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Community: An Alternative School Accomplishment

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Introduction

One of my first impressions of alternative schools—and surely one of the reasons they have fascinated me—is the strong sense of community that prevails within them. The effective schools literature familiarized us with the importance of school community, and attempts to generate it are not uncommon now. But when I first began looking at alternative schools, in the 1970s, such a notion was alien to conventional school preoccupations and would probably have been dismissed as irrelevant, if not inappropriate. Yet a sense of something akin to community was one of the first things that struck me about alternative schools—and it became a central feature of what I was soon calling the “magic” of alternatives. It often seemed palpable from the moment one stepped inside the school door—reflected in the sounds and appearance of the place and expressed even more directly in the words and behavior of students and teachers.

I recall my astonishment on one of my first encounters with an alternative school, when a boy stepped up to me in an otherwise empty hall, smiled a greeting, and asked, “Can I help you?” Adults can’t always expect such friendliness from adolescents, and certainly not in schools, and I was amazed. It took me some time to understand such a display of the sort of hospitality with which an adult might greet a

guest. I had first to come to know the genre well enough to be able to say to myself, "Well, why not? He *owns* the place."

Words such as *ownership* and *commitment*, *caring*, *respect*, *trust*, and *family* have all been linked with the idea of community, as have *culture* and *climate* and *ethos*. There have now been several attempts to explore the concept of community directly in its application to schools (Lehman, 1991; Raywid, 1988) and to identify related attributes of schools (Bryk and Driscoll, 1988; Gregory and Smith, 1987). I want, in this chapter, to extend both of those discussions, supplementing the meaning of community as it applies to schools and identifying it in various types of alternative schools.

We might begin by noting that unlike *culture* or *climate*, as these terms have been applied to schools, *community* is not evident in all schools. It can be said that every school has a culture and a climate, be these positive or negative, strong or weak. But not every school has (or is a) community. Thus, *community* is a term denoting an accomplishment, rather than exclusively a descriptive term—and with the exceptions of *culture* and *climate*, all the other terms cited above as frequently associated with community (*caring*, *ownership*, *commitment*, *respect*, *trust*) are also achievement terms: To apply them is to assert that some schools have managed to arrive at them even though others have not.

And just what is the accomplishment? To assert that a school is a community is to suggest that within it one finds genuine interest in and acknowledgment of all the individuals involved by other individuals—students as well as teachers, administrators, and staff. Awareness of and responsiveness to others' happiness or sorrow, growth, accomplishments, and misfortunes is an integral part of daily life in the school that is a community. Such a school is a place where those involved bring their psyches, a place they can be and express themselves and find companionship, understanding, and support. It is thus a place they find attractive: It is *theirs*, not just an institution, but a place in which to live and find meaning. What is more, those involved in such a school community share an awareness and self-consciousness of these characteristics.

But community is not a "seen one, seen 'em all" matter, nor an all-or-nothing proposition. Communities come in varying degrees of expansion, development, and strength, and they can be as varied as the alternative schools that have been so successful in spawning them. The particular type of community a school generates reflects that school's "personality" and culture. Some foster a sense of closeness and interdependence and mutual support, while others pursue that

direction more tentatively, and yet others seem bound extensively by a commitment to the right of each to march to a different drummer. Some alternatives appear to be communities dedicated to the larger public interest—to alleviating sociopolitical ills and transforming their local community—while others are more explicitly attuned to developing the group's immediate members and attending to their situations.

Alternative school communities differ also as to predominant traits, in ways quite parallel to those in which individuals differ: In some, for instance, humor appears a continuing central feature, while compassion has more prominence within another alternative school community, and yet another seems more occupied with individual or civic responsibility.

Alternative School Types

Alternative schools are not, of course, all of a piece. In fact, many of them are explicitly committed to ideas obligating their uniqueness, e.g., ideas like responsiveness to the immediate student population and a commitment to school-to-school diversity. Yet it is possible to discern types. Several years ago I identified three, on the basis of differences in how their students come to be there, what they expect of the alternative, what their teachers expect of them, and the kind of school ambiances that result.

Type I alternatives appear to be the heirs of many of the 1960s and 1970s alternatives, established in response to demands that education be rendered "more humane, more responsive, more challenging, and more compelling for all involved" (Raywid, 1990). Such programs sometimes enroll able and highly accomplished students, distinguished perhaps by a determination to make their schooling a meaningful experience. Sometimes the youngsters attracted are among the highest achievers, with strong leadership ability. For other students, dissatisfaction with previous school experience has limited prior accomplishment. In either event, Type I alternatives are likely to be educationally demanding programs, drawing students across ability and accomplishment levels, biased perhaps in the direction of a willingness among their students to assume more responsibility for their own education.

