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ABSTRACT

Patterns of history and culture help define the path one finds acceptable and follows. In Tremont, Maine, out-migration coupled with the influx of summer visitors has helped create a culture that undercuts students' appreciation of their own abilities and diminishes their aspirations to postsecondary education. Maine students in the "high risk group" may experience cognitive dissonance if they seek higher education and succumb to the cultural pressure not to continue. However, educators can use the strengths of rural culture, the family, and community as levers of change to encourage students to pursue higher education and return to build the local economy and revitalize their communities. A community center could address many of the constraints on young people's aspirations by offering mentoring from community members, entrepreneurial education, job counseling and internships, parenting education and day care, and adult education programs that are also open to high school students. Sharing of local school facilities with the community would make these facilities more economical and bring together people of different ages. (Contains 37 references.) (Author/TD)

CULTURE:
The Fulcrum for Levers of Change

Barbara Kent Lawrence, Ed.D.

A paper presented at Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, Canada, April 19 – 22, 1999.

ABSTRACT
Culture: The Fulcrum for Levers of Change

Patterns of history and culture help define the path we find acceptable and follow. In Maine out-migration coupled with the influx of summer visitors has helped create a culture that undercut students' appreciation of their own abilities and diminishes their aspirations to post-secondary education. Maine students in the "high risk group" may experience cognitive dissonance if they seek higher education and succumb to the pressure in the culture not to continue. However, educators can use the strengths of rural culture, the family and community, as levers of change to encourage students to pursue higher education and return to build the local economy and revitalize their communities.

Culture: The Fulcrum for Levers of Change

If we are to reform, literally re-form, patterns of schooling we must look at patterns in local culture as the fulcrum for opportunities or levers of change. Such patterns in Tremont, Maine suggest that culture has profound impact on learning and aspirations. Tremont is the least populated and most isolated of the four towns on Mount Desert Island, with the highest percentage of native-born people, least ethnic diversity, lowest per capita income, and the fewest college graduates. Tremont gives us a clearer picture of Maine culture than towns with a higher percentage of summer visitors or residents from out-of-state.

Tremont displays many characteristics that have made Maine a place where children get a fine elementary school education but do not go on to post-secondary education in the numbers one would expect given their stellar performance on state and national tests. Maine students score first or second on the NAEP's when they are in 4th grade, however, they go on to post-secondary education at a rate that puts them 49th in the nation in attendance at in-state public universities, 44th in attendance at any colleges and universities. This astounding gap suggests powerful forces are at work and there are lessons to learn about what inhibits rural students from continuing their formal education (see Halstead, 1996; Lawrence, 1997).

Combining qualitative and quantitative methods, I gathered data from a wide range of sources including historical records, literature, census figures, interviews, focus groups, observation, and a survey. Relating this data to a tri-

partite framework of constructs from psychology, sociology, and anthropology I developed a holistic portrait which gave people a voice and situated their responses within the culture and history of the community. I triangulated my data with a survey from the National Center for Student Aspirations of 136 students from 3rd through 8th grade at Tremont Grammar School and 9th graders from Tremont attending the high school.

For many students the transition from a small, nurturing elementary school to a consolidated high school is difficult. Like children anywhere, children growing up in Tremont develop a sense of self in relation to their immediate environment, their nuclear family, as well as their extended family, community, school, the larger island community, Maine, and of course, the national and international environment. They are most firmly imprinted by the closer associations of their primary group: family, community, and school and develop their perceived self, ideal self, and real self in relationship to these influences.

There is consistency in the messages most Tremont children hear from their families, community and school: they are valued; they need to work hard throughout high school; they have ability and need to compensate through hard work for the more limited opportunities in Tremont. Although, of course, children are aware of differences in family income and status while growing up, their perceptions of self begin to separate when they go to the high school and are divided into college, business, or vocational programs.

