Critical Dimensions of the Caring Culture of an Urban Middle School, 6(3)

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine several operational arenas that functioned as organizational vehicles for the expression of a school's caring culture. Data from interviews with nineteen teachers, four administrators, and eight professional staff members, and participant observations indicated that the principal was a vital force in creating and sustaining a caring culture at this school. In addition to the administration, three other areas of school functioning helped sustain the caring culture at this middle school: mission and goals, curriculum and instruction, and structures. However, although the school's stakeholders had made strides in developing a culture of caring at their school, future efforts needed to focus, especially, on including students and their parents as important contributors to such an endeavor.

Introduction

Our understanding of the concept of caring is illusive, in part because it appears in so many contexts. Caring is a broad concept often used to denote a wide range of attitudes and behaviors. In connection with moral development, caring is examined as an orientation for moral reasoning (Noddings, 1984; Perry, 1996a). Caring is also used as a synonym of other concepts such as prosocial behavior (a group of behaviors oriented toward caring), empathy (ability to understand other's perspectives), helping (a behavioral manifestation of caring), and compassion (an attitude or value) (Eisenberg, 1992). Noddings (1984, 1992) posits that caring is a receptivity to the needs of others. Thus, caring is a "way of being in relation" (Noddings 1984, p. 17). A caring relationship involves a "feeling with" which Noddings calls "engrossment," a temporary state in which the "one-caring" receives the "cared-for" into her/himself and sees and feels with the other (p. 30).

Even though such institutions as church and family have traditionally been agencies for developing caring behavior and attitudes in youth, schools are increasingly viewed as places to develop and nurture an ethic of care (Chaskin & Rauner, 1995; Kohn 1991; Noblit, Rogers, & McCadden, 1995; Noddings, 1992, 1995; Perry, 1996a). Noddings (1995) points out that "we should want more from our educational efforts than adequate academic achievement and that we will not achieve even [this] meager success unless our children believe that they themselves are cared for and learn to care for others" (p. 675). Schools are ideal settings in which to develop caring communities around an ethic of care because caring occurs in social contexts. Schools in which an ethic of care is evident are often described as "community" and "family" and focus on responsibilities and relationships, instead of on rights and rules (Kratzer, 1996; Lewis, Schaps, & Watson, 1996; Newberg, 1995; Sergiovanni, 1994; Sickle & Spector, 1996; Tyree, Vance, & McJunkin, 1997).

Although caring is a definite expectation of schools, there is also an expectation that schools primarily function as places of learning, which may lead to pressures and constraints that inhibit the expression of caring (Noblit et al., 1995). However, research suggests that effective schools foster high degrees of caring and achievement (Battistich & Hom, 1997; Bennett, 1998; Davenport, Jaeger, & Lauritzen, 1997; Green, 1997; Noblit, 1993; Peterson & Deal, 1998). Students' voices in several studies (Bosworth, 1995; Ferreira & Bosworth, 2001; Pink 1987; Sickle & Spector, 1996; Wentzel, 1997) echo the expectation and hope for caring schools. These youths defined caring teachers as those who are warm and genuinely interested in students. But caring teachers do not work in a vacuum; they are an integral part of the school culture, which may or may not reflect a pervasive ethic of caring.

To understand the impediments to and dynamics of caring in schools requires an inquiry not only into the caring behavior of individuals but also into the culture of schools. Caring is best understood, as Noddings (1984) suggests, as an ethic rather than just a variable in the equation of effective schools. Although the positive effects of caring on educational outcomes have been documented, there is little research on the ethic of caring as part of school culture. This paper explores critical areas of school functioning and how they contribute to the caring culture of an urban middle school.

Theoretical Framework

Because schools are social organizations, the study of school culture has developed to further understand the complex social phenomena of life in school. Schein (1992) defines culture as "the deeper level of basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of an organization, that operate unconsciously, and that define in a basic 'taken-for-granted' fashion an organization's view of itself and its environment" (p. 6). Likewise, Owens, and Steinhoff (1989) define culture as "the shared philosophies, ideologies, values, assumptions, beliefs, expectations, attitudes, and norms that knit a community together" (p. 11).