In contrast, Type II alternatives are programs openly and explicitly designed for the worst of students. They have aptly been called "soft jails" since their students typically are "sentenced" to them, often as one final opportunity before expulsion. In a number of places, it is

understood that those sent to Type II alternatives may be permitted to return to the regular program as a reward for good behavior.

Type III alternative schools are quite different in that they are nonpunitive, but designed for youngsters presenting special needs—for example, students requiring remediation, or in emotional difficulty, or who are pregnant or substance abusers. Given the current interest in preventing the at-risk population from dropping out, Type III alternative programs are today probably multiplying faster than either of the other two varieties.

Now one might reasonably expect the ambiances or general climates among the three types of alternative schools to differ considerably, with the punitive orientation of Type II programs contrasting strongly with the other two. Such differences might in turn be expected to yield and sustain quite different sorts of communities. No one arrives by choice at a Type II alternative program, and to be sent there is something of a disgrace. The expectations as to ambiance following from such circumstances would be completely fulfilled in many Type II alternatives, where one finds a stern, relentless imposition of highly structured behavioral demands. Yet other Type II programs appear rather different. What one often finds is that within them the punitive orientation defining the Type II alternative has given way to a considerably more positive and compassionate stance on the part of its staff. The result is that it becomes in effect a Type III program.

This is sometimes a matter of evolutionary change and sometimes just a matter of the difference between the authorities who have mandated a program and the sorts of people chosen to implement it. In some such programs (though certainly not in all Type II alternatives), a staff may deliberately incline toward a rehabilitation approach in preference to a punitive one. Under such circumstances, the experience of students does not resemble that of prison inmates. Rather, many feel they have been “expelled to a friendlier place,” as one study of such programs expressed it (Gold and Mann, 1984).

In such a situation, the general climate of a Type II alternative may bear a lot of resemblance to that of a Type III program, with a fair amount of support and nurturance extended by the faculty in both situations. The two also share other important features. First, both Type II and Type III alternatives enroll youngsters seen by the regular school as losers. Whether for moral reasons, reasons of limited capacity, or other handicap (personal, financial, familial, or ethnic), these are students whose past performance makes subsequent school success unlikely. Often the youngsters involved have accepted the perception that they are losers and internalized the message. Thus, low self-esteem

and low estimates of their own ability to succeed are shared by a number of the youngsters enrolled in both Type II and Type III alternative schools. This may actually stimulate the forging of strong bonds between them—but it also disposes them to see themselves as a community of losers and one denigrated by others. What is more, like their students, Type III as well as Type II alternative school faculties are inclined to see their charges this way too.

Such an orientation on the part of the teachers involved is likely to assure several far-reaching effects. First, it will very probably depress teacher expectations and hence, student accomplishment. Moreover, it virtually guarantees that teachers will locate the reasons for failure within the students rather than within the school. The consequence of such a premise—often deeply buried and taken for granted—is not only a tolerance of failure but an avoidance of exploring school changes of the only sort of magnitude that could matter: If it is assumed that the problems lie within the students, then changes in school organization and program and practice are not the solution and probably can't matter very much. An evaluation of a massive, multi-million dollar effort to restructure schools for at-risk youngsters—a *failed* effort—recently summarized the result of such an assumption this way: “The most serious limitations of the [failed] interventions was their implicit assumption that the problem was to find ways of altering students rather than the institution” (Wehlage et al., 1992:91).

A final commonality between Type II and Type III alternatives tends to yield similar ambiances and communities in the two. It is perhaps the most crucial difference between Type I communities on the one hand, and Type III on the other. Teachers in the latter are likely to see their charges as weaker than other students in some important way and as needing more help and direction than other youngsters—an orientation disposing them toward a *clinical* posture in the way they treat their charges. However sympathetic and compassionate they may be, their gestalt tends to be professional, rather than communal. It assumes that they, the teachers, remain primarily the professionals engineering the development of their students, rather than first and foremost human beings accompanying and guiding the young in their progress toward competent maturity.

The difference is sufficiently fundamental and pervasive in our society to warrant a bit more detail. Perhaps it can better be displayed in an analogy, shifting the scene from school settings for at-risk youngsters to professional preparation programs. Two sets of recommendations for preparing teachers were identified by one analyst as the contrast between people who saw themselves as “colonizers” of prospective teachers, and

those who saw their role instead as one of inviting would-be teachers into "conversation" (Johnson, 1990). The first orientation calls for imposition justified on the basis of some presumed superiority (power, competence, knowledge), the second for joint examination, discussion, and illumination. The first orientation is a carryover from conventional schools where teachers see themselves as professionals responsible for the enlightenment and development of the immature. The second orientation is more communal in its downplaying of status and power differences in favor of an invitational and collaborative stance.

