



**PLACES
TO BE
AND
PLACES
TO BELONG**

**Youth Connectedness in
School and Community**

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Executive Summary

This report presents findings from a study of youth perceptions of life in their school and community. It was intended to better understand what elements of school and community life youth felt fostered and thwarted a sense of belonging, care, trust, and respect. It was also intended to better understand how and why perceptions of “connectedness” tend to decline by age.

Three hundred and eighteen youth in eighth, tenth, and twelfth grades were surveyed and interviewed for this study in early October of 2001. They were asked to think and talk about how they perceived their school and community environments. Overall, the results suggest that when youth feel that they and other youth are developmentally supported in schools and communities, they are likely to report feeling connected to each setting. Although the study was conducted in one upstate New York community, the findings reflect a portrait of youth familiar to many who work with young people on a day-to-day basis.

What is “Connectedness?”

“Connectedness” is a term increasingly used to describe a healthy, protective relationship between youth and the environments in which they grow up. It is increasingly clear that opportunities to experience a sense of place, belonging, and trust during adolescence promotes wellbeing – not just for individual youth, but also for the environments in which they live. While relationships with individual adults are important, connectedness as used here also encompasses ideas related to **belonging, attachment, and reciprocal positive regard for not only individual adults but the institutions, policies, an**

practices associated with the adult world. It also implies a sense of place, respect, and belonging that comes from feeling like you and others like you are valued members of school and/or community.

Life at School

Youth in this study were blessed with and benefited from well-resourced schools clearly invested in their learning. High proportions of youth perceived key developmental supports in their school including safety, creative outlets, and positive relationships with adults.

Yet, the findings clearly indicate that youth in this study perceive a lack of **agency** (power, participation, means to effect change) – the single most critical factor in determining the degree to which they felt connected to school. By and large, youth perceived that schools served two primary functions: inculcating conformity and academically preparing them to **begin** their lives...**later**.

What conditions do youth identify as influential in determining how connected they feel to school? Overall, the answer to this is easy – those that have

an impact on their ability to exercise power, participation and autonomy in the day-to-day workings of life at school. Conversations about the conditions that fostered or impeded connectedness at school spanned a broad range of topics but fundamentally spoke to the ways in which

Overall, the findings indicate that youth could feel connected AT school to peers and adults, but not feel connected TO school.

youth were encouraged or discouraged to exercise power. In the focus groups, this played out as tension over adult willingness to provide resources critical to development: time, the benefit of the doubt, multiple opportunities to succeed in the light of past failures, and the extent to which adults used their status as adults to control or manipulate. In the survey data, it was even more clear – meaningful opportunities to be engaged, or at least to know that other youth they respected were engaged in decision making roles was, by far, the most powerful correlate to connectedness of all variables tested.

Overall, the findings indicate that youth could feel connected **at** school to peers and adults, but not feel connected **to** school (it was rare, however, for the converse to be true). They also showed that individual youth could possess good relationships with one or more individual adults, but not feel that they, and people their age, were trusted, respected and cared about by adults and adult institutions. This is important because when youth perceived that they were collectively denied respect, trust, and care at school, they were far less likely to reciprocate.

Life in the Community

The findings from this study suggest that despite prevalent expectations, encounters with anonymous adults in the streets and in public spaces teach young people volumes about how to be an adult, how to treat others, and how to be a part of a community. Subtle exchanges between adolescents and adults within their community, known and unknown, conveyed potent messages about the value of young people.

As in school, high proportions of youth perceived key developmental supports in their community including safety, creative outlets, and positive relationships with adults. However, most youth believed that they were individually and collectively invisible to many adults and adult systems. Again, young people wanted to be regarded as a legitimate constituency with the right to be seen and heard – be it on the street, in businesses, or in the decision making chambers of both town and school. Overall, most youth felt that they were collectively denied the basic elements of **citizenship** and the belonging, independence, equality, responsibility, participation, and shared existence and identity that citizenship evokes. The clear desire among study participants to occupy space, publicly and alone with friends, clashed mightily with adult perceptions of youth and created tension. This dynamic was worsened

by the belief among youth that young people are not permitted some of the most basic rights of citizenship – namely mechanisms and opportunities to participate in the formal and informal processes for creating community.

What conditions are influential in determining how connected youth feel to their community? The process of individually and collectively becoming community citizens in their own and adults' eyes, including experiencing positive status, rights, desirability, and literal and figurative place in their community, is a critical pathway to cultivating community connectedness.

Grade, “Stage-Environment Fit” and Connectedness

Connectedness to school and community were moderate for youth of all three grades, but clearly decreased with age. Seniors, in particular, appeared to be in a “connectedness slump.” Not only were their survey scores lower than their younger peers, the tone used when talking about their relationship to school and community was far more negative and passionate. When asked to explain this trend, the vast majority of seniors invariably came back with something akin to the following: “I think it’s `cause we feel like we’re growing up and turning onto adults, yet we’re in an institution like this where they basically treat us like eighth graders.”

What this quote indicates and the research suggests, is that as youth progress through middle and high school, their developmental needs gradually outgrow their environments, i.e. their environments remain static and do not provide them with new opportunities to meet their burgeoning needs. The primary difference between eighth and twelfth grade youth was not their recognition of these imbalances, but the faith they placed in adult willingness to address it. Older youth were far more cynical and frustrated by what they perceived as a continued failure to adequately address developmental needs and prepare them for a future beyond academic life.

With regard to town, the findings showed that even when satisfying entertainment venues were available, seniors reported feeling bored and unengaged. The findings suggest that lurking beneath the façade of entertainment needs lie something even more important – the need to **do something** with meaning and purpose beyond themselves.

Cultivating Connectedness

This study suggested that disconnectedness and the gradual decline in connectedness by age is not inevitable. Study results from seniors in a small alternative program suggest that schools and communities can do much to enhance youth connectedness and performance by assuring opportunities for youth to meet core developmental needs.

Youth in a nontraditional school program perceived significantly higher levels of meaningful roles, positive relationships with adults at school, and school connectedness. They also reported feeling more engaged than youth of the same achievement level, as well as advanced placement youth in the traditional school setting. Analysis of their relationship with the community showed that if this particular group of seniors possessed a tendency to report the positive, it went no further than their school walls. Nontraditional school seniors reported significantly lower connectedness levels in the community than their peers in the traditional school setting.

The alternative school structure, with its emphasis on providing students with ways to impact school policy, and the attention paid to cultivating positive relationships between adults and youth commanded strong student loyalty, connectedness, and productivity. These students were so loyal that every one of them agreed, “Our school is just right the way it is.”

The Power of Cumulative Support

Findings suggest that there is an “ecology” of connectedness in school and community settings – the more connected youth felt in one setting, the more likely they were to feel connected to the other and vice versa. For youth in this study, school and community connectedness tends to increase as a youth experience more developmental supports in either setting. In other words, it did not matter whether youth perceived developmental support in school or in the community, the more support they reported across both settings, the more respect, care, and trust they were likely to perceive and to give in each setting.

This helps to explain how developmental support and feelings of connectedness or disconnectedness accumulate. Youth who feel disconnected in one setting are likely to carry those feelings into the other setting. One possible reason for this is that possessing supports in one setting provides skills, access to important social capital resources, optimism, and confidence transferable to other settings.

Conversely, inability in one setting may hinder capacity in another setting.

Disadvantaged Youth

The power of connection to school and community may be particularly important for disadvantaged adolescents who lack other sources of support. Unfortunately, many opportunities to meaningfully participate in both school and community environments are awarded largely to youth with proven academic or leadership capabilities. As a result, many of the youth invited to participate in meaningful roles at the school or community level are those who are already “support and opportunity rich.” Functionally, this systemic reward bias serves only to widen the “connection gap” between “support-rich” and “support-poor” youth. Targeting “support poor” youth for special services, the backbone of most prevention strategies, is critical but does nothing to address the bias built into school and community opportunities to effect change and to make one’s voice heard. This study suggests that such opportunities are central to connectedness and should be used to support all youth rather than reward a select few.

Recommended ACTION Items

Based on the research summarized in this report, thirteen strategic recommendations are suggested to further “connect” and actively engage youth in school and community settings.