Much of the culture of schools and other institutions is also created from the attitudes, values, and interactions of the stakeholders in them. These attitudes, values, and interactions are shaped to some extent by the policies, decisions, structures, and relations through which they are mediated. Thus, culture is re-created in the activities of people who regularly interact over time. As a result, culture is a social construction. This is a hopeful point in that, if human beings have created culture, they also possess the power to recreate or direct it towards favorable outcomes. This is the work of much research on administrative leadership (Beare, Caldwell, & Millikan, 1989; Bennett, 1998; Deal 1987; MacGilchrist, Mortimore, Savage, & Beresford, 1995; Peterson & Deal, 1998; Sergiovanni, 1984, 1994).

Research on effective schools indicates that caring is a common factor associated with effective, or "high confidence" schools (Battistich, Solomon, Kim, & Watson, 1995; Bennett, 1998; Green, 1997; Lewis et al., 1996; Mitchell, 1990; Shann, 1990). In a study examining what distinguished higher and lower achieving schools, Shann (1990) found that "an ethic of caring made the difference. It permeated all of the data collected from students, teachers, and principals" (p. 215). This ethic of caring was expressed in co-operation among students and collegiality among teachers.

Caring seems to permeate the culture of a school through connectedness and commitment (Cabello & Terrell, 1994; Lewis et al., 1996). Connectedness refers to the ways in which the actors in a school are drawn together and are able to relate. An emphasis on drawing connections between people and between people and their purpose in school (curriculum) means creating opportunities for such connections to be forged (Noblit et al., 1995; Noddings, 1995).

Commitment is closely akin to connectedness in that close connections foster commitment. Commitment may be manifested in a number of ways, but mostly in the form of a clear and shared sense of purpose among teachers, students, and administrators (Bennett, 1998; Cuckle, Broadhead, Hodgson, & Dunford, 1998; Peterson & Deal, 1998). The literature has shown that fostering commitment is an integral part of effective school cultures. Collaboration and collegiality all foster a sense of commitment (Cuckle et al., 1998; Peterson & Deal, 1998; Prestine, 1993; Scribner, Cockrell, Cockrell, & Valentine, 1999).

Although there is little specific research on the culture of schools in terms of caring, the existing research indicates an important link between the culture of schools and the ethic of caring (Battistich et al., 1995; Noblit, 1993; Noblit et al., 1995; Schaps, Battistich, & Solomon, 1997). Some literature points to the impediments to caring in the context of schools suggesting that there are aspects of the culture of schools that inhibit the establishment of a caring ethic (Noblit, 1993; Schaps et al., 1997; Peterson & Deal, 1998). One of the impediments to the development of an ethic of caring in schools was identified by Noblit (1993) as the lack of a language of caring. However, from the research on effective schools, it seems that an ethic of caring is fostered by developing the culture through a number of

strategies of which speaking of caring is only one. Thus, an examination of how caring is integral to the culture of effective schools sheds light on what it means for a school to have a pervasive ethic of caring and on the significance of this ethic for all individuals who participate in the effort to enjoy and benefit from life in school.

Method

The study took place in a middle school in a large urban area of a Midwestern state. For the purpose of this study, we called it Urban Middle School. At the time of the study, this school had not passed state standards and was on state probation. The school drew its seventh- and eighth-grade students mainly from the neighborhood around it. The local neighborhood was one of poverty (over ninety per cent of the students at the school qualified for free or reduced-cost lunch). Of the 800 students who attended the school, fifty-one per cent were African American and forty-eight per cent European American. The school was organized into academic teams (or "houses" as they were know at Urban) in which a group of four or five teachers (English, mathematics, science, and social studies), worked with 130 to 140 students.

Data Collection and Analysis

Two major sources of data were used in this study: field notes from participant observations and interviews. Print material collected at the school supplemented the data.

Interviews. A total of nineteen teachers, four administrators, and eight professional staff members were interviewed. Of these, twenty-one were female (eighteen European American and three African American) and ten were male (six European American and four African American). The semi-structured interviews focused around general areas of school functioning such as goals and purposes, administration and leadership, curriculum and instruction, discipline, and structures, and the extent to which these areas reflected a caring culture. Each interview was audiotaped and lasted forty-five to sixty minutes.

Participant observations. In order to gain a full understanding of the school's culture, a team of two researchers visited the school each week, for a period of five months, taking extensive field notes from observations of classrooms, team meetings, cafeteria, hallways, offices, committee meetings, and extracurricular activities. In addition, we collected descriptive materials throughout the course of the study and took photographs of hallway and classroom displays.