One crucial difference in the results of the two is that the first approach perpetuates two cultures in the school, adult and student, or professional and client. Even though the adult professionals are kindly and benevolent, they are nevertheless a separate group. The persistence of the two cultures is likely to produce an adversarial situation or at least conflictual occasions. The communitarian orientation, by contrast, does not heavily emphasize generational and knowledge contrasts and is thus less generative of subcultures organized around these differences.

In sum, then, there are likely to be several key differences in the ambiance and communities of the three types of alternative schools: Since the Type II alternative is modeled on jail or reform school, it stands in striking contrast to Types I and III. The student subculture in a Type II alternative may reflect some sort of community, but the adult or official culture is stern and punitive. Both Type I and Type III ambiances appear positive and invitational by contrast. The therapeutic model reflected in Type III programs is considerably more positive than a reform school model, but it is still impositional and leaves intact a dominant adult or "official" school culture on the one hand, and a separate student subculture on the other. Type I alternatives often display a single culture linking the adult and student groups within the schools. When such an accomplishment occurs, it seems to emerge within a context that is invitational, as opposed to clinical and impositional.

Since it is the Type I alternatives, then, that are most likely to arrive at the accomplishment that community represents, much of what follows pertains more to Type I alternatives than to Type II or Type III.

Community

Sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies long ago contrasted the two kinds of social groupings observable in modern society, identifying them as

gemeinschaft communities and *gesellschaft*, which are not really communities at all (Loomis, 1963). The members of *gemeinschaft* communities have emotional ties to one another and are linked by shared values and beliefs, recurring interaction with one another, mutual dependence, and a shared commitment to a particular place—a neighborhood or town or area. What is more, they are conscious of a spiritual bond between.

Gesellschaft groupings, by contrast, have no such feelings of kinship. Tönnies associated *gesellschaft* groupings with the world of business and government, the public world, as opposed to the community groupings of family and friends, and he correctly predicted their dominance in urban society. *Gesellschaft* pseudocommunities are assemblages brought into existence by contract rather than feelings of kinship—for example, the people employed by a corporation or who go to the same resort.

The interactions of *gesellschaft* members are far more superficial and fleeting, and they are largely instrumental—occurring, that is, in order to accomplish particular purposes and essentially limited to such purposes. The separate and individual interests of the parties involved continue to dominate *gesellschaft* interactions, and in the absence of loyalties or sentiments to determine social patterns, rules and contracts and conventions are adopted to maintain the peace.

Charles Cooley, another early sociologist, drew a related distinction in contrasting what he called "primary" and "secondary" associations: primary associations are relationships where the parties' interest in each other is broad, extending across multiple lines of activity (Cooley, 1937). A friend or family member, for example, is interested in an individual as a person—in her past and future, in her work and hobbies and worries and pleasures. Secondary associations, on the other hand, are marked by their limited purposes, and in such relationships—presumed to be temporary—interest is confined to the instrumental purposes bringing the parties together. Thus, the connection between two people who work in the same office, or between shoppers and checkout counter clerks, are secondary associations.

Tönnies and Cooley correctly foresaw that the lives of individuals in industrial societies would consist increasingly of the secondary associations of *gesellschaft* noncommunities. Both thinkers reacted wistfully to the passing of community and its primary associations. At the same time, however, a parallel development was being welcomed and recommended for adoption as the way to organize our burgeoning public life in the interest of both fairness and effectiveness. It was a system designed to assure that individuals were employed by virtue of

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what they knew, not whom they knew or who their fathers were, and that those most knowledgeable made the decisions that workers were held accountable for executing. The name of the system was bureaucracy, and it was urged by reformers of the early twentieth century as the best way to end the corrupting influences of political patronage as well as the best way to assure effective performance and productivity.

It was not long before these developments began to influence schools. During the early years of the current century, there was an extensive effort, particularly within cities, to install the new organizational pattern as the way to operate education. Thus, many reform-minded, forward-looking school officials moved toward bureaucracy. The move had consequences that today are very apparent. For our purposes several of them are crucial. First, the bureaucratic emphasis on appointment by competence brought impersonality as well as fairness. Its insistence on narrow, highly specific role definitions and restrictions brought stability by assuring that school wouldn't fall apart when a key staff member left. But it also brought fragmentation as the educational task was divided up, assigning teachers to different grade levels and subjects, and it reduced the role of individual talent and interest and personality in determining a particular teacher's work. And finally, the recommended shift from a social order determined by loyalty and sentiments and shared assumptions to one controlled by explicit, written rules and regulations was of enormous consequence.

As bureaucracy gradually became the standard organizational structure for schools—in suburban and rural areas that wanted to be part of the reform as well as in urban districts—it determined the way in which teachers would relate to one another. The pattern became that of secondary associations in *gesellschaft* settings. In some places, attempts to apply scientific management to school administration brought similar effects to classrooms and the way they operated.

