teachers and students share membership in this community, and it is through collaboration that learning occurs. For Dewey, the importance of community was rooted in philosophical as well as in pragmatic reasoning: the extent to which the group is concerned about all its members and facilitates interaction among its different constituents is a mark of a worthy society.

Even though we know that this sense of community is important for emotional support and learning, schools as educational institutions pay scant attention to the socioemotional needs of students, individually or collectively (Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Goodlad, 1984; Hargreaves, Earl, & Ryan, 1996; Maehr & Midgley, 1996; Noddings, 1992; Ryan & Powelson, 1991; Ryan & Stiller, 1991).

Traditionally, the balance between affect and cognition shifts noticeably at the secondary level. In a policy environment emphasizing standardized test-
ing to establish school, teacher, and student accountability, that pressure is
intensifying at the secondary level and increasing at the elementary level.
With an almost exclusive focus on academic accomplishment, shaping the
school culture are beliefs and practices that nurture individualism and compe-
tition, rather than community and collaboration. Integral to this culture are
organizational policies and practices that systematically prevent and preclude
the development of community among students and directly contribute to
students' experience of isolation, alienation, and polarization (Hargreaves,
Earl, & Ryan, 1996).
Within schools, tracking or ability grouping is one organizational prac-
tice that appears to have negative effects on student-teacher and peer rela-
tionships. Oakes (1985) has described tracking as a "legitimation of inequality" (p.
137), a practice which, as Schwartz (1981) illustrates, very directly affects the
nature and quality of relationships. Departmentalization, almost a universal
given in secondary schools, is another organizational pattern that is paradoxi-
cally associated both with academic rigor and depersonalization (Hargreaves,
Earl, & Ryan, 1996). Different disciplines vary in their preference for instruc-
tional strategies (Siskin & Little, 1995); but, in general, departmentalization
reflects the predominant emphasis on academic accomplishment and is often
associated with ability grouping and impersonal instruction. These approaches
may support teacher collegiality within the department and enhance the teach-
ing of subject matter but do little to support the development of positive rela-
tionships among students and teachers. Other critics have highlighted the
negative impact of school size and traditional scheduling practices that corre-
spond to academic needs but fragment students' experience and reduce oppor-
tunities for sustained and cooperative interaction within the classroom.
In a more positive vein, smaller schools, block scheduling, departmental
steaming, houses, interage grouping, and looping (maintaining intact classes
over several grade levels) are organizational options intended to increase sense
of community. All of these changes extend the time that students remain with
the same peers and teachers. Theoretically, these structural changes would
increase opportunities for interaction and enable students and teachers to
develop more personal relationships. Yet, researchers and reformers are begin-
ning to question the efficacy of structural change alone as a means of school
reform because it often has little effect on assumptions that shape the processes
and practices of schooling (Lipman, 1998; Maehr & Midgeley, 1996; Wideen,
1994).
Kunc (1992) attributes these practices to an institutionalized set of
beliefs about schooling. The first is that personal and emotional needs of stu-
dents are met at home or in social relationships outside of the classroom. The
second is that achievement and mastery are more important than the sense of
belonging. The third is that belonging is not a precondition for engagement,
but a reward for compliance and achievement. Research, however, challenges these assumptions.

CONCLUSION

Substantial empirical evidence demonstrates that the experience of belonging is indeed an essential motivational ingredient. Students whose psychological needs for relatedness are addressed will think, feel, and act in very different ways that are directly associated with academic and social success. Students who experience acceptance experience greater emotional well-being; they are also more highly motivated, engaged in learning, and committed to school. These concepts of commitment and engagement are closely linked to student performance, and, more importantly, to the quality of student learning. From an individual standpoint, the benefits are clear. There is also evidence that this sense of acceptance extends into, and affects, the quality of relationships with others; students who themselves are more accepted are more accepting of others. While academic achievement and mastery can enhance motivation, they cannot emerge unless emotional needs are satisfied at some basic level. Conversely, withholding affection, support, and autonomy in response to behavioral or academic deficits is a pedagogical strategy that fails to address motivational needs and will only exacerbate the problem.

From theory and research, we learn that motivation is contextually specific. Strong emotional support in the home is clearly important for psychological development, but for optimum motivation, students must experience support within the school context as well. That support must come from peers as well as from adults. While adult support is significantly associated with engagement, peer support addresses very important emotional needs. While family support and friendships in and outside of school are important, they do not address students’ needs for acceptance or collegiality within the school community. Students may have strong support within the family but experience themselves as outcasts in their school and classes. Similarly, students may have friends or be part of a peer group but still feel isolated within their classes or the school as a whole.