- Create engaging opportunities for youth of all ages in as many levels as possible.
- Diversify the range of opportunities for youth to participate in community life; opportunities need not and should not be solely related to issues directly affecting youth.
- Promote linkages between school and community to promote/facilitate learning partnerships.
- Create a “developmentally attentive culture” in school and community by targeting attitude change among adults – particularly those with regular but anonymous contact with youth such as police, business, and general community members.
- Increase the number of developmental supports young people perceive in school and community.
- In designing initiatives, focus on the supports and opportunities that can create the greatest breadth and depth.
- Recognize and accommodate grade-related differences.
- Recognize and address the possibility that declining connectedness scores across grades may be the result of a poor fit between developmental needs and environmental opportunities to fulfill these needs...and that “senioritis” may begin earlier than the senior year.
- Consider substantive senior year reform in keeping with the recommendations issued by the National Commission on the Senior Year in High School.
- Actively recruit high-risk and/or low achieving youth for involvement in school and community level leadership opportunities.
- Create formal structures or forums for youth representatives to solicit input from their youth constituents.
- Capitalize on the opportunities already provided to young people in schools by clearly advertising the roles youth play and the effects they have on school life.
- Generate and implement strategies for enhancing school engagement.

Definition of Terms

Agency: A mode of action, power, participation. Means to effect change.

Age-profile: To make one-dimensional assumptions about capacity or intended behavior based on age and caricature of “youth” promoted by the media or on experiences with a small number of adolescents.

Connectedness: A term increasingly used to describe a healthy, protective relationship between youth and the environments in which they grow up. Connectedness differs from connections with individual adults because it implies a sense of place, respect, and belonging that comes from feeling you and others like you are valued members of a school and/or community.

Contemporary youth development approach: Youth Development is an approach intended to compliment problem reduction strategies with a focus on engaging entire communities in helping all youth thrive. It builds on traditional approaches to youth services by emphasizing the need to engage in long term, systemic strategies for cultivating qualities and traits desirable in young people through the provision of environments that support their developmental needs and capacities.

Creative engagement: A construct and set of measurements intended to gauge the extent to which youth perceive that they have opportunities to build and audiences to share their creative interests.

Developmental attentiveness: To be aware of and to plan according to the developmental needs of different age/developmental groups.

Developmental supports: Aspects of youth environments known to be important in promoting healthy adolescent development. For the purposes of this study, developmental supports included: safety, positive relationships with adults, academic engagement, creative engagement, perception that adults were fair regardless of appearance, meaningful opportunities for involvement in decision making and governance, and positive expectations.

Participatory education techniques: Techniques that permit students the opportunity to tackle problems on their own and in multi-sensory ways and which consistently and actively engage students in the learning process. Techniques may include: interactive games and activities, group work, hands-on activities, innovative demonstration and humor.

“Senioritis” or “Senior Slump”: A predictable, and many would add natural, disregard among youth in their senior year for academic and institutional expectations. Senioritis is most commonly written off as an inevitable malady that emerges from a natural lack of incentive, ill-timed assessment systems, ill-prepared teachers, and what the National Commission on the Senior Year in High School calls the “tyranny of low expectations.”

Social capital: A concept first used in the 1970s to label the opportunities and advantages conferred on individuals simply by virtue of their membership in certain communities. Social capital includes notions of civic trust, participation, and exchange that come from individual involvement in community level civic activities and organizations. Although social capital is not a lens frequently applied to adolescents’ experience in their schools or communities, the idea of connectedness contained in social capital theory and the belief that it contributes to positive outcomes for youth is implicitly assumed in most youth development theory.

Poor stage-environment fit: the mismatch between adolescent developmental needs and environmental (school, community) opportunities to fulfill those needs.

Introduction

A young man seated in the third row of the ninth grade class looked down when I walked by. It was my third day in his classroom. I had come to lead students through a variety of activities designed to heighten their knowledge and awareness of sexual reproduction, healthy decision-making, and romantic relationships. Today's activity required that they identify a few people in their lives that they knew loved them. Most students recorded names of family, teachers, adult friends, best friends, and/or boy or girl friends. His page, neatly set up to contain the names just as I had instructed, was blank. Though this was concerning, his teacher assured me that this young man was a good student and showed few signs of trouble. Two years later when I returned to Ms. Carr's classroom she told me that the young man with no names on his page had recently tried to commit suicide – a complete surprise to school administrators conditioned to look for more obvious indicators of trouble. That day is forever etched in my mind because it marks when I began to wonder if contemporary research might not be missing an important variable in understanding the lives and development of young people.

This event occurred in 1989, just as scholars of adolescence were moving from thinking primarily in terms of risk and prevention to addressing questions aimed at understanding why some youth, despite the profusion of risk factors they faced, managed to beat the odds.² Since that time, researchers have consistently shown that positive

Nobody grows out of being a person, and the second decade of life is when one's personhood becomes defined in terms of the wider world. As a society, we need to support that process, not sequester and render it irrelevant.¹

connections to other human beings have profound implications for child and adolescent outcomes.³ Indeed, the importance of such positive connections in fostering healthy development is highly intuitive and has been the basis for numerous policy and program initiatives which seek to provide disadvantaged youth with adult mentors – such as the well known Big Brothers Big Sisters Project.⁴

Such approaches represent **an individualized form** of connectedness in which youth are encouraged to establish supportive individual relationships with others, particularly adults.

The contemporary youth development approach implicitly expands the notion of connectedness to encompass ideas related to **belonging, attachment, and reciprocal positive regard for not only individual adults but the institutions, policies, and practices associated with the adult world.**

Although related, the more generalized form of “connectedness” differs from connections with individual adults because it implies a sense of place, respect, and belonging that comes from feeling like you and others like you are valued members of a school and/or community.

Youth can have good relationships with individual adults but not feel that they, and people their age, are generally trusted, respected and cared about by adults and adult institutions.

This report summarizes findings from a study conducted in three school districts within a community located in the northeastern United States. It was intended to explore the factors that contribute to youth perceptions of connectedness in their school and community environments and to shed light on why older adolescents consistently report feeling less connected to their schools and communities than younger adolescents.

Why is School and Community Connectedness Important?

“Connectedness” is a term increasingly used to describe a healthy, protective relationship between youth and the environments in which they grow up. (See Chart 1.1 below for “Connectedness” questions used in this study.) It is increasingly clear that opportunities to experience a sense of place, belonging, and trust during adolescence promote well-being – not just for individual youth, but also for the environments in which they live. Feelings of collectivity, belonging, respect, and sharing engender trust and promote individual and civic health.

The role communities and schools play in promoting the conditions that engender these feelings is the focus of increasing attention. For example, in a study aimed at understanding why high numbers of American children suffer from emotional and behavioral problems such as depression, anxiety, attention deficit, conduct disorders,

Opportunities to experience a sense of place, belonging, and trust during adolescence promote well-being.

and thoughts of suicide, the 2003 Commission on Children at Risk concluded:⁵

In large measure, what’s causing this crisis of American childhood is a lack of connectedness. We mean two kinds of connectedness – close connections to other people, and deep connections to moral and spiritual meaning...Where does this connectedness come from? It comes from groups of people organized around certain purposes – what scholars call social institutions. Because in recent decades, we as a society have not been doing a good job of meeting these essential needs, large and growing numbers of our children are failing to flourish.

The Commission’s conclusion is echoed in other studies which find that youth who feel connected to social environments outside their homes are less likely to participate in activities that threaten their well being and, when they do face risk, are more protected from long term damage.⁶ For example, in a survey of over 30,000 youth, researchers found that “belonging to a community of others” was the strongest protective factor for health outcomes such as poor body image, emotional stress, multiple drug use, school absenteeism, and risk of injury or pregnancy.⁷

Unfortunately, there is evidence that youth do not generally feel particularly supported or connected to their community or schools. Indeed, the emerging collective research in youth development suggests two important trends:

Chart 1.1 “Connectedness” Questions Used in This Study

Connection to School	Connection to Community
Adults at my school care about people my age.	I care about my town.
Adults in my school listen to what I have to say.	I trust most of the people in my town.
Adults at my school don’t respect what people my age think.	Adults in my town don’t care about people my age.
I care about the school I go to.	Adults in my town respect what people my age think.
I trust the other students in my school.	Adults in my town listen to what I have to say.
I trust the adults in my school.	