By and large, however, the transformation of *classrooms* to secondary associations and *gesellschaft* noncommunities occurred indirectly and as a by-product of organizing school employees according to such a pattern. At least initially, bureaucracy was seen as a way of organizing employees—the producers—not the recipients of the services being delivered. Gradually, however, bureaucracy's norms, and the norms of professionalism that began to influence teachers' aspirations and behavior, began to affect the ways teachers related to students and students were expected to relate to one another. It was recognized that young children need personalized environments and nurturance, but it was evidently assumed that they outgrew that fairly quickly. By the time they were twelve and ready for the seventh grade, we put them

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into institutions that virtually guaranteed the depersonalization and essential disconnectedness that are the hallmarks of secondary associations and *gesellschaft*. By assigning each youngster to seven or eight different classrooms each day, each with a different teacher and possibly with different classmates as well, and by assigning each teacher 150 or even more students a day, it was virtually guaranteed that primary associations could not be cultivated and *gemeinschaft* could not develop.

From the vantage point of hindsight, it appears that youngsters were able to tolerate daytimes of *gesellschaft* because there were afternoons and evenings and weekends and holidays of *gemeinschaft*. Human beings, it is widely held, need close association and connection with other human beings (Bronfenbrenner, 1980; Wachtel, 1989). So long as such connection was provided outside of school, youngsters could do without it inside. Mid-century and the changes tied to World War II and its aftermath are generally thought to mark the turning point in that regard. The concentration of the nation's population in metropolitan areas, the decline of the extended family, employment patterns, mobility patterns—all of these conditions led to the decline and disappearance of *gemeinschaft* from the lives of many youngsters. This, say many, makes it doubly important that students experience it in schools.

Now much of this development was evident and being discussed in the 1960s and early 1970s when alternative schools began. Indeed, some who were directly associated with alternative education made it quite explicit. Social commentator and philosopher Paul Goodman produced several books reflecting the themes expressed here. One that he titled *People or Personnel* (1963) focuses precisely on the human effects of bureaucracy, secondary associations, and *gesellschaft*. And he was not alone. The protest against bureaucracy, so familiar a part of the current scene, really began in the 1960s, when a lot of social criticism began to focus on what were called its dehumanizing tendencies. A considerable amount of that criticism was directed explicitly at schools, and one prominent theme of the student protest of the 1960s was precisely the impersonality of large schools and universities. One of the banners of the era, in fact, sarcastically mimicked the message borne on computer cards and proclaimed, "I am a human being. Please do not bend, fold, spindle, or mutilate."

Not surprisingly, then, community became a prominent theme in a number of early alternative schools. Outsiders were sometimes critical of such a preoccupation, and there were charges of a "touchy-feely" ambiance which was both saccharine and wasteful of school time. Whether it was alternatives or critics' minds that changed, such criti-

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cisms have become far more infrequent since the effective schools literature began to emerge.

Beginning in 1979 with the publication of *Fifteen Thousand Hours* (Rutter et al., 1979), research began to indicate that school climate and shared values and consensus as to fundamental direction are centrally important to school effectiveness. As Rutter and his colleagues concluded, "the style and quality of life at school was having a relatively pervasive effect on children's behavior" (Rutter et al., 1979: 183), and hence on their performance and achievement. Such questions led quite naturally to the matter of whether, and what kind of, communities obtained in schools.

Qualities of Alternative School Communities

The communities that seem to thrive in alternative schools appear strikingly different from those of other schools (Erickson, 1989; Erickson et al., 1982). This seems particularly evident in those we have identified as Type I alternatives. Though clearly differing one from another, most seem to share a number of qualities. The following pages attempt to identify those qualities. Subsequently, there is a brief attempt to identify the conditions that produce them.

Respect

One of the most noticeable qualities of the *gemeinschaft* community in alternative schools is that of respect. The degree of respect shown alternative school teachers by their students is not usually found in other schools. It appears based, however, not on respect for the office but for the individual. A teacher, then, must earn the respect of students. A major requirement for doing so appears to be treating *them* with respect.

Alternative school students frequently respond to questions about what is special about their schools by saying that they are treated with respect there—a situation they then often contrast with their previous schools.

Adolescents identify the word *respect* with the word *caring*, explaining a noncaring school as one lacking in respect for its students.

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The two are not synonymous, but respect may be the foundation of caring. As manifested in alternatives, it seems to consist in a willingness (1) to take an individual seriously, and (2) to sustain authentic courtesy in exchanges.

To take another human being seriously is to be willing to hear what she has to say, even if her position and agenda are at odds with one's own. It is also to reflect some degree of concern with that individual's current psychological state—how she perceives her current situation and how she feels about it. This calls for an openness to what is presently on a youngster's mind and a receptivity to hearing her present understanding of a problem or situation that are not always present in teacher interactions with students. Respect does not require that a youngster's wishes prevail. It does mean that her wishes must be held germane, important, and deserving to be heard.

