Cliques, Clans, Community, and Competence: The Experiences of Students with Behavioral Disorders in Rural School Systems

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A romantic vision of ruralness persists in the minds of many, but it appears that living in a small rural community may not be an advantage for children and youth with, or at risk for, behavioral disorders. Recent social constructivist thought stands in contrast to the prevailing view that the cognitive and the social can be studied independently. In this study we bring this social dimension of school to bear on the efforts of students with and at risk for behavioral disorders to acquire competence. An analysis of the descriptions of 39 students concerning their experiences in schools in a rural region of western North Carolina revealed two major themes: "community," with its components, relationships with peers, relationships with teachers, social isolation, creating community, and distorted belonging; and "competence," with its components, schools' contribution to incompetence, the dilemma of rural schools in encouraging competence, and encouraging competence. In order to reflect the richness and coherence of the students' accounts, results are presented using direct quotes and discussed within the context of current thought about social constructivism and research in behavioral disorders and rural education.

A romantic vision of rural life persists in the minds of many. Not only do rural areas offer peacefulness, a clean environment, security, and strong community bonds, but a vision of rural life also evokes an image of a community where one can still keep one's doors unlocked and everyone knows everyone else or everyone is related (Fitchen, 1991). The school often is viewed at the heart of the rural community—the site of the annual firemen's barbecue, boy scout meetings, town meetings, and so on. In addition, the school is the venue for social activities, and events such as high-school football games mobilize the entire community.

The sense of community found in rural areas still is considered the fundamental characteristic of rural life that enriches the lives of rural citizens and strengthens rural schools. References to the sense of community and to the school-community connection pervade the literature on rural education (e.g., DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995; Stern, 1994; Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995). In fact, Herzog and Pittman (1995) suggest that the qualities of community that they believe are inherent in rural schools are the panacea for which many critics of American education are looking.

Coleman and Hoffer (1987) refer to a community with strong cohesiveness as a functional community. According to these authors, a functional community is one in which the social structure of the adult community is transmitted

through the school. "A community in which social norms and sanctions, including those that cross generations, arise out of the social structure itself and both reinforce and perpetuate that structure" (p. 7). Coleman and Hoffer describe the type of social relationships found in a functional community as social capital, and they distinguish social capital from both physical and human capital. Social capital is product of social relationships between persons that bring benefits to them. When an individual has many social relationships that are of benefit to him or her, he or she is considered to possess high social capital. Students, for example, may have many relationships with others, both peers and adults, from which they gain benefits that help them excel in school or sports.

Given the belief that strong school-community connections and high levels of social capital characterize rural areas, one might expect living in a rural area to be an advantage to disadvantaged or troubled youth. Referring to expectation theory, Coleman & Hoffer (1987) argues to the contrary:

> According to this theory and research, higher expectations and standards will be held by teachers for those students from families with high status, while those students from low-status families will be stigmatized with the reputations of their parents, low expectations for their achievement will be held by their teachers, and adult members of the community outside the school will treat them differently. (p. 231)

Unfortunately, it appears that living in a small rural community may not be an advantage for children and youth with and at risk for behavioral disorders. According to a recent report, isolated school systems feel the effects of social problems that have typically plagued urban areas such as guns, violence, and drugs in schools (Voorhis, 1993). In fact, social issues previously identified with urban areas such as drug and alcohol abuse, HIV incidence, crime, juvenile delinquency, and suicide have been found to be more prevalent in rural areas than in urban areas (Helge, 1993). According to DeYoung (1995), there is strong evidence that many of the undesirable characteristics of urban schools (e.g., reproducing inequality via low expectations for low status children or "pushing out" marginally successful adolescents from high schools) exist in rural schools. Consequently, dropout rates may even be higher in rural areas than in urban settings (Swanson & Butler, 1988).

Community and Competence

Acceptance, attention, and affection from others allow individuals to gain a sense of attachment to their home, school, and community. When young people possess a strong sense of belonging, they become open to guidance from other members of the community. For students with or at risk for behavioral disorders, however, developing and maintaining friendships and interpersonal relationships that are characterized by trust and mutual respect are difficult tasks.