- significant numbers of adolescents of *all ages* fail to experience the multiple developmental supports needed to promote connectedness and its corresponding outcomes.⁸
- the number of youth perceiving connection to their school and community environments seems to decrease as youth age.⁹

Moreover, Search Institute research reveals that fewer than half of youth surveyed in all age groups perceive adequate support, developmental opportunities, belonging, care, and bonding across school and community domains. Search Institute studies showed that, when compared to younger adolescents, older youth:

- perceive far less support and bonding with family, neighborhoods, and schools
- are far less likely to report feeling valued by the community
- report that they are not regarded as resources
- report encountering far fewer adult role models
- encounter less positive peer influence
- perceive much lower expectations from adults

Although older teens report the same level of involvement in youth programs as younger teens, older teens report far less time engaged in what they consider to be creative activities.¹⁰

What accounts for these trends? Why do young people of all ages report feeling that they and others their age are not valued, engaged, and of use in their schools and larger communities – spheres with critical influence and responsibilities for socializing young people? And why does connectedness appear to diminish as youth move from eighth to twelfth grade?

Although youth detachment from families makes sense and is compatible with adolescent developmental theory, the fact that significant numbers of young people tend to perceive increasingly negative relationships with schools and their larger communities as they transition into adulthood is far less intuitive. Renowned developmental psychologist, Erik Erikson, argues that the fundamental task of adolescence, identity integration, cannot be successfully accomplished unless the adolescent can determine how he or she fits within the larger society.

If youth report feeling less, rather than more, valued by the schools and communities in which they come of age, how are they to accomplish this fundamental task?

Addressing these questions was the primary goal of this research.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to answer the following five questions regarding youth connectedness.

- 1) What demographic and contextual factors best explain youth perceptions of connectedness to school?
- 2) What demographic and contextual factors best explain youth perceptions of connectedness to community?
- 3) Why does perception of connectedness and other developmental supports decline with increasing age?
- 4) Under what conditions do youth thrive?
- 5) Is there a relationship between perceptions of school connectedness and community connectedness? Is this relationship cumulative?

Methodology

By placing youth perspectives at the center of a mixed method approach, (survey and focus groups) this research project developed and applied a model and set of tools to assess differences and similarities in how eighth, tenth, and twelfth grade adolescents perceive conditions that promote connectedness to their school and community. Ultimately, the research goal was to identify the demographic and contextual factors with the greatest promise for fostering youth perceptions of connectedness to school and their larger communities. One objective of this study was to examine “connectedness” by teasing out distinctions in the way youth talked about their relationships to school and community.

This study was a collaboration between Janis Whitlock, three School Districts, and the Town Youth Board in a community (just over 100,000 residents), in the north-eastern United States, clearly dedicated to cultivating the capacities of its youth. Three hundred and eighteen surveys were analyzed among eighth graders (n=130), tenth graders (n=112), and twelfth graders (n=76) during October 2001. Furthermore, a total of ten focus groups (total n=108) with eighth (n=36), tenth (n=31), and twelfth (n=41) grade youth from all three school districts were conducted in December 2001.

Students enrolled in the three participating school districts are disproportionately Caucasian (89%

Caucasian, 5.0% African American, 5.9% other) and middle to upper economic class. A concerted effort was made to ensure balance in gender, ethnicity, economic status, and other variables that might affect perceived connectedness. This study was conducted in a relatively affluent community to limit poverty as a potential explanatory variable and to better understand the nature and ways in which factors other than those related to poverty influence young people’s relationship to their school and larger community. Although the results are not necessarily generalizable to other communities, particularly to low-income communities, they do suggest that poverty status is not the only important factor in determining youth connectedness to school and community. Specific methods and analytical approaches are further discussed in Appendix A.

Chart 3.1 Summary of Study Phases, Activities, Sample and Response Rate

<i>Phase</i>	<i>Activities</i>	<i>Sample</i>	<i>Response Rate</i>
I – October 2001	School and Community Connection Survey	Six eighth, six tenth, and seven twelfth grade classes across all three districts (n= 350).	318 surveys analyzed
II – December 2001	Youth Focus Groups Recommendation Agreement Method	Three eighth, three tenth, and four twelfth grade classes across all three districts (n=108).	Ten focus groups (n=108)

Connectedness: Life at School

What do youth say makes them feel connected to school?

On April 20, 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, students at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado shot and killed 25 students and faculty members and injured up to two dozen more. This incident marked the fifth time in eight months that a student had fired on other children on school property or at a school event. As a shocked nation looked on and mourned, pundits across the spectrum searched for an explanation. Following this event and several other school shootings, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) issued a report that summarized a detailed investigation into all school shootings up to that point. Out of those findings came the lesson that despite prompt law enforcement responses, most shooting incidents were stopped by means other than law enforcement interventions. In addition, they issued a set of findings which included three of importance here: 1) most attackers had engaged in some behavior prior to the incident that indicated the need for help, 2) at least one peer knew about the idea or plan to attack, and 3) when the attacks were foiled, it was because someone had disclosed the plan to an adult at school.

The role individual youth-adult relationships and feelings of community play in fostering connectedness to school is clearly important – not just for preventing negative outcomes such as school violence – but for fostering positive outcomes as well. Results from this study show that many factors impact feeling respected, included, heard and

Power & Control

Conversations about conditions that fostered or impeded youth's perceptions of connectedness fundamentally spoke to the ways in which youth were encouraged or discouraged to exercise power.

cared about. Individual relationships with adults were clearly important, but were not the only, or even the most important factor, in predicting how connected a youth felt to school. Moreover, it was also clear that the youth most in need of being connected were often the least likely to perceive any of the developmental supports associated with it.

What conditions do youth identify as influential in determining how connected they feel to school?

Overall, the answer to this is easy – those that have an impact on their ability to exercise power, participation, and autonomy in the day-to-day workings of life at school. Conversations about the conditions that fostered or impeded youth perceptions of connectedness at school spanned a broad range of topics, but fundamentally spoke to the ways in which they were encouraged or discouraged to exercise power. It was during these conversations that the multiple hues of connectedness stood out. It became clear, for example, that youth could feel connected **at** school to peers and adults but not feel connected **to** school (it was rare, however, for the converse to be true). The experiences and negotiations that influenced youth perceptions of connectedness played out on many fronts: in relationships with adults, in relationship to the policies and procedures of school as an institution, in the strategies employed in the classroom to promote learning, and in the role schools played in preparing youth for life beyond academic performance.

Survey Results

The survey was designed to understand the way demographic variables and developmental supports within school contribute to school connectedness. The findings showed several interesting trends.

First, it was clear that the majority of the eighth, tenth, and twelfth grade youth who participated in the survey perceived a broad base of support and opportunities in school. As Chart 4.1 shows, many youth felt safe, had creative outlets, had good relationships with at least one adult at school, and felt like adults were fair, regardless of individual youth appearance. Almost two-thirds (62.3%) of the youth reported feeling connected to school. Given the immense investment their school has made in promoting positive youth development, this was not surprising.