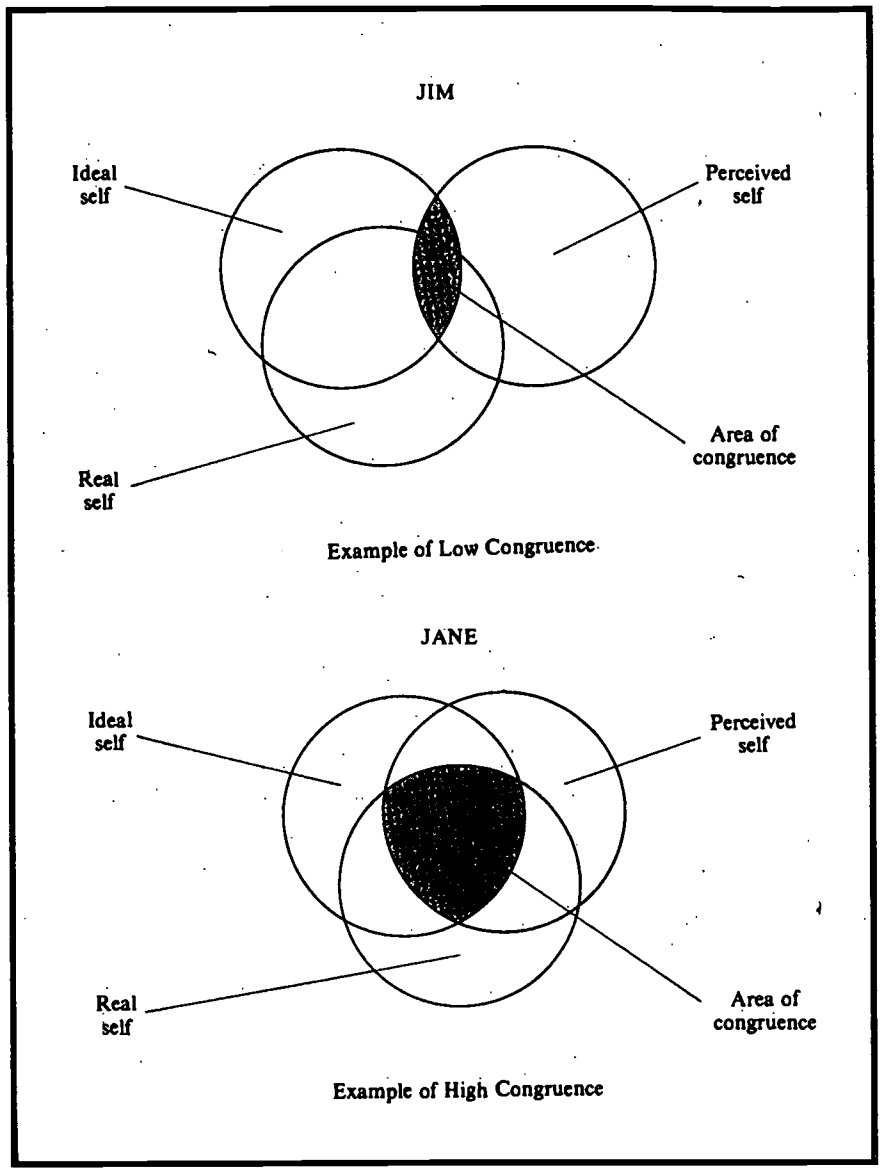
In high school, increased exposure to national media and island peer culture brings students into contact with different values and mores that

contradict and de-value the ones they have internalized as children. Contradictions that may have been hidden become apparent. For example, at Tremont School students are encouraged to go to college or vocational school. When they are at high school they face the reality of expensive tuitions, diminishing support from family and teachers, and competing values luring them into other activities. Differences between the culture of grammar school and high school, between traditional culture and contemporary culture, as well as the realities of finding local employment, create tension between what some students see as their ideal self, which may be a person who has a college education, home, family, career, and good income, and what they begin to see as their real self, which faces more limited possibilities. Part of the tension of growing up anywhere is in bringing the ideal self and real self into alignment. The irony for students from Tremont is that they have been so nurtured and successful throughout grammar school that their promise seems limitless. That promise is dulled by attitude, values, mores, and habits of mind inculcated by the history and culture of Maine that unintentionally conspire to make post-secondary education seem, for some students, too expensive, difficult, unrewarding, and irrelevant or contrary to the values of the culture. As support of their family and community dwindles, and if they fail to establish strong roots in their new school through involvement in extra-curricular activities, the promise fades and they settle into a diminished reality, a reality that becomes acceptable because it is consonant with the values and ways of living of so many people they know.

Students, who have a clear sense of purpose, are involved in school activities, or whose parents support their efforts to go to college, will find consonance at the high school. They can pursue a course of studies and extra-curricular activities that enable most of them to go to colleges or vocational schools considered acceptable. Some Tremont students at the high school do very well academically, socially, and in extra-curricular activities. These tend to be students whose parents or grandparents went to college, or who had parents who were encouraged by family-members to go on to post-secondary education but for whom that dream was impossible at the time. These parents whose own desires for post-secondary education had been thwarted know the difficulties their children face and are almost relentless in their encouragement and support.