Compounding and closely related to the disconnectedness students with behavioral disorders may experience are difficulties with academic tasks. Children as well as adults strive for mastery of their environment. A sense of accomplishment or achievement feeds motivation for further achievement, while failure stifles motivation. The majority of students with behavioral disorders experience difficulty in academic areas (Coleman, 1992; Epstein, Kinder, & Bursuck, 1989; Kauffman, 1997; Knitzer, Steinberg, & Fleisch, 1990; Mastropieri, Jenkins, & Scruggs, 1985; U.S. Department of Education, 1994). According to Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern (1990), when young people are deprived of opportunities for success, they may express their frustration through troubled and troubling behavior. In fact, there appears to be a strong link between poor school achievement and school adjustment and behavioral disorders (Kauffman, 1997; Whelan, deSaman, & Fortmeyer, 1984). Academic inadequacy may only further alienate students with behavioral disorders from their teachers and peers.

Social Constructivism

Social constructivist theory has much to say about the link between poor school achievement and school adjust-

ment and behavioral disorders. Classrooms and schools are social places, situated within particular cultures and contexts. In the view of social constructivist theorists, one must acknowledge the contributions of the school curriculum, the classroom and school environments, and the broader culture and community in forming the experiences of students with behavioral disorders.

Constructivist theory is based on the idea that individuals construct their own understandings of the world through their interactions with problems, objects, and others (Lave, 1991; Prawat & Floden, 1994; Reynolds, Sinatra, & Jetton, 1996). While the varieties of constructivism cover a wide expanse of intellectual terrain, our focus is on social constructivism, the perspective that relates most closely to the issues of community and competence in school. For social constructive theorists, social interaction is the chief means by which learning occurs. Knowledge, according to this perspective is a socially shared, rather than an individual, possession that is "constructed by, and distributed among, individuals and groups as they interact with one another and with cultural artifacts such as pictures, texts, discourse, and gestures" (Reynolds et al., 1996, p. 98). It follows that learning occurs when a young person develops inner speech, or internalized thought processes, through the social experience of interacting with peers and adults (Reynolds et al.).

Recent social constructivist thought stands in contrast to the prevailing view that the cognitive and the social can be studied independently. Therefore, the social setting in which a cognitive activity takes place is an essential component of that activity, not merely the context for it (Lave, 1991). Given this perspective, the social dimension imperceptibly pervades the tasks of acquiring knowledge and skills in schools, even when those tasks appear to involve individual students engaged in private cognitive activity.

In the present study, we bring the social dimension of school to bear on the efforts of students with and at risk for behavioral disorders to acquire competence. We focus on students' descriptions of their experiences in schools in a rural region of western North Carolina. Our assumption is that the descriptions of students' experiences are a useful source of reflection on programs for students with and at risk for behavioral disorders and on educational practices and professional agendas in rural communities. Gardner (1991) reminds us of the need for taking seriously the experiences of students:

> We all suffer from misconceptions and stereotypes and risk wallowing in them unless we remain vigilant. It is necessary both to respect the conceptions that students of all ages bring to the schools and to be aware of our own predilections toward strongly held but unfounded beliefs. . . . We must place ourselves inside the heads of our students

and try to understand as far as possible the sources and strengths of their conceptions. (pp. 252-253)

The students with whom we spoke serve as windows into the school experiences of students with and at risk for behavioral disorders in rural communities. Like Gardner, we are concerned not only with what our students know and how they behave, but also with how they experience school with respect to community and competence. The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between community and competence in the context of rural schools and communities and to describe how students with and at risk for behavioral disorders experience community and competence.

Students with behavioral disorders seek membership in some kind of community, but they find it difficult to achieve in the school environment (Habel, Bloom, Ray, & Bacon, in press). They are likely to strive for feelings of membership in a community and competence in deviant ways such as involvement in gangs and destructive behavior that will leave their mark on the school and community.

Method

Participants

The method of data collection was the interview. Participants (hereafter referred to as students) comprised two cohorts, one consisted of 13 males and 4 females, the other of 18 males and 4 females. While all students participated in interviews, the students in each cohort participated in a different interview procedure. All students were volunteers who ranged in grade level from fifth to twelfth and were enrolled in five elementary schools: a middle school and two high schools in two small, rural districts. One of the districts was predominantly Native American, and nine of the students with whom we spoke were Native Americans. Students either were (a) placed in special education programs for students with behavioral disorders according to North Carolina criteria for behavioral disorders and received services in resource rooms or (b) judged to be "at risk" for placement in such programs because they had had special education referrals by their classroom teachers due to behavioral problems. The students were nominated by their teachers and invited to participate on an "advisory board" of their school. The purposes of these advisory boards were to give students opportunities to voice their views about school and to obtain a student perspective on what school is like for students with or at risk for behavioral disorders.