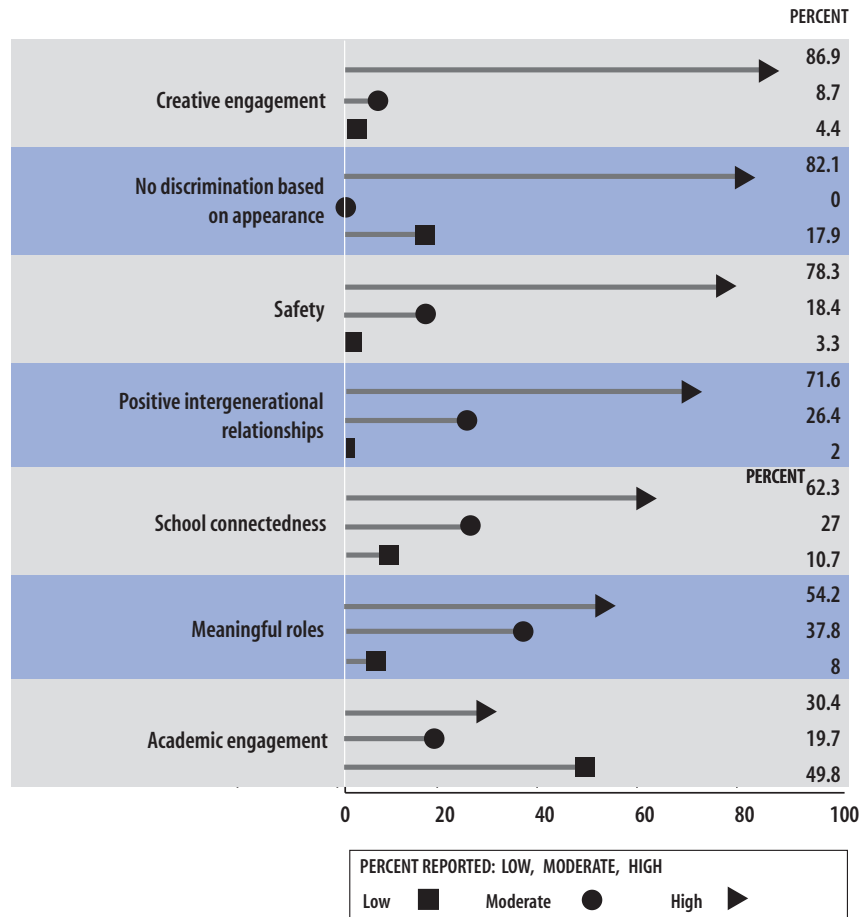
However, levels of academic engagement¹¹ were very low with nearly 50% of youth reporting high levels of boredom (low academic achievement). Furthermore, many respondents (nearly 50%) felt people their age were not permitted meaningful opportunities to influence institutional policies and practices. This trend was particularly evident for older youth.

Although Chart 4.1 levels illustrate how students felt regarding the listed developmental supports, it does not say much about the extent to which each of these conditions affected how connected youth felt to school. Further analysis showed that the only condition outside of school that was associated with school connectedness was positive parental relationships. Aside from relations with parents and grade, a number of changeable developmental supports inside of school were strongly linked to school connectedness.

Moreover, the survey showed that:

- Older youth were less likely to report support and connectedness.

Chart 4.1 Perceptions of Life at School



The chart indicates responses as: "Low" ("strongly disagree" or "disagree"), Moderate (moderate response) and High ("strongly agree").

In order of influence the **strongest correlates** to school connectedness were:

1. Youth perceptions of meaningful opportunities for involvement in class and school decision making
2. Positive relations with individual adults at school
3. Academic engagement
4. Adult fairness regardless of physical appearance.
5. Creative engagement

- Girls were slightly more likely to report involvement in more meaningful roles than boys, but were otherwise not significantly different than boys in their responses.
- Race¹² and academic status (being an “advanced placement” student rather than an average or “at-risk” student) were not factors in perceived connectedness.

Positive relationships with adults and meaningful opportunities for involvement in decision making at school were also important links to feeling safe and forming friendships at school. The findings also suggest, however, that youth connectedness to school has as much to do with the social and political dynamics of youth-adult and youth-institution relationships as with course structure and content – the accepted purpose of schools.

The survey was useful for identifying the above key correlates to school connectedness. It showed that relationships and roles may make a substantial difference in how connected young people in the study felt to school. The focus groups, however, provided rich detail in precisely how these key areas mattered. It is to this that the next section is devoted.

ACTION Item

Enhancing school connectedness will be most effective when efforts:

- Provide opportunities for a broad number of youth to contribute meaningfully to both school and classroom functions.
- Strengthen young people’s access to adults – particularly those unlikely to be connected to an adult in school.
- Develop strategies for promoting academic and creative engagement.

Focus Group Results

Focus groups were started by asking youth participants to identify comments, made by respondents on the survey, with which they most strongly agreed. (See Appendix A “Recommendation Agreement Method” for details). Chart 4.2 on page 18 shows the youth generated comments about life at school that other youth in the focus groups most

agreed with. Overall, the conditions that came up this way were parallel to those that emerged in the survey (see Top Four Hot Topics).

Top Four Hot Topics

- [1] Desire for meaningful work versus busy work
- [2] Overused institutional practices and policies for exerting control
- [3] Over-strenuous standards and expectations
- [4] Adult discrimination against youth especially those who look or seem different

As with the results reported in Chart 4.2, **neither peer relations nor safety** emerged as correlates of school connectedness for participants in this study. The emphasis that focus group youth placed on life in the classroom, youth-adult relationships, youth-institution relationships, and academic expectations resonated strongly with the survey findings. That they emerged consistently across both methods, however, said little about whether they contributed to youth perceptions of connectedness (conditions that conveyed or elicited from youth: respect, caring, or attentiveness at school).

Of course, many of the conditions that arose during the course of discussion were highly interconnected. But not all were linked to feeling connected (respected, cared about, and trusted) to school. Looking for themes that were discussed in relation to connectedness in at least three separate instances across at least two grades revealed four “persistent themes” and fourteen distinct associated conditions.

These were the youth suggested conditions, shown in Chart 4.3 on page 19, with the greatest potential for facilitating or inhibiting young people in eighth, tenth and twelfth grade in forming connective, productive bonds with their school.

Looking for conditions participants linked to connectedness across focus group and grade helped sort out conditions that affected respondents’ perceptions of their schools from those with seemingly little influence. It did not, however, say much about which of the areas identified might prove the most potent in affecting connectedness.

Chart 4.2. Teen Recommendations: Improving Life at School

This chart shows the most common recommendations youth made about improving life at school.

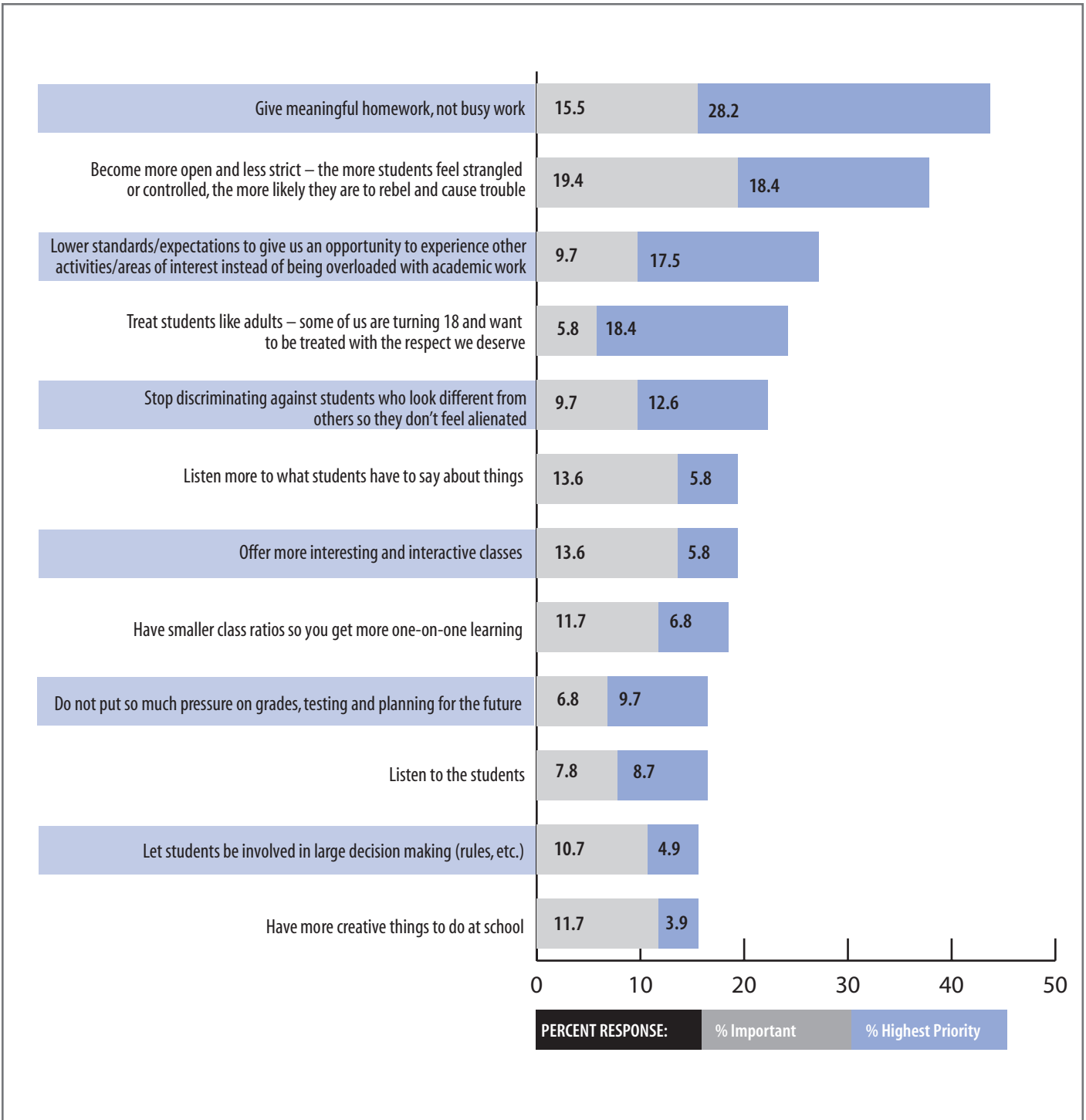
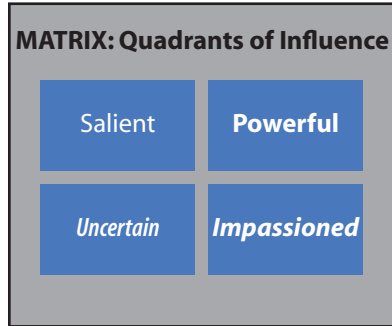