Data analysis. The purpose of the analysis was to identify themes or issues (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994) around operational arenas that had been previously identified as vehicles for expressing a school's culture (Deal & Peterson, 1994; Owens & Steinhoff, 1989; Schein, 1992). After the interview tapes were transcribed, the transcripts from the interviews and field notes were read several times to identify regularities and patterns, which were used to develop coding categories (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) that represented positive elements of the school's caring culture.

Findings

We identified five operational arenas that functioned as organizational vehicles for the expression of the school's culture: Mission and Goals, Administration, Curriculum and Instruction, Discipline, and Structures. Four of these (Mission and Goals, Administration, Curriculum and Instruction, and Structures) contributed to the development of a caring culture as a result of changes made in response to a middle school philosophy. Although the new discipline policy seemed more consistent with a middle school philosophy, inconsistencies in its implementation across teams limited its contribution to the development of a culture of caring in the school.

Mission and Goals

In a general sense, the overarching purposes of Urban Middle School were expressed in its mission statement, which was on display in the foyer of the school:

The staff, teachers, parents, and community of [Urban Middle School] are committed to developing high student self-esteem through an educational experience, which promotes academic, emotional, social, and physical growth.

Most, if not all, of the adults we interviewed were conscious of the school's mission and a few used the word "vision" to express their understanding. We also asked them what were the most important goals of the school. Three categories of goals were most prominent: the school's environment for learning, academics, and personal and social goals. While identifying goals for the school's environment, one teacher described it as "a comfortable place for children where learning can take place." Later, the same teacher described it as a "loving, nurturing, caring environment." Another teacher described the goal as "an environment where all of the students would have the availability of the learning process." One administrator's goal was "to change the culture of the school" so that it would be a place where "children can learn."

Urban's clearest academic goals were to improve the essential skills and to raise the state test scores of its students. Most of the emphasis was on reading, writing, and computing. One teacher expressed these goals in the following manner:

It would be very good if all our students went to college. But by the same token, it is more important than algebra that my students know how to do fractions, percentages and decimals because those are functional math skills that you use in the day-to-day.
Other academic goals were likely to be cast in general terms as: "to educate kids" or "to help children develop in all areas," or "to make sure as many children as possible are successful." One teacher mentioned "teaching academic subjects" and others indicated specific subjects such as, mathematics, and social studies.

Many of our respondents also mentioned social and personal goals, perhaps because they felt this was an area of greatest student need. As one teacher pointed out, "You have to talk to people if you rent a house" or "live in society." Another one added that, "learning to work with people is important" as well as "having feelings for each other." Another teacher said that students "have a hard time coping with anger and I feel that if we can help them learn how to cope with their anger, we're giving them a lot." Other social goals included "preparing them to be responsible citizens," helping them to "respect each other," and "caring about the feelings of others."

"Self confidence," "self-esteem," and "respect for themselves" were three ways of expressing personal goals, but many adults stated such basic goals as food, clothing, eyeglasses, medical treatment, and a safe physical environment. As one teacher put it, "we try to focus on individual students."

Improved attendance was a goal that was mentioned by several people. Teachers and administrators agreed that regular attendance was important if children were going to have opportunities to learn. Poor attendance had been one of the primary reasons for failing the accreditation review. Not only was attendance mentioned as a goal, several teachers felt good about the progress that was being made toward that goal. According to them attendance had improved from about seventy-nine per cent to ninety-four per cent.

When we asked teachers how they knew these goals were important for the school, they responded: "we talk about them in meetings," or "we are sent to workshops to incorporate them in our teaching," or "the principal keeps them in front of us." While most felt that a majority of the teachers agreed with these goals, there was general agreement that students were receiving mixed messages from parents, from a small minority of the teachers, and from all teachers in moments of frustration or stress.

Urban's Administration

The faculty and staff at Urban viewed the administrative team (the principal, two assistant principals, and an administrative intern) as a cohesive unit that modeled what was expected of the staff. One teacher explained the importance of the administration in setting the tone for the school:

If they want to model that the building has open communication, that students are cared for, that this is a safe environment, and that there is nothing we can't talk about, then that has to be modeled. I think for the most part it is. The principal, who had been in the school less than three years, had made a tremendous difference. According to teachers and others, the principal was a person they genuinely admired. She was called "marvelous," a "quality person," a "heroine," a "classy professional," a person "who models caring," an "overachiever," a "super leader." One person called her "a mother, a father, a leader, a nurse" and added "she covers about everything." Another described her as "the best thing that ever happened to this school."

