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Middle School Students' Perceptions of Social Dimensions as Influencers of Academic Engagement

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates rural middle school students' perceptions of academic engagement. Participant-produced drawings (Kearney & Hyle, 2003), integrated with a series of semi-structured interviews (Patton, 2002), served as the primary data collection techniques. Twenty middle school students participated, stratified for socioeconomic status, grade level, gender, history of academic achievement, and school type. Findings indicate students strongly perceived the social conditions of the classroom as influencing their academic engagement, positively through an authentic community and leadership opportunities; and negatively through distraction and the judgment of peers.

Introduction

Academic engagement correlates strongly with academic achievement (Finn, Pannozzo, & Achilles, 2003). Many factors have been identified as increasing student engagement, including type of instructional materials (Lee & Anderson, 1993); subject matter and authenticity of instructional work (Marks, 2000); and real world observation, conceptual themes, and self-directed learning (Guthrie, 1997). Most often, students' academic engagement is measured by external observation of time on or off task. Observers determine when and to what extent students are engaged in the learning at hand.

While the educational community has benefited greatly from such research, the use of external observers admittedly leaves room for the potential misinterpretation of action and motive. A student deep in thought may appear to daydream, and the inverse is also possible. Yet, students themselves rarely have been consulted as "knowers" in this process, as valuable informants of when they are truly engaged, and of what they deem as conditions influencing their engagement. Learners as potential sources of valuable information about schooling have long been undervalued in educational research (Cook-Sather, 2002; Erickson & Schultz, 1992). "We cannot afford to continue old reform efforts or to develop new ones that do not succeed in making school a place where students want and are able to learn" (Cook-Sather, 2002, p.12), and yet rarely are students consulted in such reform efforts. This perspective guided our research into student perceptions of academic engagement, wherein we sought student perspectives through drawing and talk.

The purpose of this study was to describe and analyze students' perceptions of academic engagement. While students offered insight into the pedagogical decisions of teachers, aspects already well documented in the engagement literature, the young adolescents in this study consistently pointed to an important, and less represented, aspect of academic engagement: the social climate of the learning environment. Students identified social dimensions of the classroom as influencing their subsequent academic engagement, including the positively perceived roles of belonging to an authentic community and the opportunity for leadership; and the negatively perceived influences of peer judgment and distraction.

Related Theory and Research

Academic Engagement

Research on academic engagement has typically centered on student behaviors such as attending to the teacher and time on task; conversely, off-task or disruptive behaviors have routinely been classified as disengagement. Attending and responding to teachers' directions have been found to relate to student achievement (Finn, Pannozzo, and Voelkl, 1995), revealing strong relationships between academic engagement and learning. Engagement in instructional activities also has been found to decrease as students age (Marks, 2000).

Factors supporting school engagement and achievement among adolescents have also been studied in relation to ethnicity, academic success, and intrinsic motivation (Hudley, Daoud, Herschberg, Wright-Castsro, and Polanco, 2002). Minority students have been found to participate less in classroom-based activities (Finn, Folger & Cox 1991; Finn, Pannozzo, & Voelkl, 1995). Minority students, as compared to their nonminority peers, have also been found to have higher rates of absenteeism (Caldas, 1993), another critical indicator of academic disengagement.

Social Dimensions of Classrooms

The social dimension of schooling has its roots in society at large. A sense of belonging and affiliation with a group is generally accepted as a social need of humans. Maslow, in his influential work on motivation theory (1954), wrote of belonging or group affiliation as one of the central love or social needs. Glasser, too, identified belonging as critical to the fulfillment of a "quality world" (1986). Many schools have found Glasser's control theory to be a helpful construct for generating a safe and respectful school climate (Martin, 1988). As they attempt to enhance students' self-concept, other schools have integrated the Native American child-rearing philosophy of the Circle of Courage, which also identifies belonging as one of four central needs (Farner, 1996).

There has been particular emphasis placed on the need to belong in early adolescence. For example, affirmations from others, especially from peers, can powerfully impact the young adolescent's self-concept (Beane & Lipka, 1980, 1987; Stevenson, 2001). Affiliation also plays a critical role in the lives of youth considered to be "at risk" of school failure, with significant relationships being found between student sense of belonging and grade point average (Clasen, 1987).