The cohort that consisted of 18 males and four females participated in audio-taped, semiformal, small-group interviews conducted by the authors. The groups ranged in size from two to five students, and groups were interviewed every week or two for about 3 months. While some students were absent for some of the scheduled interviews, most students spent 5 to 6 hours in conversation about their experiences at school with respect to the four "spirits" of the circle of courage: belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity (Brendtro et al., 1990). The basic tenets of the circle of courage are that children and youth, to develop as healthy members of the community, require security, relationships with peers and adults that are characterized by affiliation and attachment, a sense of autonomy, and opportunities for responsibility. These tenets correspond to the principles of social constructivist frameworks for child development.

The members of the second cohort, 13 male and 4 females, participated in individual, audio-taped, semiformal, guided interviews about their experiences in school. Among the questions posed in the interviews were:

1. Tell me about a time when you felt like you really belonged at school. Who helped you feel that way? How?
2. Tell me about a time when you felt like you didn't belong at school. What made you feel that way?
3. What do you like about school? Why? What do you dislike about school? Why?
4. Tell me about a time when you felt successful at school.
5. Tell me about the best teacher you've had at school. What made him/her the best? Tell me about the worst teacher you've had at school. What made him/her the worst?
6. When do you get to make decisions in school? Tell me about the responsibilities you have.

Typical probing questions included: "What was that like?" "How did you feel when that happened?" "Could you tell me more about that?"

The interviews were conducted by nine graduate students who were enrolled in a masters program in special education with an emphasis on behavioral disorders. To develop and practice interviewing skills, they taped and transcribed pilot interviews, and their questioning techniques were critiqued. Seven were full-time teachers and the teachers of the students who were interviewed. The questions were developed collaboratively by the researchers and the graduate students who conducted the interviews and were designed to elicit descriptions of students' experiences with the spirits of the circle of courage.

The purpose of these interviews was to encourage students to describe specific events in their lives, rather than to speak in the abstract about their impressions of school.

Interviewing

The interviewing process is grounded in a long tradition of systematic inquiry in the social sciences (Colaizzi, 1978; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Kvale, 1996; Polkinghorne, 1989). This study employed a perspective that recognizes the interview conversation as a social encounter in which both the interviewer and the student actively shape the form and content of what is said. The objective, according to Holstein and Gubrium (1995), "is not to dictate interpretation but to provide an environment conducive to the production of the range and complexity of meanings that address relevant issues" (p. 17). This perspective also requires that careful attention be paid to how the students relate to the interviewers. Holstein and Gubrium maintain that "respondents not only offer substantive thoughts and feelings pertinent to the topic under consideration but simultaneously and continuously monitor who they are in relation to the person questioning them" (p. 15).

We are well aware that one trademark of students with or at risk for behavioral disorders is their reluctance to communicate candidly with adults. Therefore, the interviewers made special efforts to encourage thoughtful and candid conversation in both small-group and individual interviews by posing questions that were meaningful and appropriate to the students. The guiding intention was to pursue the course of the conversation that was established by the students; to treat the interview as a social interaction rather than an interrogation. In general, the students appeared to speak freely during our interviews and to develop a sustained narrative across repeated interview sessions. Some, however, despite efforts to draw them out, were circumspect in their responses.

Data Analysis

The audio tapes of the individual and group interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed for thematic categories. Transcripts were compared to audio tapes to check for accuracy. The thematic analysis followed procedures described by Colaizzi (1978), Kvale (1996), Patton (1990), and Polkinghorne (1989). The thematization process began by seeking a thematic description of the individual transcripts. Each author did this analysis independently. Thematization is a continuous back and forth process of relating part to whole and whole to part. Each passage was seen in terms of what came before and of what followed. To treat each transcript as an autonomous body of data, preconceived theoretical assumptions about the phenomena under study must be "bracketed," or identified and set aside. Bracketing is a means by which we relate to the described experiences of students in a non-dogmatic fashion and attempt to grasp, rather than impose, meanings emerging from the interview.