Teachers and staff acknowledged her personal qualities and the leadership she brought to the school. "I've been in systems where you don't have any leadership whereas this principal does exhibit a lot of leadership," said one teacher. Leadership included "being organized at faculty meetings," "addressing problems, and looking for solutions," "setting high expectations," and "being a straight talker;" "saying things directly;" "not beat around the bush." When asked what made the school a caring school, one teacher responded, "the leadership. You can't be any better than your leadership. I think the principal sets an excellent example of caring."

Teachers felt supported by the administration. That support began with the recognition that all of the adults in the school were there to serve the needs of children. While not all interpreted these needs always in the same way, teachers had a sense of "real improvement," that the school had "gone forward," in important ways. However, the administration's focus on children and caring was criticized by a few teachers who felt the caring got in the way of appropriate discipline for students.

Middle School Philosophy

Since the new principal had arrived three years before, there was a distinct movement toward a middle school philosophy. The school was still called a junior high school, but many of its practices in teaming, curriculum, and instruction, and in discipline, were geared toward the unique needs of adolescents rather than the subject matter focus of the high school. There was a good fit between a middle school philosophy, which emphasized the social and emotional turmoil of adolescence, and a caring school culture. The first expects, perhaps even requires, the second for significant growth and development. Although the majority of teachers favored this direction, a small minority opposed it. This was most evident in concerns about discipline.

Houses. Houses or teams, as many schools call them, had been in operation for two years at Urban and were a direct result of the movement toward a middle school philosophy. Under the house plan, a group of four or five teachers worked with a group of 130 to 150 students throughout the year. The typical configuration brought together teachers from language arts, social studies, mathematics, science, and reading. At least one house had a special education teacher as well. Teachers within a house were assigned their preparation periods at the same time to facilitate planning.

The plan permitted teachers to know students better and permitted students to feel they were among friends and advocates. Indeed, many teachers viewed the houses as extended families and tried to model parenting behavior for their students. After agreeing on an approach for addressing inappropriate behavior, teachers tried to use it consistently within the house. According to teachers, the sense of family that existed in the houses had contributed to a change of perspective among students with discipline problems:

When we bring a student in and talk about his/her behavior, it's not a round-robin lecture. Usually it becomes more of a cheering section. Oftentimes when kids see that many people really care about their behavior, they become different. You see more results out of that than you would from lots of detentions and suspensions.
Another teacher commented on a specific house she was acquainted with:
Those students, I think, feel very comfortable with those teachers, and I know those teachers are completely devoted to those kids. They delve into their background to find out why there is such and such a problem. They are very caring about them and reward them for things. I see this in other families [houses] too. I am around that family the most, because we have our period off together.
Some teachers would like to see the houses remain intact over several years, and some would like to stay with the same group of students. One of the benefits that many teachers experienced in houses was the level of support that it provided to individual teachers. Whether they were looking for new approaches to subject matter, new ideas for class management, help in approaching a specific child or just a sympathetic ear, they could usually find it among the other teachers on the team. A teacher spoke about her house as a "help system." According to her, "I would never teach without a help system again. I think that makes a big difference."

Curriculum and Instruction

We were interested in how the adults (primarily teachers and administrators) at Urban viewed the curriculum of the school. The school was going through a period of transition and was shifting from a centralized process of curriculum development to a decentralized one. Such a shift meant less emphasis on specific academic subjects and greater emphasis on meeting the needs and interests of adolescent students. Language arts, mathematics, and social studies were the only academic subjects mentioned with regularity, and only reading and writing (under language arts) were given considerable attention. Science, art and music, home economics, and physical education were

seldom mentioned. Several teachers and administrators mentioned reading because it had received a great deal of attention in the last two years. As one administrator said, "We have placed a very important emphasis on reading and one of our goals is to continually increase test scores in this area."