Further, there are strong links between feelings of belonging and the prevention of youth at risk from engaging in criminal behavior (Van Bockern, 1998). Youth gang membership fosters a sense of belonging and attending to this need can be useful as a prevention and intervention strategy (Reep, 1996). Among at-risk students in particular, conventional classroom practices fail to engender a sense of belonging (Beck & Malley, 1998). Overall, a sense of belonging matters, especially to young adolescents.

Methodology

Site Selection

When considering how to invite a diverse group of young adolescents to participate, we sought schools that had quite different configurations, for example, in terms of "gradedness." As Munoz asserts in her ethnographic study of identity in Latina and Latino youth, "Differences are just as important as what we have in common, for they disrupt easy agreement and taken-for-granted assumption" (1995, p. 58). To obtain a range of perspectives, and to capture both major variations as well as common themes, we began by stratifying during

site selection. The inclusion of these different graded patterns served to challenge the notion that students can be defined neatly as belonging to elementary or middle school.

Schools across the United States vary widely in their designation of what constitutes the middle level learner, with middle level teacher education and licensure, for example, spanning many combinations of grades four through nine (Gaskill, 2002). Vermont is no exception. In Vermont alone, most students ages 9 to 14 attend schools that fall into 21 different grade configurations, only three of which are strictly classified as "middle grades" (5-8, 6-8, and 7-8), and which account for only 23 of the 276 schools in which Vermont's young adolescents are enrolled (Bishop, 2002). This degree of diversity in schooling experience is particularly evident in rural states.

As we selected research sites, we sought four schools from four different communities to capture a range of perspectives. These schools represented differing grade level configurations, pedagogical orientations, community socioeconomic status, and per pupil expenditures, as illustrated in Table A. (Figures have been rounded slightly for the purposes of anonymity, while remaining true to the range across sites.)

TABLE A

School and Community Attributes 2002 (most recent available)	**Mountain Community School**	**Main Street School**	**Town Elementary School**	**Village Elementary School**
Grade Configuration	6-8 (attached to 9-12 building)	K-8	K-6	K-6
School Enrollment	300	1,200	100	300
Average Class Size	20	20	12	20
% Free & Reduced Lunch	26	9	DNP	32
Median Income	$35,000	$70,000	$45,000	$39,000
Per Pupil Expenditure	$6,700	$7,500	$10,000	$6,000
Town Population	5,100	7,700	1,700	3,300 (two towns combined)

Participant Stratification

Given that the study was conducted in four schools in Vermont where there is little ethnic and racial diversity, a limitation of our study was the relative ethnic homogeneity of the student population from which we drew. On the other hand, the experiences of those in rural schools are relatively underrepresented in contrast to recent national emphases on urban school settings (e.g., Breitborde, 2002; Carvan, Nolan & Yinger, 2002). We stratified the participants based on several key attributes; 20 students, four from each of fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth grades, represented a wide range of socioeconomic status, grade range, and history of academic achievement and behavior. Gender was equally represented. With this approach, we were able to "select information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry ..."(Patton, 2002, p. 230).

Procedures

Data collection. To access middle schoolers' perceptions of academic engagement, we coupled the ethnographic technique of interviewing with the less utilized approach of participant-produced drawing (Kearney & Hyle, 2003). The interview protocol consisted of four central questions or tasks. We began by asking students, in individual interviews, to describe a "typical day." We then invited the students to draw a learning experience in which they felt engaged, and we discussed the circumstances that surrounded that experience. Third, the students went on to draw a picture of a learning experience in which they were not engaged; again we talked about the conditions of the event. In each case, we modified the use of our terms to describe engagement and lack thereof, based upon the developmental level of the participant. For each drawing, students were

offered graphite or colored pencils, crayons, or markers. Finally, we invited students to consider what they would choose to do with a magic wand, if they could change anything they wanted, about their school experience.