Respect also demands sustained and authentic courtesy, which is more than a matter of superficial civility. It requires foregoing that sort of rank-pulling that enables teachers, however subtly, to convey doubts about a student's integrity, capacity, goodwill, or essential decency. When adults interact this way with their own peers, they recognize that they are acting discourteously. To do so with students is to take advantage of an unequal power distribution: the student's situation is such that a response in kind represents impertinence and insubordination. Thus, he is put in a position where he must choose between punishable behavior and his own dignity. Authentic courtesy would never demand such a choice. The acknowledgment and preservation intact of a student's dignity, under all circumstances, is what youngsters appear to mean by respect.

Joe Nathan, a longtime alternative school teacher before becoming a national spokesman for school choice, dramatizes the message with a story he tells frequently about a youngster named David who responded to a teacher's collaring and shouted, nose-to-nose demands that he remove his hat by leveling the teacher. According to Joe, once enrolled in an alternative school where he was treated differently, David became a model citizen.

Caring

The quality of caring is also ubiquitous in alternative schools. It is related to but differs from respect. Whereas no teacher who denies students respect is ever likely to be known as a caring teacher, caring

goes further and requires more. Respect is something extended to everybody, as due all, and it is passive, a quality of the response made to youngsters' words and behavior. Caring differs: it is both particularistic and proactive. It is particularistic in that it is deliberately extended *differentially* to people, specifically acknowledging and addressing their uniqueness, and it is proactive rather than expressed only as a response. To care is to reach out, to initiate positive interaction rather than waiting for the other to move. This kind of recognition of children as individuals and reaching out to their particularity are prominent in what youngsters seem to mean as they speak of teachers who care. It goes without saying, of course, that the message conveyed in reaching out is of positive affect—support, approval, appreciation, regard, admiration, concern, fondness. Personal interactions that convey caring are abundant in alternative schools.

One sort of manifestation can be seen in a recent issue of one alternative school's newsletter. The author—the school's director—describes a set of skills taught to students and recommends them for parents also. They relate to what he calls "active listening," which consists of several components: focusing, as to eye contact, body language, responses; drawing out, which consists of showing we are tuned in by encouraging, questioning, restating; and acceptance, or "trying to show the speaker that we really want to understand even if we don't agree. . . . We want to walk in his or her shoes, feel what the person feels, experience the world that the speaker inhabits" (Abbott, 1992). The message details quite a sound implementation plan for what Nel Noddings calls "engagement" and identifies as a hallmark of caring in her well-known work (1984).

Caring also manifests itself in the extent to which alternative schools manage to personalize learning and other activities that are often handled in quite impersonal ways. For instance, at the graduation ceremonies of one alternative school, each candidate is presented individually by his or her advisor, who describes something of the talents and accomplishments of that individual. At another school, each graduate is presented by a fellow student, who offers a brief statement about the student before presenting a diploma. Atypical as they may appear, such practices are not unusual in schools where caring is valued as something to be taught and learned. Alternative schools, remember, are *gemeinschaft* communities that have deliberately rejected the impersonality of large bureaucratic institutions. The result is that they have built in the practices and arrangements which make possible the nurturance and expression of caring.

Inclusiveness

A third quality of alternative school communities is inclusiveness. Alternatives are not cliquish, and in fact there are continual attempts to make sure each participant is drawn into the circle and none are allowed to remain outsiders. It is difficult for any individual to remain on the fringes, either physically or psychically, since invitations will be proffered and concern expressed about hangers back. The carefully nurtured sense of responsibility for one another makes it not only permissible but obligatory for each individual to reach out to fellow members of the community if any appear in difficulty.

Such bonds are not too extraordinary among youngsters, especially among teenagers. And research suggests that among some groups of teachers, the ties of primary associations are evident—particularly in private schools, and more often in small public elementary schools than in high schools. But given the chasm typically separating adults and adolescents, what is somewhat unique is a communal inclusiveness that incorporates both staff and students. James Coleman noted some years ago that schools typically have at least two cultures: the adult culture of the staff that is the school's official culture, and the student subculture which usually consists of beliefs and values quite foreign to those of the official school culture (Coleman, 1961). In fact, the subculture typically stands in adversarial relation to the adult culture and can oppose it at virtually every turn. The unusual thing about alternative schools is not that the adult and student cultures are harmonious and compatible but that there appears to be only a single culture. That is, the adults have managed to persuade the youngsters of the veracity of their assumptions and the worth of their values. Thus, fundamental disagreements are fewer, and conflicts rarely find the teachers pitted against the students. When struggles occur, the alignments are otherwise and hence less likely to endure than adult-student splits might prove.