However, students who are in a "high risk" group will not find consonance between their aspirations to post-secondary education and the realities they face. These students will encounter dissonance between the values they learned from their elementary school teachers and the larger society (that one must have a post-secondary education in order to succeed today) and their perception of self as defined by their families and local culture. High-risk students will have to deal with the cognitive dissonance they experience either by going against their families and local culture to pursue the goal of post-secondary education, or by giving up that ambition (see Hamachek, Figure One). If they give up, perhaps by moving from the college to business or vocational tracks, they will try to make this acceptable, by minimizing the value of a college

FIGURE THREE
High and Low Congruence of Self-Concept



Hamachek, 1992:29

Memory, conscious and unconscious, does indeed work forwards as well as backwards. By influencing the self concept, the past influences the individual's perception of the present and his or her ability to be inspired in the present and set goals for the future.

education, maximizing the difficulties they face, or trying to get approval from friends and family members.

High-risk students will find support from friends and some family members for changing their goals but are unlikely to go to teachers or guidance counselors because they are less likely to support this decision. Students will go to friends, who are often also looking for affirmation for withdrawing from more demanding programs or even leaving school, and to parents, who don't always understand the value of a college education and fear that they or their child will incur a large debt, and that the child will have to leave the community to find suitable work after graduation. The dissonance is simply too strong for many students to bear alone and they diminish their goals to achieve a better cognitive fit.

Without intervention it is hard for students to continue towards the goal of post-secondary education because to do so requires that they turn against the culture that has nurtured them so well. If students entering high school do not develop a new primary group that supports post-secondary education they may find it impossible to sustain their aspirations. The following types of students seem at risk. Those:

- Who do not participate in extra-curricular activities.
- Whose parents did not go on to post-secondary education and who do not support them in the aspiration to continue their schooling.
- Whose parents believe that "what was good enough for my father is good enough for my son."

- Whose parents (or other relatives) offer them a secure job in a family owned business.
- Who do not have the support of a mentor or other significant adult who helps them value post-secondary education.
- Who are very close to their families and do not want to leave the community.
- Who see no opportunities for employment in the area that require post-secondary education.
- Who value a liberal arts education only as a means to secure employment?
- Whose parents may have attended college or post-secondary vocational school but paid their own tuition at a time when tuition was not such an enormous investment and have not planned, or do not plan, to pay for their children's further education.
- With little resilience or determination, and no internalized goals or investment in further education.
- Who have had secure jobs in family-owned businesses and little experience in other types of work.

The extraordinarily supportive and synchronous messages of the culture of Tremont promote success through elementary and high school, but many of the deepest values of the culture go against the aspiration to post-secondary education. Because high-risk students must defy these traditions, efforts to help them pursue post-secondary education must be based on their perceptions of the reality they face and use their culture as a fulcrum for change.

INTERVENTION: Creating A Community Center

The phrase, "It takes a village to raise a child" has become so trite I hesitate to use it; however, the value of the concept can be seen easily. In small traditional societies throughout the world help in raising children often comes from members of the extended family or other caring and experienced members of the community. In many rural places in America bonds between family members and within the community are still strong and they are the primary source on which and with which to build a program to encourage aspirations.

As Joy Dryfoos has demonstrated, community schools can be loci for programs that extend from pre-natal care through adult education (Dryfoos, 1994). Many of the issues I have identified as constraints on the aspirations of young people in rural places can be addressed through educational, recreational and cultural programs offered to the entire community.

Mission of a Community Centered Program

- To ease the transition of students from elementary school to high school, many of which are large consolidated facilities removed from the community.
- To counter the "separation" and alienation some students experience during high school.
- To offer guidance and counseling for high school students about issues they face, as well as in planning their careers and post-secondary education. (Guidance counselors in most large high schools simply do not have the time to work effectively with students).
- To reach out to parents and other family members to address cultural issues that impede support of post-secondary education.

Specific programs:

- Mentoring might be encouraged not only through advertising and making people aware of the importance of mentoring, but also through tax credits to individuals and businesses that support mentoring.
- Events: both for teenagers and the community at large
- Teen Center

It is extremely important that teen-agers have a place to go that supports them and in which they can enjoy each other's company and spend time with caring adults, as well as become involved in positive, active and fun activities. Investment in teen-agers is critical to the continuing strength of any community.

The following considerations may be useful.

a) Students should be involved from the inception of the program to assure it meets their needs and has their support.

b) There should be a place set aside for the use of teen-agers. This room could have a different use during the day and be reserved after school hours for teens.

c) There should be a caring adult responsible for planning and co-coordinating who is working with the teenagers.

d) There should be regularly scheduled public transportation from the community center to all areas of the community.

e) Teenagers should be encouraged to participate in some of the adult activities such as basketball games in the Men's and Women's Leagues.