Drawing has long been used in psychology and other fields, including intelligence testing in children (Goodenough, 1926) and as a gauge of cognitive and drawing ability (Golomb, 1992). In contrast, drawing has been utilized very little in research pertaining to education, with relatively few educational researchers using the method (e.g., Bebell, 2001; Chula, 1998; Haney, Russell, Gulek, & Fierros, 1998; Weber & Mitchell, 1995). Testimony to the method's infancy, drawing's absence in the AERA sponsored volume, *Complementary Methods for Research in Education* (Jaeger, 1997) was highlighted by Haney, Russell, and Jackson (1998). Denzin & Lincoln (1998) also disregarded drawing within the chapter on visual methods in their widely utilized publication, *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials*. Even among those who are utilizing student drawing, fewer still join the technique with interview. Much of the drawing research has instead involved quantifying themes within the pictures (e.g., Haney, Russell, Gulek, & Fierros, 1998).

The choice to couple interview with drawing brought at least four methodological strengths. First, the open-ended nature of this approach allowed participant perspective to be paramount, rather than the more common survey approach in which survey items serve as suggestions or prompts. Second, the middle schoolers were able to bring us to specific moments in their schooling history, moments that led to memorable experiences, thus enabling a level of specificity in the data. Third, the postmodern critique of traditional research paradigms asserts that persons who are powerful and established typically are those who interpret schooling while the less powerful and less established are not heard (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Inviting students to draw and then describe their drawings and experiences enabled them to take hold of and lead the interview, thus inviting a shift, small but important, in the typical power differential. Fourth, drawing offered students the occasion to represent their perspectives in a non-verbal manner, an approach that contrasts with the verbal emphasis of most school and research tasks.

We ensured confidentiality by interviewing the students individually in a private space and by providing anonymity through the use of pseudonyms for all individuals and communities. We tape-recorded all interviews and maintained abbreviated notes throughout each interview. To reconnect with these students, we returned for an additional series of interviews in the first two months of the following school year. These interviews were useful opportunities to extend our understanding of students' perceptions.

Data analysis. All 40 interview tapes were transcribed verbatim and coded by both researchers for emergent themes. We met regularly to discuss and refine the codes as an organizational schema developed. We used both verbal and pictorial data to triangulate the students' responses and analyzed the drawings on two concurrent levels. First, they were reviewed for the degree of consistency with interview findings. We looked both for ways in which the drawings supported the interview findings and for ways in which the interview data supported the drawings. We also searched for negative cases, or instances where items in the documents would negate, or at least call into question, the findings from the interviews.

Trustworthiness

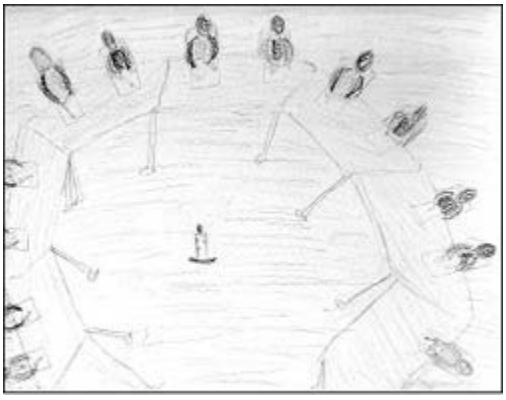
Understanding the ways in which our subjectivity played a role in how we interacted with the participants, as well as with the data, was one step in ensuring greater trustworthiness of our findings. The use of triangulation—concurrence in drawing and interview, concurrence in interview and drawing, and negative instances—was intended to provide trustworthiness. Our sampling technique also strengthened the trustworthiness of our data. Additionally, we benefited from working collaboratively, as we brought two researcher perspectives to the data. "A general prescription has been to pick triangulation sources that have different biases, different strengths, so they can complement one another" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 199). Our diverse experiences as quantitative and qualitative researchers added to the depth of our discussion. We employed member-checking techniques, through the use of follow-up interviews with the participants. Finally, our commitment to thick description resulted in the constant integration of student voices and drawings to illustrate both common themes and disparate findings.

Findings

Our student informants had a great deal to say about their engagement in schools. Like the students in Nicholls and Hazzard's (1993) ethnographic examination of second graders' perceptions, the students in our study, too, were "curriculum theorists and critics of schooling ..." (p. 8). While our qualitative methodology clearly does not permit generalizability, the middle schoolers in our study identified four social dimensions of the classroom as critical influencers of their subsequent academic engagement. Two dimensions were named as enhancing their engagement: community and leadership; and two as detracting from it: distraction and judgment. Although many students spoke and drew of those dimensions as they relate to engagement, we present here one student's drawings per theme, as representative of the theme in the data overall. We do so to provide a more in-depth examination than multiple presentations would allow.