Chart 4.3 Conditions Associated with School Connectedness

THEMATIC DOMAINS	CONDITION
Adult–Youth Relations	Adult willingness to provide time and assistance (Assistance) The extent to which youth feel “visible” to adults (Visibility) Emotional availability of adults (Accessibility) Adult willingness to understand individual youth based on more than age, peer network, and academic standing (Multidimensionality) Adult willingness to give youth the benefit of the doubt (Benefit of doubt) Willingness to use adult status to exert control over youth (Status)
Academic Engagement Practices	Degree to which academic work is perceived as meaningful (Meaningful Work) Use of interactive versus rote learning techniques (Participation) Teacher passion for subject (Passion)
School Curricula (Content and Structure)	Class size (Class Size) Perceived relevance of curriculum to interest, ability, and future (Relevance)
Academic Pressure	Quantity of work (Quantity) Strong focus on the future (Future) Focus on state tests (Tests)

To take the analysis a step further, two additional dimensions were used: the **tone** youth used to talk about the theme and the **impact** youth felt the theme had in influencing their behaviors. These two dimensions were used to develop a matrix that showed how potent each condition was in influencing school connectedness among youth.

Plotting conditions in this way makes it much easier to see how the themes cluster together on importance. The matrix presents the conditions in four quadrants of influence:



powerful (passionate tone, high impact), **impassioned** (passionate tone, low impact), **salient** (moderate tone, high impact) and **uncertain** (moderate tone, low impact).

Conditions in the **Powerful Quadrant** – **visibility, multi-dimensionality, assistance, and adult use of status** were those which arose often as high impact factors and about which participants tended to speak passionately. These are the factors the qualitative data suggests would have the **greatest impact on youth perceptions of connectedness**.

Conditions listed in the **Impassioned Quadrant** – **emotional accessibility, giving youth the benefit of the doubt, and quantity of work** – were those spoken about with passion, but which did not come up often and/or **were not gauged to have a lasting impact on youth perceptions of school**.

Conditions listed in the **Salient Quadrant** – **participatory techniques and perceived relevance of school work** – are those gauged to have a **lasting impact** on the way youth think about school, but about which youth displayed **less impassioned** sentiment.

Lastly, those in the **Uncertain Quadrant** – **meaningful work, classroom practices** (teacher passion, class size, test focus) **and future orientation** – were those that appeared on the radar across groups and grades as correlates to connection, **but were described as less powerful than the others in explaining connectedness in the focus groups**.

Powerful Quadrant Conditions

See me, see my life, help me, and don't use your power as an adult unfairly!

Along with our parents, our teachers have a big impact on our lives, and sometimes I don't think all of them realize that.

The above statement made by an eighth grade participant, neatly summarizes the power that adult relationships at school can have in fostering and inhibiting school connectedness among youth. Indeed, of the four categories to emerge as potent in these analyses – relationships with adults, academic engagement practices, school curricula, and academic pressure – **those concerning relational aspects of school at the individual and institutional level**, were consistently cited as the conditions most powerful in fostering or discouraging connectedness. Of the many and varied conditions discussed, adult and institutional willingness to “see” young people, to acknowledge the multifaceted dimensions of their lives, to provide assistance even when not mandated, and to sparingly wield the staff of authority granted by their age and status, consistently emerged as the most powerful mediators of connectedness. Relative to other conditions, these were the ones about which participants spoke with passion and to which they attributed the power to affect attitudes and behaviors.

Two of the most potent criteria, visibility and multi-dimensionality, were but two sides of the proverbial coin. They were also the two most commonly cited equivalents to respect and care, or when lacking, of disrespect and lack of caring by adults.

Visibility

The first of these, visibility, was particularly powerful and multifaceted. An open door, recognizing someone by name in the hall, noticing improved class effort, even noticing differences in personal style were very meaningful to study participants. At its core, visibility concerned the simple, everyday interactions that keep individuals, in the midst of many, from feeling anonymous and taken for granted.¹³

ACTION Items: Visibility

- An open door
- Recognizing someone by name in the hall
- Noticing improved class effort
- Noticing differences in personal style

One of the teachers, I won't say his name, but he won't even memorize your name during the trimester that you're in his class. He'll make up an excuse like, "You try memorizing this many names throughout the year!"

Other aspects of visibility related to having one's absence noticed:

Like if you've been out for a day and they're like, "Oh, we missed you yesterday" or if they said something really nice that really made your day, then you really know you're cared for.

Multi-dimensionality

Even if students were visible, many participants felt that only parts of themselves were visible. The desire for adults to recognize individual youth as multi-dimensional beings was a very strong and regular theme. Many students were bitter about being seen only in reference to the institutionalized categories often used to sort them – academic standing, peer network, or risk status. This was particularly evident among youth who felt that their school standing/identity put them at an unfair disadvantage with regard to not being seen as more complex human beings:

Our principal probably doesn't even know any more than 20 kids in this school by face. He probably doesn't know anything about any of the students. And they're like kids that are doing fine. They're the kids that, you know, he's given scholarship awards to. They're not the kids that are in trouble.

Indeed, adult tendencies to "profile" youth into static categories were a source of much resentment, particularly among groups of youth unlikely to be positively described. Many of these youth expected that they or others who did not fit positive student profiles would be tagged from the moment they arrived. Their expectation that adults would summarily judge adolescents based on age and risk markers was viewed by one youth as evidence of discrimination:

ACTion Item: Multi-dimensionality

Avoid sorting teens by institutional categories such as: academic standing, peer network, risk status.

Connectedness Activity for School Administration, Faculty and Staff

Many students do not feel connected to school and have limited, if not, shallow relationships with adults at school. This exercise, suggested by Search Institute trainers, is designed to illuminate which students at your school are "connected" to adults and which may be "at risk."

In a very private and completely confidential space (students should NEVER see or hear the results of this activity), tack large sections of paper across the walls – enough paper for every student's name in your school. Write every student's name on the paper covered walls with approximately 12 inches of blank space after each student's name. Ask every staff and faculty member within the school community who interacts with students to go around the room and draw a star next to each student's name that they feel connected to or have a relationship with that student beyond an administrative, staff or faculty level.

During this exercise it quickly becomes apparent, which students are "connectedness rich" and which students are "connectedness poor." A debriefing session and action plan should be implemented immediately following the activity to address your school's specific connectedness challenges and opportunities.

I put a stop to discriminating against students who look different from others so they don't feel alienated. I put that because there's a lot of people in this school that look different and I just think a lot of people are discriminated against by adults because of it. If you look a certain way the principal or someone's gonna be eyeing you. Like, if you're a new student that's like black and comes from the city and you look all ghetto, the principal is gonna ask about the background. He's gonna watch you.

Perhaps one of the reasons this issue emerged as such a potent factor is because in viewing youth as multi-dimensional, adults conveyed some of their own multi-dimensionality. In doing so, they opened up avenues of connection outside of those dictated by institutionalized relationships:

Visibility, multi-dimensionality, and assistance are very powerful dimensions of school life for youth.