After independent analysis of the transcripts of small-group and individual interviews, the authors collaborated with colleagues in the thematization procedure. When working with qualitative data, researches must guard against two types of bias. The first form of bias involves making conclusions that are not warranted by the data, and the second involves failing to discern patterns that are present in the data. While it is impossible to inoculate oneself against bias, the collaborative group served as a means to minimize bias. The members of the group facilitated bracketing by conscientiously questioning the assumptions each member employed. If, for example, one person inadvertently failed to bracket a preconception, the others in the group were in a position to see this failure. The collaborative group afforded another benefit: The perspective of the group was broader than that of any individual. Therefore, a thematic pattern that might not have been noticed by one of us was discerned by the group. The group, comprised of multiple perspectives, was less likely than any single researcher to approach the data in a stereotyped fashion and focus on certain aspects of a given transcript while failing to see others.

After the transcript of each small-group or individual interview had been thematicized by the group, the context of the analysis was broadened to attempt to incorporate all the interviews at a broader, inclusive level. Themes obtained early in the analysis were collapsed into smaller numbers of themes as the data analysis progressed. Through a process of continually checking back and comparing themes among interviews, redundancies were eliminated and higher-order relations between themes formulated. The overall thematic description of the experience of the students in school emerged as all members of the group engaged in the process of continually checking back and comparing themes across interviews that is described above. This process of identifying themes across interviews requires that support for each thematic category must be available in each small-group or individual transcript.

Direct quotations are the sources of data, revealing the perceptions of the students, their experiences, and the ways they have organized the world of school. Units of data usually are paragraphs, but occasionally, they can be sentences or sequences of paragraphs. While numerous quotations are used to illustrate each of the themes, no quotation appears more than once.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of students' descriptions of their experiences in schools revealed two major themes: "community," with its components, relationships with peers, relationships with teachers, social isolation, creating community, and distorted belonging; and "competence," with its components, schools' contribution to incompetence, the dilemma of ru-

ral schools and encouraging competence. These themes, along with related literature, are discussed below.

Community

    Marrais (1996) suggests that attachment "remains the single most compelling motive behind the construction of meanings in life" (p. 45). In their review of Western theoretical frameworks of individual behavior, Thornton, Orbuch, and Axim (1995) corroborate Marrais' claim about the fundamental importance of attachment. They point out that central to virtually all Western perspectives is the assertion that the quality of one's interpersonal relationships is strongly related to one's mental and physical well-being and, therefore, is vital to one's satisfaction and enjoyment in life.

    For students with behavioral disorders, however, establishing community—developing and maintaining friendships and interpersonal relationships—is a difficult task. These students have or perceive themselves to have few productive social relationships and, therefore, low social capital (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). They often have strained relationships with peers and teachers and experience isolation and rejection. Further, the constraints of a rural community may add to these problems.

    Relationships with peers. Students with behavioral disorders are often rejected and viewed negatively by their peers. Based on observations and the reports of students, Milich, McAnincha, and Harris (1992) found that nonlabeled peers consider labeled children less likable and are consistently more negative toward them than nonlabeled children. In an extensive review of literature, Safran (1995) found that aggressive youth are less popular and more rejected by nonlabeled peers and that peers hold negative views of students with externalizing behaviors and consider them to have negative dispositions. For some, the distrust of teachers or other students, as well as the perceived presence of "enemies," are central aspects of school and students. Following are illustrative quotations from our students:

    "When I first moved here, I thought I was going to belong here. . . . But as the year goes by . . . I'd make enemies."

    "When the students pick on me, that is really unfair because I can't fight that well."

    "Kids would pick on me and make fun of me and made me feel like I didn't belong."

    "Yeah, . . . [a student] picked on me. I told him to shut up and told the teacher. He pushed me and I pushed him and he hit me in the nose."

    "Well, they always pick fights with me and I fight back."

    "They jump you for the clothes you wear, the way you style your hair. Yeah, that's it. 'I don't like your clothes. I don't like your hair. I don't like the way you look. I don't like what music you listen to.' [If you ignore them] you get jumped."

    Relationships with teachers. Elias (1989) identifies "disconnectedness" from significant others as a primary factor that causes schools to be stressful for students. This disconnectedness is prevalent because school personnel tend to take the position that stress is person-centered, a problem of the child who is experiencing stress. The school provides palliatives in the form of guidance and counseling and special education services, but nevertheless places the onus squarely on the child to shape up and manage the stress. In a survey of rural teachers and administrators, Cates and Yell (1994) found resistance to inclusion of students with behavioral disorders by both teachers and administrators.