Social Dimensions Enhancing Engagement: Belonging

An authentic community. One often hears reference to a "community of learners" in the field of education. Shelley (all names are pseudonyms chosen by the participants), an eighth grader, revealed through her drawings the important role a sense of community plays in her engagement. Shelley's two pictures are thoughtful renditions of the classrooms in which she was learning.



Time of Engagement

Time of Disengagement

In Shelley's first drawing, students were seated in a circle. All faces and clothing, except hers, were drawn with black crayon because, as she stated, the candle in the middle lit the room only dimly. It was present, she explained, to symbolize the idea in the class that what was said and written there must remain there. She told us that she drew herself with color because, of course, even though she could not see the others, she knew what she was wearing.

> It was like writing class and we had like a candle lit so that they're like reading poems and stuff that we wrote 'cause it was poetry week or something and they're like writing poems and stuff and we had candles lit and it's something that our teacher says so that nothing that's said in the room would go out of the room and we wouldn't tell anybody and stuff.

The circle of students in Shelley's drawing spilled off the paper, but remained closed. Shelley represented here the shared focus of each student and the quiet of the room. The use of a candle invited a sense of ritual to the classroom. This sense of community and the group norm, that nothing would leave the room, contributed to Shelley's feeling that it was safe to take risks. This teacher had created an authentic community in the classroom and, in so doing, revealed to Shelley what it felt like to come together as learners. This academic experience was intensely social, and Shelley perceived it as leading to her academic engagement.

In her second picture, Shelley drew her science class. To represent a time when she was not engaged, Shelley depicted the teacher at the board and herself and her classmates facing in various directions. Shelley explained,

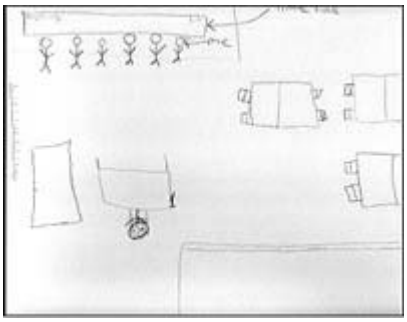
> Some people are like fixing their binders and stuff and going through, I don't know, I just noticed one day, I was just looking around at everybody who was looking different ways and doing something and there was like nobody paying attention.

Scattered about the drawing, each student had something different in his or her hand; the circle was broken. No one looked at anyone else, including the teacher who was depicted as standing with a kind of slouch as she wrote on the board.

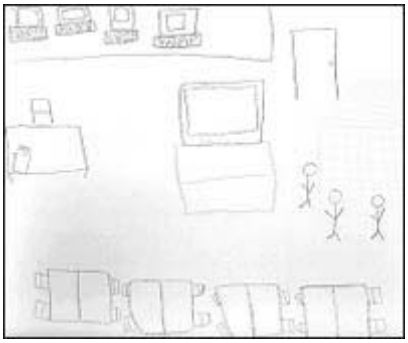
Shelley's two very different compositions portrayed the two very different experiences of engagement. In her "engaged" time, the circle of students and the centered visual focus on the candle symbolized the group norm, the feeling of safety, and the shared purpose. Although Shelley informed us that this was a special week, that "we just did it like that week ... and did it that day and that was it," it was a memorable one in her mind. She and her fellow students came together as writers and poets to share their work in a safe environment. In her second drawing, of her "detached" time, Shelley demonstrated to us the complete lack of sharing and engagement during the science lecture. Here she drew the class with a diagonal composition. And, instead of the repetitive presentation of each focused student of the first drawing, here the students were drawn facing this way and that, with legs and arms going in different directions. Students were separated, each with different objects to fiddle with. In the first, there is unity of purpose, in the second, complete disjunction. The episodes Shelley represented in her drawings and talk are examples of the connection between a sense of community and school life. There she showed how that positive social environment played an academic role. Here the curriculum, a writers' workshop, was merged with the social needs of students, and she perceived that merger as the means for facilitating her ability to focus on poetry writing, the academic work at hand.

For Shelley, clearly, a sense of community and common purpose was central to engagement. Noddings (1992) writes, "Relation, except in very rare cases, precedes any engagement with subject matter" (p. 36). This attention to relation is at the heart of creating classroom spaces where students feel the sense of belonging to an authentic community that Shelley represented in her first picture.