The reading program had several components. First, the reading teachers spent regular class periods with their classes. In addition, every teacher, from gym to home economics, was asked to spend twenty minutes a day, four days each week in sustained reading. According to some teachers, even custodians were reading for this twenty-minute period. Older students were trained to read stories to elementary children, and in some classes students sat in pairs and read to each other. Members of the community were invited in to read to students, and one teacher wrote a grant to take fifty youngsters to visit a famous poet. Teachers who were not reading teachers helped with the program, and everyone appeared excited about the results they were getting. One teacher shared with us the following success story:

I have had a class of students who started out the year as very poor readers and would labor with each word. By December a student read three whole paragraphs aloud and didn't miss a word. That was meaningful to me.
As students became excited about the reading program, so did the teachers. As one teacher pointed out, "Yes, they get excited about books now. That excites me. Gee, I have done something that has turned them onto books. That was my goal for the first semester." Another teacher saw the results in terms of improved test scores. According to her, the reading program had made "a tremendous change."

Affective curriculum. While the division is an artificial one, the educational literature tends to make a distinction between the cognitive curriculum represented by academics and the affective curriculum represented by such things as social skills, self-esteem, respect, dignity, caring for others, and even self-discipline. However, the affective curriculum was not taught through any formal program, textbook, or set of curricular materials. There were no system guidelines that addressed it, and it did not appear with regularity in the content of what teachers taught. It was delivered more in the enacting of the daily interactions between teachers and students. In other words, teachers taught the affective curriculum in the way they modeled behaviors for their students. To the extent that teachers modeled such goals — and some did so much better than others — they were demonstrating things to be caught rather than taught.

We also asked teachers, administrators, and others if caring was an important part of the curriculum. While some acknowledged that caring might enter into the discussion of a story, for example, most replied that caring was not part of the curriculum in the formal sense, as content in textbooks and other materials. A teacher differentiated between the formal curriculum and the enacted or implemented curriculum in this way: "Caring or to care might be on paper and that's really fine, but if you don't have the people in the trenches believing in it and doing that and modeling that, then it won't make any difference." According to this teacher,

Caring is remembering that a student's mom had to go in the hospital last week and asking about her or remembering students' birthdays, even those that occur in the summer; or the little discussions you have before and after class. These are the things that demonstrate caring, not the formal curriculum.
Some teachers saw the team or house as the vehicle for caring. As one teacher put it, "Our team teaching deals with caring because we have a team of five teachers that deal with the same group of children." According to her, these teachers, "can reflect on different problems related to a specific child and address the situation as a group."

Service learning can also be part of the curriculum to instill caring attitudes and behaviors. By service learning we mean giving youngsters the opportunity to participate in a program of service to others. Although some of the teachers had developed a few activities intended to help students develop sensitivity toward others, service-learning opportunities were not common at Urban.

Discipline

The discipline policy had also been changed to better reflect a middle school philosophy. While in the past the district's central office developed the policy, teachers through their teams or "houses" had been important contributors to the development of the new policy. However, in some ways, discipline represented the single most important arena through which a tough and tender philosophy of caring was tested. Under the new policy, teachers within the houses were encouraged to develop a series of steps to bring students into orderly behavior, while the assistant principals dealt with more disorderly conduct such as fighting or being verbally abusive to a teacher. Although most teachers liked the new system of discipline because it acknowledged the uniqueness of each student and the complexity of each situation, some teachers felt the new policy was inconsistent and too soft on students.

According to one of these teachers, the administration should be "a lot more strict; when they say they're going to do something, they need to do it, because students can come here and yell and nothing is done."

More than any other arena, discipline became the battleground for the believers in the old ways and the new wave. The former wanted to return to a more rigid system of punishment for misbehavior, while the latter placed greater hope in prevention, anticipation, and rehabilitation. While the new system seemed more consistent with other changes in response to a middle school philosophy, and offered more hope for a caring enterprise, pressures from the believers in the old culture lead to continued inconsistencies.

Social Structures

In addition to houses, we identified four other social structures that reflected the values, beliefs, and philosophy of the school. These included: The Student Assistance Program (SAP), the Teen Health Center, Athletics, and the April Project.