Such coherence is no accident, and it emerges from a variety of arrangements and practices. For instance, the usual physical divisions between staff and students are not part of most alternative schools. There is typically no separate teachers' lunchroom nor teachers' lounge, and teachers and students relax together and eat together as well as work together. There is often no separate teachers' meeting room and no prohibition against students sitting in on teachers' meetings. Although it may be rare for any students to endure a full meeting, being in the room for parts of one—or moving in and out of the room

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while the meeting is taking place—is a common occurrence. There is, in short, a pervasive tendency toward inclusion in preference to the exclusion of anyone, extending to groups as well as to individuals and manifested in alternative schools through various arrangements and practices.

Trust

Yet another prominent quality of alternative school communities is trust. Members of the community trust one another and are thus willing to disclose themselves and their work to their colleagues to a degree that appears extraordinary. The trust walks and rappelling that organizational developers use with adults as a means of team building are activities that many alternatives sponsor for their students. They are both symbol of and metaphor for the kind of mutual trust that is engendered as one individual quite explicitly places his or her physical safety in the hands of another.

To cite two examples from Urban Academy, an alternative school in New York: Not long ago, I watched two teachers vie with one another in a faculty meeting to describe the new courses they were teaching (time preventing both of them from doing so on that afternoon). The contest appeared entirely friendly and ended quickly when one deferred to the other, but the remarkable thing was that this was something both really wanted to do. Elsewhere, the presentations would have occurred only if required, or perhaps have been perfunctory or truncated in response to the political risk involved or the criticism that could ensue or the narrowed prerogatives that could come from exposure. But when questioned separately afterward, both of the teachers who had wanted to describe their work reported that they wanted to do so because they fully expected the occasion to yield them important, highly valuable feedback. Such an expectation suggests several kinds of trust: certainly in the goodwill and general supportiveness of colleagues and also in their professional competence and capacity to be of assistance. But it also suggests a different sort of trust: in the use of power and authority in such fashion as to attach minimal risks to personal exposure. Thus, exposure is far more likely to yield benefits than high costs.

A second example suggests how a somewhat different kind of trust is sustained, and why students come to understand that the school is a place where they and their interests will be protected if need be. I

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was surprised one day at Urban Academy to hear Herb, the director, summon a student from the hall in uncharacteristically angry tones. There followed a brief exchange in which Herb was obviously heated and issuing orders. Afterward, he told me that the boy had passed another calling him a “Goddam faggot,” not heatedly or in anger, but with the casual contempt adolescents sometimes display. Herb was not disturbed by the swearing—accepted as a fairly standard feature of adolescent speech—but the “faggot” incensed him. He told the boy, “Look, this is a small group and all of us are aware of others’ sexual preferences—and you are not going to taunt him with that any more than we would let you sneer at him for being fat or slow or Jewish or anything else that may happen to bug you.” The taunter had walked away without responding, and it was impossible to assess the effect of Herb’s obviously angry statement. The boy could have no doubts, however, about the school’s commitment to maintaining an environment in which one person could trust another.

Empowerment

A fifth quality common to the community found in Type I alternative schools is a sense of empowerment or potency within the school. Interestingly, even in alternatives that their teachers describe as rather highly structured, students sometimes report a strong sense of efficacy and empowerment. Students feel that they will be taken seriously and that their feelings count, since there will be a serious attempt to come to grips with their concerns. Given the widely shared conviction in many schools that student desires are considered irrelevant, this is a considerable accomplishment. How does it happen?

Many of the early alternatives sought to empower students by fashioning themselves as participatory democracies in which all members of the school community had a direct voice in decision making and voted on issues. This town meeting form of empowerment proved time-consuming, and it sometimes failed when particular youngsters consistently proved influential by virtue of fluency, sheer tenacity, or otherwise, while others did not. Larger schools sometimes attempted empowerment through the machinery of representative democracy instead, but this arrangement inevitably leaves the bulk of the student body as noninvolved nonparticipants. Both political models satisfied some people that enfranchisement does not assure empowerment, because to have a vote is not necessarily to command very much influence.

Thus, some alternatives abandoned a political model of decision making altogether, in favor of one that is more reflective of *gemeinschaft*. The result was to look less to formal machinery as a guarantee for empowering each member of the community and more to other ways of doing so. One such way is to seek genuine agreement on major issues to be resolved. This is often pursued by examining such an issue in groupings of various sizes and compositions before the matter comes up for all-school consideration. This is the procedure at University Heights High School, Bronx, New York, where all parties agree there has been only one instance in the school's six-year history when the principal has overridden a consensual decision reached by students and staff.