    Our students speak of the disconnectedness they experience at school when they describe teachers who fail to listen to them. Asked, "Is there a time when you thought a teacher or an administrator did listen to you?" their responses include:

    "Not anybody here."

    "If [teachers] agree, they listen to you."

    "And when you try to tell them, they say, 'No, I don't want to hear it.' That's the way [a teacher] was this morning. I was in there and I wasn't arguing with the teacher or nothing. I was just telling her I didn't understand what she was saying. And I asked if she could explain and she said 'Just write him up and send him to the office and don't worry about it.' Makes me so mad I can't see straight."

    School environments tend to be viewed as neutral in terms of fairness and justice (Elias, 1989; Guttman, 1982). However, research suggests that students with behavior problems may be treated unfairly in many cases. For example, results from a study by Safran and Safran (1985) suggest that children with a reputation for or labeled as disruptive may receive disproportionate blame for classroom disorder. In the small rural school, where everyone knows everyone else, students may be stigmatized by their reputations, their family circumstances, and so forth. Our students feel that they are often stigmatized, disrespected, and treated unfairly.

"All the teachers pick on me. . . . We're the number one trouble makers . . . Cause we've always been suspected when stuff happens."

"Sometimes I am the only one that gets in trouble."

"[The teacher] treated certain boys and certain girls like they were angels from God. . . . She treated them better than everybody else . . . She yelled at everybody. . . . not everybody, but the people who didn't understand, she yelled at them.

". . . Some of my friends and me are being unfairly treated cause . . . we're being punished for the stuff other people do."

"In my eighth grade year I went to camp over in . . . [a nearby town] to work on some of my problems, and when I come back I had changed. I got back in high school and . . . [the principal] and my fourth grade teacher—the grade I got expelled in—was my principal. She never let up on me. She never tried to see how I'd changed!"

"When I got that award for being student of the month, [the teacher] said 'If [student] can do it, all ya'll can do it' (How did that make you feel when she said that?) Kind of insulting cause it sounded like 'If [student] can do it, any of you can do it.'"

"They think we're like little kindergarten kids and here we are 16, 17 years old. But still they treat you like a little bitty kid."

"They just don't give us enough credit for being human."

Social isolation. Students with behavioral disorders, by the nature of their disability, lack social skills needed for successful relationships. Many school programs are designed to limit the amount of social contact and, therefore, the chance to practice important social skills. Based on reports from 40 adolescents, Neel, Cheney, and Meadows (1992) found that, compared with their nondisabled peers, students with behavioral disorders spend more time interacting with teachers and less time interacting with their peers. In one study, adolescents with behavioral disorders reported lower levels of empathy, participated in fewer extracurricular activities, and had less frequent contacts with friends and lower quality relationships than their peers without disabilities (Schonert-Reichl, 1993). The students with whom we spoke describe this social isolation.

"During school. You don't do nothing except sit in desks most of the day, and go to lunch, then if you talk to one of your friends in class, you've had it. You get to go see [the principal]."

"The only one I talk to is my best friend."

"We don't have time to actually talk."

"They got us. Like we can not associate, or talk to, or sit with the eighth grade any more. We got assigned areas for lunch. We got to go to break with our teachers. We got to sit with our teachers."

This failure to establish relationships creates little sense of community in school. When asked about times when they felt that they belong to a community at school, students respond succinctly: "What's there to belong to?"

Our students also reveal their wish for more opportunities for social contact at school. Many of them are unable to attend evening activities, such as sporting events, because their parents are unwilling or unable to transport them. Under these circumstances, they have specific suggestions about what schools could do to foster belonging:

"There could be more activities during the day instead of at night whenever they play sports. . . . All we do is sit in desks most of the day. During school you don't do nothing except sit in desks most of the day, and go to lunch. Then if you talk to one of your friends in class, you've had it."

"I wish we had more social time."

"I wish we had a dance once a month. I wish we had more social time like outside or something."

Creating community. Weitzman and Cook (1986) suggest that attachment is more complex and resilient than originally conceived. They contend that environmental factors and peer relationships "can intervene in the process of development to have a restorative effect on earlier developmental deficits" (p. 99). Weitzman and Cook question the time-honored assertion that young children who fail to attach to their mothers during infancy are rendered later in life unable to establish and maintain friendships, to trust those with whom they have regular contact, and to develop love relationships. Brendtro et al. (1990), like Weitzman and Cook, posit that both belonging and attachment are powerful motives that can be satisfied later in life, even in the absence of early experiences with attachment figures. Their guiding premise is that for many young persons with or at risk for developing behavioral disorders, becoming

members of a community can be fostered by relationships with adults who recognize that belonging and attachment are central to the development of social competence and self-esteem.