Student assistance program (SAP). The Student Assistance Program was designed to offer a wide variety of physical, social, and emotional support services to Urban's students. Many members of the faculty mentioned the program as a whole, or one of its dimensions, as a significant contributor to the caring culture of the school. Seven different community agencies provided volunteers to work with students and some of the teachers also volunteered their prep periods to work on various areas of the program. The program included services for individuals such as counseling and a number of small group programs to strengthen peer relationships, build personal self-esteem, improve attendance, reduce chemical usage and disruptive behavior, and to explore goal setting, dating, parenting, and other topics. The support group for young mothers, for example, permitted students who had children to come together and talk about their experiences, and teachers who could offer some suggestions about mothering. The most important element of this program was to make someone available to students whom they trusted and could confide in. As one teacher pointed out, "The kids have to have somewhere to go. They have to have somebody they can trust."

The teen health center. The Teen Health Center was conceptualized as part of the Student Assistance Program, but it was significant enough to the caring culture of Urban Middle School to warrant separate consideration. Established and continued with outside grant money, it was uniformly regarded by faculty and staff members as an important vehicle for caring at Urban. Perhaps faculty saw the Center as a reflection of a broader commitment of the school to the community and to its children.

The purpose of the health center according to a brochure was, "assessment and treatment of common illnesses, assessment of growth and development, physical examinations including sports physicals, evaluation of injuries, instructions on good health practices, and referral to health care agencies." A nurse practitioner and a medical aide both employed by a local hospital and paid by a grant from the Johnson and Johnson Foundation provided basic health services. A pediatrician was also on call. To use the Center, students had to have a signed parental consent form and parents were encouraged to visit the Center and to participate in the care and health education of their children.

Because the center's staff was supervised by a hospital, the nurse practitioner could administer medication to youngsters who had no regular doctor. Without such medicine, students might have had to remain home from school. In this way, the health center assisted the attendance program. If students required further care, they could be referred to a nearby neighborhood health center, which provided services at minimal cost. A grant proposal for the following year would tie the school health center and the neighborhood center more closely together by employing a single nurse practitioner to work in both places. This would enable the nurse practitioner to work with adolescents and their families during the summer.

Athletics. While several teachers mentioned sports, most did little more than mention them and only one sport, volleyball, was actually identified by name. This seemed to confirm a point made by one teacher who said, "We don't have a heavy emphasis on athletics, but we do promote athletics in order to structure teamwork and show the children how working together can create success." Unlike most of the other clubs, where student interest was the key to eligibility, the teachers who coached the various sports tried to include just about as many students as they could and required students not to be suspended and to maintain passing grades. As one teacher acknowledged, not being suspended and getting good grades "is usually hard for these kids. You can see that when they're on a team, they really shape up." Another teacher commented, "There must be a tremendous amount of (caring) in coaching because they help a lot of kids straighten up their behavior so that they can stay in athletics."

The coaches stayed in close touch with the players' teachers. Every Friday, a monitor sheet was sent around asking every teacher to indicate if a student had been in trouble. Teachers were asked to write a note or see one of the coaches. As one coach put it, "if they don't have time to do their homework, then they need to come to us. A lot of the time, we'll sit down and we'll try to tutor them."

Those interviewed felt that the results from this program were encouraging. "Our girls are pretty good; they stay on task," said one coach. Sports also brought out parents to the games and that had the potential to motivate them to become involved in other areas of the school.

The April project. This project made use of one Saturday in April to clean up and spruce up the neighborhood around the school. Flowers and trees were planted to beautify the area as well. This project was developed by the Urban Community Council, a group of teachers, parents, and community persons that the principal formed to promote better communication and co-operation between the school and the community. Local businesses were also involved, donating flowers, trees and food.

Discussion and Conclusions

Research suggests that effective school leaders are culture builders (Beare et al., 1989; Bennett, 1998; Deal, 1987; Peterson & Deal, 1998; Prestine, 1993; Schein, 1992, Scribner et al., 1999). According to Prestine (1993), "it is the principal's vision that guides, shapes, and molds the school culture" (p. 356). Our results support the research on the role that school leaders play in changing school culture. In less than three years, Urban had gone from a school with the reputation of being "one of the worst schools in the city to work in" to a place where teachers and staff wanted to be. The new principal's leadership was the main explanation for the school's "turning the corner," as one teacher put it.