Another way is to simply invite decision making by those who care enough to remain involved. This is the pattern of the Village School in Great Neck, New York, where decisions are made in weekly lunchtime sessions attended by all members of the community who wish to come, teachers as well as students. Those entitled to vote consist of all who attended the immediately previous meeting. Over the years, the school has found that individual patterns of participation shift according to the issues being discussed. It is an arrangement less conducive to the emergence of a continuing group of influentials than are participatory or representative governments. An arrangement favoring a fluid and self-determining group of decision makers is one way of respecting the concerns of community members, who may very well feel strongly about one issue and want to be heard and to vote on it, while not being as moved to do so on another set of issues.

A positive feature of this and other empowerment measures that appear more *gemeinschaft* than *gesellschaft* is that they provide a way to respond to the intensity of feelings on an issue. In allotting one vote per person, a democratic voting system ignores whether a vote is registered with strong or weak conviction or whether one is cast casually or even in ignorance. *Gemeinschaft* systems are likely in one way or another to register that.

In other programs, it is not specific decision-making procedures at all that seem to account for the sense of empowerment on the part of students, teachers, and even parents: it is the conviction that the nature of the community assures everyone a hearing and the ability to affect school events and arrangements. Such a situation obviously depends on assumptions as to the goodwill of other community members. It reflects confidence that if one cares enough to speak, one will be heard, and that if one's caring is intense, that will somehow be reflected or accommodated in the decisions which ensue.

Commitment

One of the most immediately evident qualities of alternative schools is the commitment of their constituents. Students in alternatives identify strongly with other members of the school community. They are bonded both to teachers and schoolmates. Students commonly liken their schools to "family" in describing relationship patterns. Some analysts have suggested that a "membership" metaphor better captures the intensity of the ties (Graham, 1980). They find it the sort of attachment ordinarily reserved for a group enthusiastically chosen and held a prized association.

A number of the people who have written about alternative schools have found this sort of attachment to be one of their most striking features. It is first an attachment to people, to teachers and friends, and it is an attachment to this particular school. It is also an attachment to what their school stands for. Thus, when the program stresses the value of knowledge and learning, this is likely to be internalized. Quite commonly, youngsters who have previously been doubtful prospects for high school graduation commit themselves to college as well. It is the quality of commitment that may explain why alternatives students thus often have college attendance rates surpassing those of their districts.

Both students and teachers are expected to genuinely invest themselves in the school. While conventional schools focus on behavioral conformity, alternatives seem far more concerned with internalization of their norms and values. They are also more actively concerned about the involvement and engagement of all. Thus "in-school dropouts"—the disengaged who are physically present but absent in mind and heart—are a relatively rare phenomenon in alternative schools.

"Commitment is experienced," asserts one analysis, "as a partisan, affective attachment to the goals and values of an organization, to one's role in relation to goals and values, and to the organization for its own sake, apart from its purely instrumental worth" (Buchanan, quoted in Firestone and Rosenblum, 1988: 3). This sort of response from staff and students describes the situation of a surprising number of alternatives: members of the entire school community personally take on the school's mission and values, see themselves not only as pursuers of those values but as obligated to help others reach them as well, and are strongly attached to the school as valuable in itself, not just as a means to a diploma or a job.

Why are youngsters so drawn to alternative schools? What is it they find so attractive about them? My guess as to the most magnetic feature

is that a certain people-centeredness looms large in alternatives. This accords with the interests of youngsters of all ages—particularly adolescents—and it has the effect of enabling them to come to know and accept themselves. The person-centeredness is manifested in various ways. In the first place, teachers focus on it. A national survey of alternative school staff found that sixty-three percent identify the nature of the personal relationships generated to be the single most distinctive feature of their schools—more important than teaching strategies or curriculum or activities (Raywid, 1982). It is this emphasis and the way it is played out that account, I suspect, for a number of the other qualities identified here (caring, respect, inclusiveness, trust, empowerment). The person-centeredness of the school not only emphasizes the value of each and every individual—something most schools rarely, if ever, undertake to do with any explicitness—but it helps each one to recognize worth and potential within herself. Alternatives are likely to make self-study an explicit part of the curriculum. So self-preoccupation is not only encouraged in alternative schools, the self becomes an object of inquiry. And the development of self is pursued in such direct ways as leadership training or human relations skills acquisition, along with more conventional fare.

Building Community

These six qualities—respect, caring, inclusiveness, trust, empowerment, and commitment—appear to be the major qualities defining the communities so apparent in alternative schools. There are numerous ways in which alternatives seek to build and sustain such community. One has just been mentioned: the inclusion of self-study as part of the curriculum. It is not always a separate course—many alternatives make it part of advisory or family group discussions—but the deliberate study of oneself, one's problems and attitudes and capacities and values and assumptions is undertaken in one school setting or another, alongside, and in interaction with, peers who are simultaneously studying *themselves*.