They treat you like a friend. They don't see you out at the sidewalk and say, "Oh, you're a smoker." They like talk to you like you're just a regular person. Not because of what you do or have done.

Lending Assistance

Like visibility and multi-dimensionality, going the extra step to lend assistance – in the form of time or extra help with school-related problems – was frequently cited as a powerful vehicle for forging or impeding connectedness. Many participants in the focus groups were keenly aware and appreciative of the moments when adults at school lent assistance in the form of time and instrumental help beyond the scope of their duties:

Like with our school counselor, if you need her for advice or for any problem, she will take time out of her schedule to be there for you. To help you with like grades or just problems at home or anything like that. She's always there.

Similarly, adults perceived as stingy with time and help were viewed quite critically:

Teachers feel that as long as you're in their classroom and as long as they get through their lesson and you're out of there on time, then they've done their time.

Use of Adult Status

Visibility, multi-dimensionality, and assistance are very powerful dimensions of school life for youth. It is not surprising, then, that issues related to the way adults use their authority at school emerged as a critical condition as well. Uses of adult status stemming solely from their power as adults rather than from measured and thoughtful regard for individual situations gave rise to negative assessments by youth because it left them no way to save face or to feel fully heard and understood. These types of interactions were regarded as very disrespectful and spurred negative attitudes, particularly among older students. Participants reported a similar dynamic with some of their teachers when they challenged the teachers' authority or knowledge. The net result in these cases was a strand of hopelessness and powerlessness typified by the following comment:

Like if you're trying to help a teacher, like if they wrote something wrong, and you're trying to make them correct it so everybody understands it, they'll say, "Don't contradict me, I know what I'm talking about." Then they'll notice later that they are wrong and you feel like okay the teacher really doesn't care about me at all. They humiliate you.

When adults failed to visibly recognize youth, acknowledge the full scope of their lives, lend extra help when needed, or use the status granted to them as adults sparingly – respondents interpreted that adults did not care

about them and were likely to report negative attitudes and behaviors. Conversely, when respondents felt more visible than their school identities might allow, they were very generous in their gratitude. They were also very clear about the degree to which positive and negative relationships with adults in their school affected their motivation to learn and to produce:

If a teacher is really nasty to you and stuff, it makes you not want to go to their class even more. It makes you not want to do good stuff for them, but when you have a teacher you know respects you and cares about you, and cares about what you do in life, then you are gonna want to do good for them.

Impassioned Quadrant Conditions

Be my friend, give me the benefit of the doubt, and don't give me more work than I can handle!

Two of the three conditions about which youth demonstrated passion, even though they came up less often and/or were not discussed in terms of lasting impact, also revolved around relational aspects of school. Participants

When adults failed to visibly recognize youth, acknowledge the full scope of their lives, lend extra help when needed, or use the status granted them as adults sparingly – respondents interpreted that adults did not care about them and were likely to report negative attitudes and behaviors.

ACTion Items: Use of Adult Status

- Consider individual situations and control use of adult power, i.e. “pick your battles.”
- Consider challenges to authority and knowledge as learning opportunities for mutual respect and organizational improvement.
- Look for ways to involve youth in classroom decision making through monthly “class meetings” – where the students and teacher discuss current events/issues, classroom celebrations, challenges and/or opportunities. (Technique of Karen Shellenback's favorite teacher, Ralph Undercoffler, ICSD, Ithaca, NY.)
- Consider “peer to peer” learning opportunities to engage youth in sharing interests and acquired knowledge.

spoke strongly about the degree to which they felt adults **were emotionally accessible and willing to give them the benefit of the doubt when youth did not meet expectations.** Quantity of work elicited a similar excitement of tone when it arose. Indeed, academic engagement practices were second only to relational issues in explaining connectedness during the focus groups.

Emotional Accessibility

Of the two relational issues to emerge in this quadrant, emotional accessibility arose most often. Youth who emphasized that adult demonstrations of emotional accessibility required more than the simple, “If you ever need to talk about something, I’ll be here for you” statements adults sometimes utter without much conviction. Instead, the extent to which adults were deemed accessible was communicated through their actions. Simple acts, such as noticing that a young person was nervous or in need of someone to listen to them, were regarded as an expression of caring and concern:

They try to help with problems too, like I can remember when my Dad died, like you don’t know how many teachers were so caring about it, and they like tried to like do whatever they could to like make it better. I still have teachers like that who understand my problems.

Many of the examples of accessibility were positive – a reflection of the emphasis that the schools placed on encouraging teachers and administrators to make themselves emotionally available (recall that 71.6% of youth reported having a positive relationship with at least one adult at school). And, from comments made by students, it was clear that having emotionally available adults at school did influence their learning behaviors and sense of connectedness.

However, as this study strongly suggests, youth perceptions of being cared for are based on a far more diverse set of exchanges and experiences than the emotional attentiveness of adults at school. As covered in the previous

Action Item: Emotional Accessibility

Provide “real” acts of care to teens when they need emotional support and encouragement – not just “lip service.”

section, power dynamics also represent a set of relational dimensions that weighed strongly in youth assessments of adults

and their school but which are rarely attended to by the administration.

Giving the Benefit of the Doubt

Another one of these power-related elements, giving youth the benefit of the doubt, came up in the passionate quadrant as well. Giving youth the benefit of the doubt was a close cousin of multi-dimensionality. In this case, however, participants wanted adults to not only recognize that they were unique human beings with multiple dimensions, but wanted adults to also understand that they lived and operated among multiple contexts as well. To understand their behaviors, teens reasoned, it was important to understand the events that precipitated them. Unfortunately, they felt that some adults chronically elected to ignore the contexts within which decisions were made:

Some teachers need to take into consideration that you’re not just dozing off, that you don’t care. They need to take into consideration that maybe something’s happening at home or maybe something happened today that wasn’t you’re fault and maybe you got picked on or you got hurt and they have to understand your viewpoint from it, instead of just having the idea that you’re zoning off, you’re not paying attention on purpose.

Failing to take life progress into account was regarded with even greater resentment. Some youth struggled with the perceived unwillingness among some adults at school to recognize developmental growth and to grant students multiple opportunities to prove themselves even when their judgments faltered at times:

A lot of the teachers are disrespectful. My boyfriend did really, really bad for a couple years and he got kicked out of school, but they let him come back. Now he’s doing so much better, but his old teachers are still treating him like he’s some horrible kid, like they’ll see him go to the bathroom during a class and they’ll wait for him to come out of the bathroom to check his hall pass to make sure he’s supposed to be there. It’s just ridiculous!

Action Items: Give the Benefit of the Doubt

- Understand that teens live and operate among multiple contexts and these contexts affect their decisions.
- Recognize growth and provide multiple developmental opportunities even if, and when, they make mistakes.

Quantity of Work

Issues related to academic pressure trailed relational issues in their power to influence connectedness. When queried about the conditions in school that communicate or erode connectedness, three areas were consistently linked to connectedness across groups and grades. One of these, quantity of work, elicited strong sentiments. Not surprisingly, quantity of work along with several other academic pressure and engagement practices were powerful associates of learning behaviors and attitudes. Boredom and frustration were named as the chief outcomes:

I think boredom is a big reason why people start to hate school. They just get sick of it. It's like you have to wake up, do the same thing every single day and it's like people are sick of it. They just don't want to do it anymore.

A lot of these situations will create like a bad reaction, like, if you get a lot of homework you're not gonna actually look at it and try to learn what's on it. Your just gonna blow through it and try to make it look like you did it so you get credit for it.

One of the reasons quantity of work emerged with such force is because it undermined some young people's sense of control over their time and activities:

It's like as soon as I get home I have to go upstairs to do my homework. Then it cuts into time with your family and friends and it just makes life so boring 'cause every day you go home and do your homework and that's it.

ACTION Items: Quantity of Work

- Give students more sense of control over their work. For example, selection of topics (within state curriculum guidelines), choice of assignments, or team/group work.
- Understand that piling on the work leads to non-engagement and boredom.

Salient Quadrant Conditions

Help me participate in my own learning and make it relevant to my life.

Salient quadrant conditions were those that elicited less passionate discussion than conditions just reviewed but were commonly recognized as factors with lasting impact on attitudes and behaviors, particularly related to learning.