Leadership means first of all having a vision of what a school might become and getting the faculty to commit themselves to that vision. The vision was to move the school from a junior high school to a middle school philosophy. This shift included the development of houses or teams, changing the curriculum and discipline policy, the establishment of a teen health center, and the implementation of a student assistance program. These efforts had contributed to the development of a sense of connection and commitment among teachers and administrators. A number of rituals and ceremonies (Beare et al., 1989; Peterson & Deal, 1998; Schein, 1992) were also created or improved to recognize and reward students for a variety of reasons: attendance, academics, and behavior. Parents and members of the community were invited to participate in these ceremonies and in some projects.

Research indicates that fostering commitment is an integral part of effective school cultures. Collaboration and collegiality all foster a sense of commitment (Cuckle et al., 1998; Peterson & Deal, 1998; Prestine, 1993; Scribner et al., 1999). Connectedness and commitment constitute a culture with a strong sense of community. The organization of Urban into houses played an important role in the development of collegiality and co-operation among teachers. The houses also allowed faculty to know their students more fully, to develop closer relations with them, and to model appropriate adult behavior for them. In this new environment, discipline was revised to respond more flexibly to the unique needs of students who were also given greater opportunities for success.

Researchers contend that a sense of community is created when students, teachers, staff, and administrators see themselves as one group with a common purpose and a common set of beliefs and values (Kratzer, 1996; Lewis et al., 1996; Peterson & Deal, 1998; Sergiovanni, 1994; Strike, 1999). However, although Urban's stakeholders, under the leadership of the principal, had made long strides in achieving a culture of caring in their school, more needed to be done before a strong sense of community could develop in the school. Future efforts needed to focus, especially, on including students and their parents as important contributors to the development of a sense of community within the houses in the school as a whole.

According to Sickle and Spector (1996), caring teachers foster relationships at four levels: teacher-student, student-student, teacher-content, and student-content. However, when asked to describe a caring teacher, student responses illustrated only one type of relationship identified by Sickle & Spector (1996) -- "teacher-student relationship," characterized by actions initiated by the teacher and directed to the students (Ferreira & Bosworth, 2001). During our observations of classrooms we also identified few of the elements of teacher-student relations that could lead to the development of a caring culture and sense of community in the classroom: activities that helped students and teachers to know one another, regular class meetings in which students contributed to the development of classroom norms and practices, and disciplinary approaches that included students in a search for solutions to their own behavior problems (Schaps et al., 1997; Shields, 1999). Furthermore, opportunities for students to practice caring

and thereby contribute to the school's culture (Peterson & Deal, 1998; Schaps et al., 1997) were rare. The spring-planting and neighborhood-cleanup project, while brief, had the potential of instilling caring values in the students. However, there was no systematic effort to infuse the school with service-learning projects, which would help students experience caring and understand its important contributions to the school's culture (Perry, 1996b, Scribner et al., 1999). To develop and ethic of caring and sense of community within the school and houses students need opportunities to care for themselves and others such as peers, teachers, their community, and their surroundings (Noddings, 1992).

Similarly, although parents were encouraged to participate in celebrations to honor their children, they did not play any active role in the functioning of the school. Indeed, even though parent involvement had increased in the last two years, parent participation was still relatively low. As previously pointed out Urban was located in an economically depressed area of the city and over 90% of its students qualified for free or reduced-cost lunch. Moreover, although 51% of the students were African American, the top school administrator (the principal) and the majority of the teachers were European American. Thus, the socioeconomic gap and racial differences between the school's administration and faculty and the students' parents might have contributed to a certain level of parent alienation. Our observations and conversations with teachers also indicated that some of them blamed the parents (and the neighborhood in which the school was located) for the major discipline problems that existed at Urban. These teacher attitudes might have come across during parent-teacher conferences, further contributing to parent alienation.

Urban's clearest academic mission was to improve the essential skills and to raise the state test scores of its students. Few other academic goals, such as improving critical thinking skills, were even mentioned, and none reached a consensus status. There was no systematic effort to achieve affective goals, including teaching students to care, through the curriculum (Lewis et al., 1996; Noddings, 1992; Tyree et a1., 1997). Affective goals were numerous, but efforts to bring them about were isolated and scattered. The affective curriculum did affirm caring, respect, tolerance, and other related values not so much through the content as through the way teachers modeled caring in their daily interactions with students. Although modeling made a substantial contribution to the caring culture of the school, we believe its impact could have been enhanced if a systematic effort was made to teach these values in addition to modeling them (Green, 1997; Kohn, 1991; Lewis et al., 1996; Noddings, 1992; Tyree et al., 1997).

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