When our students talk about experiences that encourage belonging to a community, they focus on relationships with teachers and administrators that are characterized by trust and affection.

> "[The teacher] treats you like you're human, not like you're a little kid or something."

> "[The teachers] talk to me, and are happy to see me. And when I'm stuck on a problem, they talk to me and help me out."

Students also cite specific instances when teachers or administrators make efforts to treat them like adults, talk with them, listen to them or treat them fairly.

> "It's like FFA, . . . [the teacher] down there, he respects us. He tells us how it is and what to do and everything. He treated us like regular people. Treat us like adults and stuff. And we got the job done."

When asked to explain to other teachers how they can treat students like adults, one student responds:

> "Give [the students] respect and talk to them like a regular human being and not like a kid. Just tell them how it is. Don't play around."

A student describes a time when he was treated fairly:

> "I got sent to the principal's office for causing trouble in class. . . . When I went in there and told [the principal] what happened, I told him the honest truth about it. He asked me again 'Are you telling me the truth?' And I said, 'Yes, I'm telling you the truth, the honest-to-God truth.' He said, 'I know you've been in trouble in the past but this is a new slate. I'm gonna treat you like nothing's ever happened before.' . . . I had been treated fairly."

The students with whom we spoke have clear ideas about the kinds of relationships they would like to have with adults:

> "The way I see it, principals are supposed to be somebody who can help you, somebody you can go to talk to when you need to talk to somebody."

> "[The teachers] could talk to the kids personally more often. Whenever kids are having trouble at home they can't cope with it, they need help."

Distorted belonging. According to Brendtro et al. (1990), individuals who feel disconnected may seek belonging in artificial or distorted ways. For example, groups to which students refer as "cliques," "clans," or even "gangs" can produce a distorted sense of belonging. Our students made several references to each of these terms.

> "The hippies are in a clan. . . . The rednecks are in a clan. . . . The preps, they're just all over."

> "You can walk in the lunchroom and you can see the clans. You see the hippies at two tables, and then there's the preps at four tables."

> "In this school we got gangs. Really bad. There's the Crips—so stupid—and the Forgotten Cowboys. I think the gangs are stupid. People come from big cities where there's gangs all around . . . and they try to bring it here. They want to be macho like them people up there."

> "The school wants us to everybody be together, right? That's not gonna work. I mean, it would be nice if it would work. But not everybody agrees on the same things. Pretty much, the people that stand there on the crosswalks pretty much agrees on the same things. We do not like the way other groups treat other groups. But we, speaking of the rednecks, we sit down there and we talk and we have a good ol' time, and the administration or the principals and everything try to get us to go back up there where everybody else is standing. We don't like to go up there because we are constantly made fun of. They try to get our tempers flared up. They know we are short-fused. And then when they do get our tempers flared up and there is a fight or something we get all the blame, every single square inch of the blame."

Competence

Research findings indicate that the majority of students with behavioral disorders experience difficulty in academic areas (Epstein et al., 1989; Knitzer et al., 1990; Mastropieri et al., 1985; U.S. Department of Education, 1994). This difficulty is one of the primary characteristics of behavioral disorders (Coleman, 1992; Kauffman, 1997).

When we ask our students to tell us about a time they had been successful, they relate success to good grades and

tell us about instances of failure and feelings of incompetence:

> "The day comes when I'll be successful I'll be dead in my grave."

> "When the teacher goes and tells me to do an assignment, like answer some questions, it's hard to go and find questions and answers. Everybody else is okay. But it takes me all the class time to answer one question. I have to go back and read the chapter over and over."

> "They could have given me the help I asked for. But no, they didn't want to do it. They never wanted to do it my whole damn life, ever since I've been in [this school system], they don't want to help."

> "I try my damnedest to make good grades, and I end up with Cs and Ds and I'm busting my ass. Some people don't even try, they don't get their homework in, don't do anything, hardly anything and they don't turn homework in and then they make a 100 on the quiz and then they get an A for the year. And here I am stuck with a C or D."

When a sense of competence is absent, students may appear failure-oriented and unmotivated (Brendtro et al., 1990). Our students reveal this absence of competence.