Participatory Techniques

Of all conditions discussed thus far, teacher use of participatory education techniques, those which consistently and actively engaged students in the learning process exhibited the greatest influence on reports that schools were attentive to the conditions that facilitated learning. Of course, this comes as no surprise to education practitioners or scholars. The use of participatory education techniques is nonetheless far from commonplace in most classrooms across the nation and in this study community, in part because the volume of material to be covered and mode of testing do not blend well with informal teaching techniques. Participants linked participatory education strategies with learning behaviors:

I think the classes need to be more interesting and interactive because that's what makes me do bad in classes if I'm really like bored and tired and you're like, oh this is like dragging on forever.. If they made it more interesting ..then you're going to enjoy it and you're going to listen to what people are saying. If it's boring and they make it really like not interesting than nobody's gonna really listen.

Participation meant all kinds of things – interactive games and activities, group work, hands-on activities, innovative demonstration, even humor. The primary reason for its appeal was that it permitted learners the opportunity to tackle problems on their own and in multi-sensory ways. No matter what the form, participation was clearly defined in opposition to only one technique, rote lecture:

They'll sit there with an overhead; they'll make you take the notes. You know, if you've got an overhead, why won't they copy it for you and go over it in class? We don't want to take notes, it takes away from the time for learning.

A number of the focus group participants acknowledged the difficulty of catering to diverse learning styles. Students raising this issue confronted the dilemma many teachers do in accommodating learning preferences and needs. As one participant aptly expressed:

For some people, taking notes is a waste of time. And then for other people, doing like hands on activities isn't helping them at all either, so there has to be a way where they can do both without wasting time for people. I don't know!

Relevance

Alongside discussions of how course content was delivered came discussions about the degree to which course options

Action Items: Participatory Education

- Consistently and actively engage students in the learning process.
- Permit students the opportunity to tackle problems on their own and in multi-sensory ways.
- Include interactive games and activities, group work, hands-on activities, innovative demonstration...even humor.
- Consider implementing an Individualized Education Plan – a plan which describes, in accordance with the student, teacher(s) and his/her parent(s)/guardian(s): yearly learning needs, goals, and focus areas. Students are accountable for designing their plan and meeting objectives. (soundout.org)
- Find ways to engage teens (especially low performance youth) in learning – help them to want to know about the topic by including: community-school partnerships, service learning projects, self guided learning periods, extracurricular activities, etc.

were relevant to their life. Although issues related to relevance came up often, conversations were rarely charged and less associated with lasting impact on youth attitudes or behaviors than issues related to participatory techniques. Discussions related to relevance were characterized by a) the degree to which students were or were not free to take courses that intrinsically interested them, and b) the extent to which standardized school curricula covered content areas they felt important to life outside of intellectual development. The latter feature was of primary concern for seniors, although it came up for some sophomores as well.

In its most common and least potent form, frustration over not having sufficient freedom to choose their own courses revolved around not being able to identify, explore, and satisfy intrinsic interests:

When I go to college or whatever, I'm not going to want to major in science or something, and I feel like I'm wasting time by taking this class when I could be doing something else that I want to do for my career when I grow up.

Such comments were rarely overtly linked to connectedness, but often became so as the conversation deepened. Knowing that the merits of standardized, strongly academic curricula is regularly debated, these comments were followed by a question about how they would respond to the argument that students are likely to change their minds about what they want to do and would benefit from a broad based education rather than one targeted at possibly fleeting interests. Participant responses most often emphasized their desire to exercise more control over what they invest

time and energy learning – particularly as they age and become increasingly clear about their interests.

Ironically, some youth desired flexibility in the curricula for the very reasons school curricula are often so regimented – because pursuing courses in their areas of interest and ability heightened their GPA and college eligibility. This concern surfaced among youth of all grades, even as early as eighth grade. In their minds, forcing them to take courses that held little intrinsic interest for them simply reduced their capacity to set themselves up for success by gaining entrance to college in a competitive environment that

demands a nearly perfect record. As a result, it sometimes seemed during these discussions that their ability to enjoy learning something new was drastically curtailed by concern about grades:

If you like know what you want to be, like if you were gonna be something that only involved science than what's the point of social studies gonna do. If you're doing really bad in that, it's gonna bring down your average, you're not gonna get into a good college, so that kind of screws up what you're gonna do in life.

The inability to chart the academic path most likely to ensure good grades and thus success beyond high school frequently led to discussion about the relevance of school curricula to other areas of their life. Although debate continues among policy makers and educators about the role of school in preparing youth for the “real” world, several youth in this study charged that standardized school curricula simply were not enough:

They stress math is so important for your life. What about everything else that is so important like social skills, like learning how to do presentations in front of people, learning about our nutrition, health and how to stay fit.

Youth desire flexibility in the curricula for the very reasons curricula are often so regimented – because pursuing courses in their areas of interest raise their GPA, and therefore, college eligibility.

Action Items: Relevance

- Try to assess and convey the importance of what they are learning to their current and future life outside of school.
- Help students make significant contributions. Encourage the creation of a student led evaluation team – conducting school wide survey and focus groups regarding curriculum relevance, participatory education practices, and student decision-making.
- Consider forming “Student as Planners” committee – to foster constructive dialogue regarding curriculum, participatory techniques, technology, building design, policies and guidelines, and classroom activities that propel engagement for all youth.
- Help students create learning pathways that are intrinsically interesting to them. For example, offer choice of assignments and/or sit down with students to ascertain interest/needs.

The stuff that we're learning, half of it doesn't pertain to stuff we're gonna need to use when we're an adult. Teach us something that we can actually see as useful. They teach us so much stuff that we will never need to know.

In light of the immense pressures placed on schools, teachers, and students to perform and the degree to which life success is equated to academic success, it was not at all surprising that the relevance of school curricula surfaced as a key issue for young people. Indeed, on one of the survey items, a full 85.9% of respondents in each grade said they would be willing to spend **more** time learning skills to prepare for the future. And, while focus group data suggested more time preparing for the future included additional academic preparation for college, it also included life beyond books.

Uncertain Quadrant Conditions

Make my work meaningful, allow for one-on-one attention, care about what you teach me, don't teach to the test, and let me live for now.

“Uncertain” quadrant themes that correlated with connectedness in the focus groups were those related to **academic engagement, school structure, and academic pressure**. Compared to conditions in other quadrants, these came up less frequently, were associated with less specific and enduring impacts on attitudes or behaviors, and were spoken of with less passion and force across the group as a whole. Nevertheless, youth discussions about the conditions listed here conveyed a clear sense that they did make a difference in their connectedness to school – they just were

not exactly sure how. When impacts were mentioned or displayed, they, like the salience quadrant conditions, were most often related to learning behaviors.

Meaningful Work

Participant perceptions that the work they did at school was “meaningful” – more than mere busywork, scored close to relevance in the matrix. Relevance captured discussions about curricula, as a whole, while meaningful work captured discussions about work in the classroom. As shown in Chart 4.2, the recommendation “give meaningful homework, not busy work” garnered the highest rate of agreement (43.7%)

among all students. Meaningful work was described as work with a purpose that was clear and sensible to youth. Busy work, on the other hand, consisted of assignments lacking obvious educational purpose.

Nearly 50 percent of students surveyed report high rates of boredom at school!

Such assignments were criticized because they produced boredom – a condition lethal to learning. Students described it this way:

I have a teacher that makes us color a map every time we start a new unit. And that takes like half an hour, or 45 minutes, and I could be taking that time and doing homework for another class that's actually gonna help me with something, you know, not coloring. A lot of teachers do stuff like that.

Although such complaints are easily dismissed as a fundamental condition of school and adolescence, the universality of the sentiments, as reflected in focus groups and survey data, is something to contend with. Not only was meaningful homework the top ranked recommendation across grades, but levels of boredom in the survey were abysmal. Only 30 percent of respondents indicated that they were not bored at school while nearly 50 percent reported high rates of boredom at school.

Action Items: Meaningful Work

- Give work that is meaningful, not just busy work.
- Remember that boredom is the antithesis of learning.

Classroom Practices

Class size was discussed almost as often as meaningful work in conjunction with connectedness, particularly among eighth and tenth grade students. Although seldom identified as a priority area for discussion during the group interviews, nearly 20% of youth identified it as a priority concern and it was consistently cited as a barrier to many of the changes students desired.