- Entrepreneurial Activities: Like Jonathan Sher, I think that entrepreneurialism can be taught because it is a habit of mind, a way of thinking, and the product of specific skills (Sher, 1977). The Center should consider starting small business enterprises planned and managed by elementary and high school students in conjunction with local colleges and businesses similar to or in concert with Junior Achievement. For example, starting a school store, Laundromat, daycare center, or furniture repair shop would give students first-hand experience in running a business. Classes in researching needs, designing products to meet those needs, and marketing these products, have been successful in high schools and should be introduced at the elementary school level with the specific goal of encouraging entrepreneurialism.
- Job Counseling and Internships: The Center could encourage local businesses to employ area youth during the summer, train students in ways to find jobs, and provide role playing and other activities designed to help students in interviews, filling out applications, etc. Internships with local businesses would give students a chance to see how these businesses work and what skills they would need to find regular employment.
- Parenting and Day Care: The Center should offer day care during program hours. The nursery might be a place where older students learned skills in child-care and also be a source of revenue for the school. In addition, the Center could supervise a program of outreach to parents using trained local visitors to provide encouragement and expertise to expectant and new

parents.[1] Programs should try to allay parents' fears about parenting, increase their interaction with their children, particularly in reading, as a long-term goal work to increase their support for post-secondary education. These programs should be available to all parents, not just those designated as "at-risk," because all parents are vulnerable and sometimes those who seem most in control are actually just putting up a good show and are quite needy underneath an impressive veneer.[2]

- Adult Education: Programs for adults should be open to High School students and might include: tutoring for the GED, training in computer programs, learning languages from computer programs, etc., as well as trips and presentations on a wide range of topics. It might be useful to have parenting discussion groups, not only for parents of newborns, but parents of children of any age. Members of the community such as nurses, social workers, experienced parents and grandparents could lead these.
- Programs for Adults: The village school is vital important resource in most rural communities. Sharing school facilities such as computer centers and libraries with the community would make these facilities more economical to run and give taxpayers a chance to take advantage of their investment. (For example, in many towns there are separate village and school libraries.

[1] See Don Davies discussions of specific techniques such as Boxes for Babes and Home Visiting.
[2] There are too many experts in child psychology who note that the first years of childhood are critical for child development for us to ignore the importance of investing in children at a very early age, ideally as close to conception as possible, and throughout their lives.

Locating both in the same facility would increase the book collection for adults and students and bring people of different ages together).[3]

Justification for the Program

There are lessons to learn from recent immigrants to the United States about ways in which to encourage students to do better in school and raise their aspirations. Researchers have found that the extraordinary success of students in American schools who recently fled Indochina is due in large part to "Indochinese values that foster interdependence and a family-based orientation to achievement" (Caplan, 1992:20). The authors paint a vivid portrait of ways these families promote academic success.

> Nowhere is the family's commitment to accomplishments and education more evident than in time spent on homework. During high school, Indochinese students spend an average of three hours and ten minutes per day; in junior high an average of two and a half hours; and in grade school, and an average of two hours and five minutes...
>
> Among the refugee families, then, homework clearly dominates household activities during weeknights. Although the parents' lack of education and facility with English often prevents them from engaging in the content of the exercise, they set standards and goals for the evening and facilitate their children's studies by assuming responsibility for chores and other considerations.
>
> After dinner, the table is cleared, and homework begins. The older children, both male and female, help their younger siblings. Indeed, they seem to learn as much from teaching as from being taught. It is reasonable to suppose that a great amount of learning goes on at these times -- in terms of skills, habits, attitudes and expectations as well as the content of a subject. The younger children, in particular, are taught not only subject matter but how to learn. Such sibling involvement demonstrates how a large family can encourage and enhance academic success.
>
> Caplan, 1992:18 -19

[3] Dr. Joy Dryfoos writes thoughtfully on the benefits of full-service schools.

An after-school program that brings parents and children to the school gymnasium at least once a week to do homework and socialize might help encourage high school students to develop strong work habits. This community center would be a community substitute for the Indochinese dining room, a place to share and discuss goals and aspirations, strategies, methods and attitudes. It is important that this take place in a community setting to sanction the discussion because parents need support from each other and members of the community in order to create and accept change. Though parents may learn skills they also use at home, it seems important they can interact with other parents and a skilled facilitator as well.

One way to assess the costs of a program is to consider what will happen if it is not implemented. In rural places the costs are already very high when measured in loss of young people who move away, students who do not continue their education, as well as the loss of a feeling of community, way of life and even the community itself. We can and must use the strengths of rural culture as levers to change patterns so that schools and communities become mutually self-sustaining.

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