Not all students experience alienation to the same extent, yet, for the most part, students and researchers describe schools as alienating institutions (Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Hargreaves, Earl, & Ryan, 1996; Johnson, Farkas, & Bers, 1997, Newmann, 1981; Wehlage et al., 1989). While the “peer culture” may establish norms for dress and behavior, it is not necessarily one that satisfies students’ need for belongingness. In general, while some students may experience support from individual teachers and peers, schools are not characterized by collegiality among students. Harassment, whether in the form of sexual harassment or bullying tends to be pervasive in schools, and certain groups of students expe-
rience rejection not only from peers but from adults as well. Although there is a need for more research on students’ sense of belongingness within the school community, from the work reported here, it would seem that many students fail to experience the sense of belongingness that Furman (1998) and McMillan and Chavis (1986) identify as the essence of community. They do not sense their own importance and cannot rely on other members of the school community—whether teachers or peers—to meet their needs. While they may have a shared emotional connection and recognize the group’s importance to them, their needs to experience relatedness are not always addressed.

As Schlechty (1997) argues, schools are also workplaces for students. In theory, if the lessons of organizational research are sound, students, too, should benefit from opportunities to experience collegiality in the workplace. Yet despite the current preoccupation with developing schools as communities, there is relatively little specific concern about the need to facilitate supportive relationships among students themselves, with the major emphasis placed on relationships among adults or between adults and students. Clearly student relationships with teachers and other adults are extremely important but, as we have seen, peer relationships, through their impact on motivation, emotion, cognition, and behavior, are also an important component of learning and human development.

The urgency of the problem should be apparent as our society is confronted with what should be viewed as devastating indicators of serious emotional problems among youth. Teen suicide, in general, is the second leading cause of adolescent death in the United States and Canada, with many of these suicides triggered by school-based incidents. Incidents of student violence toward other students and teachers, regardless of their frequency, stun us as a society. Combined with drugs, eating problems, depression, dropouts, and teen pregnancy, these, too, are “symptoms of a society in which self-hatred has become an epidemic” (Kunc, 1992, p. 37). According to Baumeister and Leary (1995), many emotional problems such as these “result from people’s failure to meet their belongingness needs” (p. 521). As Jones (1996) describes the problem, “too many of our youth have crawled beneath the blanket of despair and are suffocating from a lack of human connections” (p. 2).

Clearly, the solution of these problems is a complex one that must involve all segments of society. Nonetheless, there is substantial evidence to suggest that concerns about addressing student needs for community should be an important item on the school reform agenda. As part of that agenda, it is important to recognize that students’ relational needs are essential to the learning process and that the development of positive and supportive relationships requires attention. While some students experience their schools as communities, many do not. The development of supportive relationships requires interpersonal understanding and that understanding develops only through
interaction. Consequently, it is important to develop policies and practices that emphasize the importance of cooperation and provide opportunities for supportive interaction, among teachers and peers, in and outside of the classroom. Students who do not experience acceptance within the classroom are unlikely to involve themselves in activities outside of the classroom. Even in extracurricular activities, it is important to foster interaction and understanding among the participants.

In general, interpersonal, instructional, and organizational strategies that support positive interaction among students and adults should enhance students’ sense of community. Implementing these practices, however, involves drastic changes in the cultural values, norms, policies, and practices that dominate schooling, particularly at the secondary level. We live in a society that values academic accomplishment, competition, and individualism, and these values are reflected in our schools. When we look at the research, however, we find substantial evidence that these practices may be counterproductive and that the creation of schools as caring communities is essential to support the intellectual, emotional, and social development of our children.

REFERENCES


NOTES TO CHAPTER 7

1. This chapter is based on work originally published in Fall 2000 Review of Educational Research, Volume 70, Number 3, pages 323–367. Copyright 2000 by the American Educational Research Association and reported here with permission of the publisher.

2. Since sense of community is defined here as sense of belongingness, these terms are used interchangeably throughout the paper. The term *relatedness* is a psychological concept that also parallels this sense of personal acceptance or belonging.
From Promise to Practice

An increasingly important and appealing concept for school renewal is that of school as community. While community holds multiple promises for schools, little is known about the practice of community in schools. This collection furthers our understanding about the nature of school community, its practice in public schools, and the role of leadership in this practice. Of particular importance is the question of how community can be created and sustained in K-12 public schools with highly diverse populations.

"Enriching our understanding of what constitutes a community—what it looks like, how it happens—and the tensions that arise in bringing about a sense of community, are useful understandings for educators."

— Patrick James McQuillan, author of Educational Opportunity in an Urban American High School: A Cultural Analysis

is Associate Professor of Educational Leadership and Counseling Psychology at Washington State University. She is the coauthor of Community and Schools: Promise and Paradox.

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