> "I'm waiting till I'm sixteen and I'm outta here."

> "[Getting good grades] does not matter to me really. . . . Well, you know like educational-wise, I'd rather have A's but if it's just for nothing, nothing at all, I don't care."

> "I can't pass all of my classes. . . . No, but I'm almost out of here. I've got 3 months left here, and in another 3 months I'm out of here."

> "Giving all these teachers paychecks. That's all were here for."

Schools' contribution to incompetence. According to Kauffman (1997), schools can contribute to academic incompetence in several ways, including insensitivity to students' individuality, inappropriate expectations, instruction in nonfunctional and irrelevant skills, ineffective instruction, and destructive contingencies of reinforcement. Several comments from our students illustrate how they have felt discouraged academically.

> "She is teaching notes and she doesn't really help you learn about them. She throws them down and she asks us what it is and she's sitting at her thing and she doesn't let us think. She just says the answer for us."

> "They [teachers] holler loud. . . . I hear 'em from other classrooms, in our classroom, too . . . Either 'Get to work!' or 'You didn't do this right!'"

> ". . . its kinda like they're saying that you're not smart enough to do it, so they'll just go ahead and do it for you. . . . I'm not the smartest kid on earth by far, but I still know that when a teacher sits down with me and helps me do it instead of doing it for me, I know they really care about me learning it. But when a teacher sits down and does it for me, that just tells me they just want me out, to pretty much get out of their class."

In her interviews with students with behavioral disorders, Crowley (1993) found that the students perceived rigidity with regard to academic and behavioral programming as unhelpful. Subthemes included procedural rigidity, rigid academic expectations, and rigid content selection and presentation. Many of our students' comments correspond with those themes.

> "They could have given me the help I asked for. But no, they didn't want to do it. They never wanted to do it in my whole damn life, ever since I've been in [this school system], they don't want to help."

> "She'd just tell you to do the dumb questions. And you'd have to go do them. All she did was just talk mostly and told you to do this stuff."

> "She was reading it like ninety miles and hour. I can't stand when she's reading ninety mile an hour, I couldn't understand most of it. I just want to back up so I didn't get the help I needed."

The dilemma of rural schools in encouraging competence. Encouraging competence in students with behavior disorders in rural schools may be complicated by two factors. First, rural school districts are often faced with low numbers of students actually identified as behaviorally disordered. Administrators who face limited enrollments and limited resources may be unlikely to commit funds specifically for this population. Additionally, qualified teachers for this population are hard to come by. Therefore, teachers and IEP teams are often stretched in developing appropriate individualized programs for this population.

Individual help and attention appear to be very important to our students for encouraging mastery.

> "She helps me out a lot when I get in a jam. You can play with the computer if you get done with your work. . . . If you say 'I need some help' and she's got a class right there, she'll say 'You'll just have to wait a minute.' And I'll wait there, and then she'll come help me because she helps me a lot. She don't tell me the answers. She makes me find 'em."

> "[The teacher] helps me with homework now because I'm failing. . . . She's helping me get better grades. I'm making a "B" in this class and I'd never made that without help."

> "When you ask for help and you get it, or whenever a teacher sees that you need help and you don't have it and she helps you without asking, that can be helpful."

However, students pleas for help are insistent:

> "Getting someone to help me with my homework would have helped a lot."

> "I need help on my math."

> "I need some help but it is hard to get."

> "I need help with reading and cause I can't read that good."

> "I'm not passing because she's not helping me with anything. . . . I always choke on the tests. I always do homework, but it doesn't count for anything this year.

> "They need to explain it more before they give us a work sheet or something."

> "I was sitting in math class the other day and I was asking [the teacher] for help. She said, 'Hold on a minute,' then I asked her again and she said, 'Hold on a minute.' And somebody else raised their hand and she answered them. She never did answer me."

The second factor that may complicate encouraging competence in rural schools is the emphasis of the curriculum in rural schools. DeYoung and Lawrence (1995) suggest that rural schools often teach values and skills that are most useful in metropolitan America. Only rural students who want to leave the community or go on to higher education adopt the school's view of the value of education. Other students are left feeling that the school curriculum is highly irrelevant and nonfunctional. Our students make reference to school work that to them is boring and irrelevant.

> "When you sit there in the desk all day long, your rear-end's sore as all get out, and you're sitting there in the classroom and the teacher's blabbering on and on and then she just says read, or do this, or do that . . ."