Opportunities to lead. A seemingly confident seventh grader, Laurie also shed light on the social dimension of schooling as she identified her times of engagement and detachment. Her two tales stood in stark contrast to one another.



Time of Engagement



Time of Disengagement

In the first, she showed us a group project. She and her classmates constructed a timeline about the Civil War, depicted with group members and with her at the head. Laurie explained her involvement in the timeline, "Like, me and my friend were like in charge of the whole thing and everybody was involved ... ." When asked how she and her friend came to be in charge of the project, she replied, "The teacher had to pick a couple people and I like being in charge of stuff, so I always volunteer and ... just got picked." Although Laurie enjoyed

many aspects of the task, such as the hands-on nature and the fact that the end result "looked really good; it was bright and colorful," she explained that this experience was primarily satisfying to her because she played a leadership role, an indicator to her that she belonged and mattered. Working with others offered her the opportunity to serve in a leadership capacity and to socialize.

Not surprisingly, then, for her second picture, Laurie chose to depict a time when she felt socially isolated from a learning opportunity as her example of a detached experience. In the drawing, four figures, involved in their work, surround a huge yellow cube, lightly drawn to the left of the figures. The concept of exclusion, of lack of belonging, comes all the more starkly into focus, as Laurie explained that she is not one of the four figures represented.

> We had this project where we had to build a millions cube, well, like, in math and that's what that is, it is a big millions cube made out of paper and I said, 'okay,' and, like, a lot of people had worked on it and stuff and while other people are out at recess and this is kind of something I didn't do, even though my friends were doing this and it's just kind of weird. They just like—didn't really want others ... I don't know, it was just kind of weird and so that's something I never really did.

When asked to describe how she felt, Laurie explained that she felt awkward, "not a part of something." To portray a lack of engagement, Laurie depicted a time when she felt unwelcome to join a project. In contrast to the first picture where the teacher picked her, Laurie had a sense that the others did not want her. Just as Shelley moved from an authentic community of learners to a lack of community, Laurie moved from a position of leadership to a position of exclusion. For Laurie, like Shelly, belonging was central to her engagement.

Social Dimensions Hindering Engagement: The Presence of Others

Distraction. The relational world of classrooms, when well orchestrated, feels like Shelley's authentic community. The opposite, our student informants taught us, results in a climate wherein it is difficult to engage in learning. Ron, a seventh grader, chose to show a recent change in the social climate of his classroom through his two depictions.

Time of Disengagement

Time of Engagement

In the first, Ron described the challenge inherent on his team, as he tried to do his work.

> It was during Life Studies this time ... everybody had to work on like projects and everybody was like looking over stuff and weren't really like supervised or anything and so like people just started fooling around like sitting under tables, running around and books were like thrown everywhere and paper and chairs were knocked over and it was just like a huge mess.

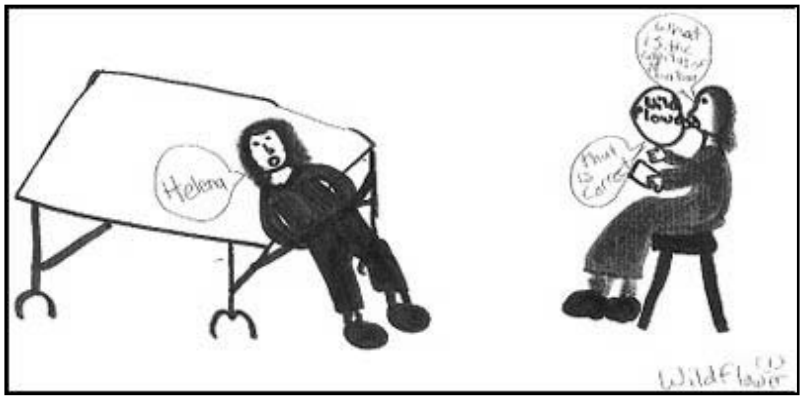
His drawing of this time is an apt representation of the classroom chaos, with the chair on its side, the motion of a student running, and another student sitting on a desk. In it, no teachers are present. He explains how it became so difficult to do his work that he went out into the hall to work on his project, a place where he felt he could focus uninterrupted.