Early in my study of alternative schools, I asked a teacher at one of them whether the self-study materials his group was working on were primarily a matter of individual self-development or of community building. He replied thoughtfully that it would be hard to serve one purpose without the other. Actually, it is not hard to envision circumstances that would attempt to do so, since such circumstances

are not uncommon in conventional schools. But it was accurately reflective of his school that the two purposes were always conjoined.

The advisories or family groups mentioned above are important parts of virtually all alternatives large enough for them to be relevant. Such groups place youngsters with a particular teacher in a group where the individual will remain throughout her years in the school. The group becomes the home base or primary point of identification for the student, and the only permanent one, since class membership is short-term. The advisor, who in many schools is selected by the student, functions as teacher, parent, confidant, liaison between child and school and school and home, and if needed as an advocate for the youngster in either setting. The advisor is also, as someone has said, "The Expert" on each of his advisees. Such knowledge, and the ability to function in these several capacities in relation to a student, cannot emerge from minimal contact or formal association alone. Advisories cannot be mere homerooms. In some alternatives they meet daily, for as long as an hour. Not uncommonly, in order to permit small advisory groupings, administrators and staff, as well as teachers, serve as advisors.

The size of these groups, their longevity, and the way they are composed and function all make for a tightly knit community among advisory members. But genuine community is also sought *across* advisories to unify the whole school. If the total student body is large enough for advisories (e.g., beyond forty or fifty), then schoolwide community cannot be pursued in the same way that community is built within the advisory. In many alternatives, it is created through weekly all-school town meetings or exchange sessions. Retreats are used by many alternatives, often with a two- or three-day weekend retreat occurring soon after school opening in the fall, and another in the spring.

A number of alternatives have created ritual celebrations that also serve as community builders, for example, the annual Egg Drop at the Metropolitan Learning Center in Portland, Oregon, where students attempt to devise containers and devices enabling them to drop a raw egg undamaged from the school roof to the playground. Some alternatives have annual events requiring schoolwide assistance and collaboration, such as the Children's Day sponsored annually by the Village School in Great Neck, New York, for all the young children of the town. Virtually all of the alternative school's students contribute to the occasion as mimes or clowns or booth operators or game directors or activity operators.

The director of one well known alternative says that in addition to

such annual events, alternative schools need a really major all-school project about every third year (Lehman, 1991). His school, the Alternative Community School in Ithaca, New York, recently constructed a "Yurt Retreat Center," a twenty-four-foot structure. Teachers, students, and parents spent many hours together working on the project. It was a venture Lehman describes as "building community by building a community building" (Lehman, 1991: 4).

A rather different kind of way in which community is maintained in alternative schools is through the deliberate cultivation of a social order built more on norms and values than on formal rules and regulations. This, of course, is a lot more demanding and time-consuming than simply announcing rules or disseminating written copies. It requires a lot more contact for inducting newcomers and enabling them to learn the school's customs and traditions. It is a move away from formal organization and in the direction of social control through less formal means, and thus it is a move toward *gemeinschaft* regulation in preference to the legal and contractual control mechanisms of *gesellschaft*. The informality does not signal a shift from rules to no rules, but rather a difference in the sources of social control. For adolescents, the norms of a *gemeinschaft* community can prove far more binding than the regulations imposed by a *gesellschaft* organization. The *gemeinschaft* approach also has the advantage of stimulating the internalization of behavioral rules. Since this is what adult self-control and self-direction are presumably about, the advantage is not minor.

As all of this attests, the strong communities found in alternative schools are no accident. The attempt to build and sustain them is reflected in the school's organizational structure, in its curriculum, in the way time is allocated within the school, and in the way teachers and students encounter and interact with one another and the array of settings in which they do so. But it is not just in these or other particular structures and arrangements that community is built and sustained in alternative schools. Perhaps most fundamentally, what has been called a humane and collaborative orientation, as opposed to a custodial and impositional one, pervades everything that goes on in the school. There is a sustained effort to make education a conjoint undertaking, rather than something one party forces on the other.

Even disciplinary situations reflect such commitment and priorities. At Central Park East Secondary School, where the overarching school theme is the cultivation of five "habits of mind," youngsters sent to the office for disciplinary reasons are treated first as learners rather than as candidates for punishment.

When those "naughty" kids appear in our office the first thing we ask them to do is sit down and write for us. We ask them to tell us what happened from two different viewpoints, to give us some information (evidence), and then explain what they could have . . . done differently. The latter request is an effort to help students see patterns and connections between their behavior and the things that happen to them. It's using our "third" Habit of Mind. (Meier, 1991: 2)

In this way, perpetrators must bring to bear three of the habits of mind the school seeks to inculcate in trying to understand and explain their difficulties. This is the first consideration, not punishing an offender. Thus, the quest for genuine community—and the sustaining of the conditions that make it possible—remain a pervasive consideration in virtually all that occurs.

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