> "If it's boring, I can't pass it."

> "We learned to say people's names instead of actually learning anything."

> "They ought to have us do something instead of sitting in a desk all day. [That] would be nice."

> "We have a quiz or a test every day. She usually lectures for 50-60 minutes; then we work."

> "And the [teachers] wonder why we fall asleep in class."

Encouraging competence. Encouraging academic competence involves providing opportunities for mastery through learning that is active, experiential, and social (Brendtro et al., 1990). Making sure that students recognize the importance or relevance of the work they are asked to do is essential (Kauffman, 1997). Our students' comments indicate a desire for learning that is active, experiential, social, and relevant:

> "If we're going to come to school to learn to do stuff that we're gonna do in life, not stuff we ain't gonna do that ain't gonna have nothing to do with life. Geometry, you ain't gonna do nothing with that not unless you're some rocket scientist. Ain't no use for it."

> "Just make it fun. Just make learning fun and all. I just like to come to school because my friends are there. . . . I just would like it, to make it fun . . .

> "Doing things with my hands. Depends on experience with being able to hear it, see it, touch it. You know you can learn something a good deal by reading books. But not all learning comes from reading. You've got to have experience."

Kauffman (1997) suggests that sensitivity to students' individuality and appropriate expectations for students contribute to achievement. In her interviews of students with behavioral disorders, Crowley (1993) found that students perceive flexible academic programming as helpful. Our students agree.

"Don't try to make everybody learn one certain way. Everybody got a different way of learning. If I can . . . hear what I'm learning plus read it, it does better for me."

"A lot of students who won't just come up and say they're having problems. If they're failing social studies, then the teacher should come up and try to help them. Some of them are kind of shy."

"Well, like if you need help or something [the teacher] will help you a pretty good bit. If you show you that you're really trying she won't fail you."

"She lets you learn it pretty much at your own pace."

"Teachers could encourage you more. . . . They could say, 'Good job!' And instead of saying, 'You better do this now', they get to say 'Take your time and think about it hard.'"

Conclusion

There is increasing awareness of the threat to contemporary society posed by the loss of community (Clinton, 1996) and growing concern about cross-generation alienation (Bly, 1990). There also is increasing awareness that the time-honored ideal of the cohesive rural community no longer is the model for strong school-community connections and high levels of social capital, at least for students with and at risk for behavioral disorders.

When the students with whom we spoke discuss experiences that encourage community and competence, they refer to adults who are caring and respectful, to teachers who give individual attention and provide learning tasks that are active and relevant, to opportunities for having a voice and making decisions, and to occasions for interacting with peers. A next step would be to use this information to develop intervention programs that attempt to encourage students to develop a sense of community and of competence. Drawing on social constructivist theory, we suggest that schools pay careful attention to the influence of school culture on learning and the power of relationships.

When the students with whom we spoke discuss their social isolation and distorted belonging, they reveal their success at creating a kind of subculture in school, consisting of their cliques and clans, that can be viewed as their own community of competence. In this community, students with and at risk for behavioral disorders exemplify competence at their own patterns of friendship and interaction with each other and with adults. It is important to note that the students with whom we spoke do not represent a counter-school culture. Their disenchantment with the school is not based on the belief that school is irrelevant, but on the tacit conviction that the school could be but is not serving their needs. A social constructivist perspective compels us to take seriously the social interaction in school as part of the learning process. Unfortunately, the students with whom we spoke learn how to function in school in ways that marginalize them. Eckert (1989) suggests that the strategies that students have acquired for learning in school that marginalize them will marginalize them elsewhere, just as in school. School, then, is not simply an unhappy setting for students with and at risk for behavioral disorders, it teaches them lessons that can hamper them for the rest of their lives.

Responsible and sensitive educators must address issues involved in community and competence at school, particularly the need to better understand the social structures and settings that promote the development of friendships and the cliques and clans that the students with whom we spoke describe (Bloom, Habel, & Ray, 1998). Further, community can be fostered by relationships of mutual trust, affection, and respect with adults with whom students with and at risk for behavioral disorders have regular contact. Competence with regard to academic achievement can be encouraged by effective instruction that focuses on the individual needs of students and is relevant to students' lives. Moreover, understanding that students with behavioral disorders are reacting to basic drives for autonomy, responsibility and independence can help professionals respond with positive programs that encourage community at school and develop competence (McNamara, 1996).

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