Ron provided his other picture, which contrasts with the first, to depict a time of engagement. In it, he includes a teacher, arms spread wide, and students, seated with a sense of order and focus. Ron eagerly described the team-wide actions taken to improve the classroom climate, this new climate that he illustrates in his drawing.

> ... Some money got stolen from the play ... and like a lot of bad things happened so the teachers decided to like go over this, go over like stuff for a few weeks instead of like literature and stuff and ... that was really like a good learning experience because everybody just like sat down and we did like a project on like how we can improve the environment and stuff like that and everybody was just working and that Mr. M, he just like didn't need to like do anything, he was just walking around and nobody was talking or anything and like fooling around or anything like that ... Everybody actually remembered what like school was all about.

With his words and pictures, Ron depicted the shift in climate, from one where students are "fooling around" to one where "everybody actually remembered what like school was all about ... ." Ron became surrounded by a sense of order and focus, where the students, guided by teachers, came together as a community to improve their own environment. A student who enjoys learning, Ron perceived a shift in the communal knowledge of students, that of knowing the purpose of school. With this shift, Ron perceived an important change in his own engagement. Not only was he a member of a community with a common purpose, he was now in an environment that was conducive to learning. While before, the presence of others served as a distraction, he was now able to focus, and felt empowered by the opportunity to improve their environment.

Peer judgment. Ron described one negative role peers can play in academic engagement: distraction. The judgment of others also emerged as a theme in the data as a negative influencer of engagement. Elkind (1984) writes of the "myth of the imagined audience." While we would agree with the assertion of this phenomenon as myth, we would add that, often, middle school students are subjected to the judgment of peers. Wildflower's perspective extended our understanding of this, as she described her conflicting feelings about being in an upcoming geography contest.



W: ... This was when I found out I was in the Geo Bee.
I: Did you have a special feeling?
W: Yes, I felt very excited but I was also very nervous 'cause I wasn't exactly sure I wanted to be in the Geo Bee.
I: And when you were chosen?
W: I actually got very red in front of my whole class.
I: Did you? How many kids from your class were in the Geo Bee?
W: Four. The most of any class.

I: Really? Wow. And what happened when the actual Geo Bee occurred? Did you do ok?

W: Um. I was one of the first to be disqualified. I was very ... nervous and ... I almost started crying because when I get very nervous I almost always start to cry. And I said to myself, "You can't cry in front of all these people."

Wildflower's self-admonition that she not cry in front of others was a powerful indicator of the emphasis she placed on how others perceived her. This stress was also indicated as she described her interactions at Morning Meeting, a time of day that was designed to create, "the kind of trustworthy space in the classroom where every child's voice becomes important, where learning carries meaning for each child (Wood, 1999, pp. 225-26). In contrast, Wildflower explained,

> ... Sometimes they are just talking with each other about this, about um, the most popular girl in the school and they are not even listening to me and that makes me think like, "Do they even care? They don't even care, so why do I even share?" Because usually the only one who is listening to me when I do share something is the teacher.

Wildflower's belief that the teacher is *"the only one who is listening"* to her served as the antithesis of the community building the Responsive Classroom espouses. Far from the "trustworthy space" Wood described, for Wildflower, the morning meeting was a time when the social aspect of school confined her voice, undermining her self-confidence. Wildflower's question, *"Do they even care?"* is an important one. Both Ron and Wildflower shared words and drawings that illustrated a theme pervasive in our data: these young adolescents perceive that the social dimensions of schooling can negatively impact their engagement in learning.

Discussion and Implications

About student needs, Stevenson (2001) asserted, "Meeting these personal human needs must be a primary goal of middle level schooling" (p. 128). Surely, Shelley and her peers would agree. The students' individual stories were tales of their experience of belonging and not belonging. These glimpses into the social complexities of school serve as powerful reminders of why teachers strive to create community in classrooms. These young people depicted and talked about times of self-confidence and times of felt uncertainty. Laurie's feeling "awkward" and "not a part of something" and Wildflower's certainty that "they don't even care, so why do I even share?" sit in weighty juxtaposition to the candle in the center of Shelley's poetry circle. Shelley and her peers remind us that the conditions through which teachers create such community must be authentic. And they suggest to us that community, affiliation, and belonging are, for these middle schoolers, central to their ultimate academic engagement. Highlighting our awareness of the social dimension of schooling causes us to consider a variety of implications, including an examination of schooling structures and pedagogies that support a sense of belonging and community. Both research and conventional wisdom have suggested that school size, teacher advisory, and service learning can contribute to students' affiliation.

School Size

It has become increasingly clear that the size of an educational institution has a clear impact of student experience. Small schools, in particular those with enrollments of 350 or fewer, are characterized by more trusting environments (Bryk & Schneider, 2002) and offer a strong sense of community and openness toward change (Wasley, 2000). Research also suggests that school size influences student achievement. This relationship is mediated by the effects on teachers; teachers from smaller schools have demonstrated more positive attitudes and students have earned higher achievement scores than their counterparts in larger settings (Lee & Loeb, 2000; Lee & Smith, 1993).

As a means for creating smaller schools, middle grades reform efforts (Carnegie Corporation, 1995; Jackson & Davis, 2000; National Middle School Association, 1995, 2003) have routinely emphasized the importance of creating small communities of learning by promoting the creation of teams. "Creating smaller schools is an important strategy for fostering supportive relationships between teachers and students. In large schools or

small, however, creating teams of teachers and students is a vital part of developing a middle grades learning community" (Jackson & Davis, p. 125). Student sense of belonging is such an overt goal of the teaming initiative, in fact, that it has been used as one criterion against which "highly effective" interdisciplinary teams have been measured (George & Stevenson, 1988). Studies have demonstrated higher student sense of belonging (Arhar, 1994; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989) and increased interracial cooperation (Metz, 1986) among students on teams. Similarly, this school-within-a-school approach has been embraced more recently by secondary schools as well (Schoenlein, 2001; Wasley & Lear, 2001), particularly as schools struggle with the reality of increasing school violence.

Knowing Students Well

In addition to such organizational structures in schools as teaming, many middle schools respond to students' need to belong by attempting to ensure that all students are known well by at least one adult in the building. Thus far, the means toward accomplishing this end in most middle schools has been the development of teacher advisories (NMSA, 2003). In a teacher advisory system, one adult meets with 12 to 15 students on a daily basis, for 10 to 30 minutes. In reality, of course, this practice varies widely, based on building-level support, teacher commitment, and numbers of teachers and students. The time is intended to be spent connecting socially and academically, and enables the adult to serve in an advocate role for those students. According to Maerhoff, (1990), "Being part of a small advisory group that meets twice a day helps all children—even the socially inept—gain a sense of belonging" (p. 507). Ideally, the advisory ensures that no child slips through the cracks of public education; ideally, it enables educators to notice, to address issues so that each student's fit with school is enhanced. The populations of the four schools whose students we interviewed were relatively small (See Table A, page 6). In the one larger school, school staff structured the program into teams with the explicit intent to draw down the size of groups. Thus, compared with many schools in the nation, these Vermont schools do provide many opportunities for students to be known. We were therefore all the more struck by the level of social discomfort students expressed.

Service Learning

In addition to these organizational features of middle schools, there are curricular initiatives that respond to students' social needs. Service learning has emerged as distinct from community service, grounded in clear and intentional links to curriculum and offering opportunities for student reflection (Andrus, 1996; Schine, 1997). When students are engaged in service in situations with real learning, the impact on them and others is significant (Conrad & Hedin, 1991). Notable differences in students' sense of belonging to school and community have been found between high school students who participate in service learning, and those who do not (Perry, 1998).

Conclusion: Honoring Student Experience

As these students have illustrated, attending to the social climate of the classroom is important. In fact, they perceive it as influencing their engagement, and their ability to learn. Grouping students on teams, attending to school size, ensuring all students are well known, and engaging them in meaningful work such as service learning are indeed a good beginning to fostering the type of belonging the students in this study say they require for academic engagement. And, as described earlier, each of these is well represented in the middle school reform literature.

What is routinely less represented in research—and in classroom practice—is the honoring of student experience. While we hear compelling calls for participatory and democratic classrooms (e.g. Beane, 1997), these calls are often drowned out by concerns about standards and high stakes testing. If teachers invite students' to share their schooling expertise, to talk about what works and what does not, they may not only learn what is critical to their students' engagement, but also build the type of community in which students feel heard, valued, and, ultimately, engaged.

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