To some extent, a teacher's success in **engaging youth in the material**, regardless of class size and other connectedness conditions, relied upon the degree to which youth felt the teachers were themselves engaged with the material:

The teachers seem almost as lax about the subject as the kids do. They just go in there and they're like, "Yeah, I know you guys don't want to do this stuff. I don't either. So let's just get through it." Even if we don't do games, if the teacher seems to enjoy the subject and kind of gets into it, it makes the subject seem so much better.

Student comments on classroom practices and environment were multifaceted and strikingly perceptive at times. Some students recognized that one of the reasons some teachers lack conviction or interest in their subject might relate to the degree of pressure teachers receive to structure class content around standardized tests. Indeed, understanding the pressure placed on schools and teachers to promote good student performance on **standardized tests** prompted a fair amount of discussion and colored student assessment of teachers and schools in general:

Sometimes, like I think they're teaching more to the test. We have to know what's for the test and then there are some things that kids don't even know, like the simplest stuff that doesn't get taught because they're only teaching to the test.

One of the reasons for youth dissatisfaction with standardized tests was that it undermined deep-set desires to craft a

ACTion Items: Classroom Practices

- Support and advocate for smaller learning communities.
- Although it may not be possible to fundamentally alter curriculum, support changes or strategies that enable teacher engagement, as passion on the part of the instructor instills interest on the part of the students.
- Teach beyond tests.

multidimensional self at school. Reduction of their personhood into a score that was deemed to have some meaningful predictive power about their future thwarted efforts to add dimensions to their public identity and to envision a positive future:

Like me, I don't see the point of taking state tests because they don't know you personally. They can't tell you if you're going to make it in middle school or if you're gonna make it into high school and stuff! I just think that they're pointless because they're grading you on what you do on a test situation. You spend a whole year studying for it and so even if the teacher wants to do something different they can't because they have to get ready for the test.

Academic Pressure and Student Life

Although it is clearly important to hold positive and high expectations for young people, it is understandably difficult to know how much pressure is "too much" and how much is enough to energize and motivate. For the young people interviewed in this study, the answer seemed to hinge on the capacities and past experiences of each individual young person. It was quite clear that for young people in advanced placement classes, high academic standards facilitated their goals and did not typically overtax their resources, although concern about grades and future success was evident at every level. For students struggling with school, however, pressure to perform to continually higher standards without adequate resources was very taxing and dropping out of school was a major topic of discussion for many within the group of at-risk seniors.

Academic pressures seemed to divide youth into two camps – those who conform and perform and those who do not. Conformers were "rewarded" with the right to exercise power through school appointments on school and community committees, through extracurricular opportunities, and through the right to "represent" other students in limited school governance roles. Student councils arose as a point of discussion regarding how the right to participate was restricted to popular and high achieving students – those already most likely to have access to a number of supports and opportunities. This restricted access simply exaggerated the distance between those already well connected to school and those with little reason to care (or be cared for):

That thing last year with the representatives where most of them said "I'm on the honor roll and I did all this and I took the SATs and I did all this stuff..." Why didn't anybody just walk up there

and say, “You know, I’m not perfect; I don’t get As all the time, but I think I can make a difference.”

Future Orientation

Concerns about their fate, success, and the future were dominant themes among all participants. Often embedded in these discussions, however, was an implicit orientation toward the future that limited young people’s ability to realize the full potential of now. As one high achieving young woman said:

There’s so much pressure to live for tomorrow...I just want to be a kid today!

This theme reoccurred consistently:

It’s so much more difficult now. I know a lot of us are in honors and AP classes, but still, I’m not even near the top. If I want to get into a good university I have to do extracurricular activities. I’m in all these honors classes, but I know there’s so many more. It’s so more, more competitive and it’s so difficult. Doing extracurricular stuff, you know, just so you can get accepted into an acceptable college.

Concern about time was inherent in the excessive focus on the future. Even among eighth graders, the pressures to manage school, extracurricular activities (which many recognized as a pre-requisite for college), and to make time for family and friends weighed heavily on their minds.

Youth in every eighth grade focus group worried that less than an A grade in an art class would translate into a poor college education and a failed life. This way of thinking is reinforced continually by schools, parents, and the larger community and helps to explain why cheating on exams and lying about grades and other accomplishments are at an all time high among youth (and probably adults as well).

“Time management” was a popular response among students when asked what they worried about. They often seemed caught – between childhood and adulthood, between the “musts” and “shoulds” of their daily lives, and the desire to have more control of their time and less pressure to fill it. In many ways, their lives were miniature versions of many adult lives – filled to the brim with activities and tasks designed to insure or safeguard the future. Ironically, contrary to what some might think,

Spending time with family is a high priority for youth.

Action Items: Academic Pressure and Student Life

- Find ways to support and connect with youth who do not feel developmentally supported and are not naturally academically inclined.
- Actively look for ways to involve and engage as many youth as possible in school governance.
- Adopt methods of student representation that more actively involve a greater number of students and are more democratic in nature.

having time to spend with family was a high priority for most of the youth in this study; on a survey question asking students to identify which of the thirteen activities listed they are most interested spending time in, spending time with family ranked second overall (behind spending time with friends).¹⁴ Time to do so, however, seemed in short supply:

It seems that the average high school student probably spends more time in school or athletics or music directly related to school than the average adult does at work. It flies in the face of the idea this person of this age should be getting more sleep than actually anyone else.

The negative attributes about the emphasis on the future should not be confused with planned behavior or positive goal orientation – which has been shown to positively impact well-being and future outcomes.¹⁵ In this case, youth identified the excessive need to prepare for the future at the expense of today. Similar discussion is occurring at the national level related to the impact of what is perceived by some as excessive amounts of homework and the effect it has on family life, well-being, and learning.¹⁶

Action Items: Future Orientation

- Help youth understand and capture the full potential of “now.”
- Be aware of messages youth receive which communicate that failure or inadequate accomplishment now will result in a terrible future.
- Emphasize the importance of living with integrity now.
- Help them manage time and activities – taking time out for friends, family and “down time.”

Discussion

The most common and potent theme revealed in both the survey and the focus groups revolved around the degree to which youth, as a group, are permitted to participate in structuring the environment that determines the daily activities of their lives. Youth in this study were blessed with well-resourced schools clearly invested in their learning, and yet, the findings clearly indicate that they perceive a lack of **agency** (power, participation, means to effect change) – the single most critical factor in determining the degree to which they felt connected to school. By and large, the young people studied perceived that schools served two primary functions: inculcating conformity and academically preparing them to begin their lives...later.

Adult relationships with youth, was clearly most central in this study, in part, because adults are the gatekeepers of power and change. The extent to which adults used their power to accommodate or thwart young people's strong need to develop a positive and multifaceted sense of self were the dimensions by which youth evaluated adults. Like family, school emerged in this study as a place in which the tensions between childhood and adulthood are played out. Heightened adolescent need for visibility and recognition meant that adult actions which knowing or unknowingly affected youth self-evaluations took on exaggerated weight. It was clear that adults at school were particularly powerful agents for conferring personhood – and little actions, many of which would go unnoticed by adults, took on great meaning for many study participants.

Struggle over adult and institutional use of power and control formed the backdrop of much of the discussion around adults at school. In the focus groups, this played out as tension over adult willingness to provide resources critical to development: **time, the benefit of the doubt, multiple opportunities to succeed even in the light of past failures, and the extent to which adults used their status unfairly.** In the survey data, it was even clearer – meaningful opportunities to be engaged, or at least to know that other youth they respected were engaged in decision making roles was by far the most powerful correlate to connectedness of all variables tested. Such findings also resonate with literature that indicates adolescents value adults for their role as instrumental guardians of desired resources, as much as for the emotional and social support they provide.¹⁷

The tendency for adults to ignore the power issues and for youth to focus strongly on them in assessing connectedness may be why the assistant superintendent of one of the

school districts noted such enormous gaps in his adult vs. youth surveys. Two years ago, his school district asked all adults in their secondary schools to estimate the percentage of youth they believed felt cared for in their school.

Meaningful opportunities to be engaged, or at least to know that other youth they respected were engaged in decision making roles was by far the most powerful correlate to connectedness of all variables tested.

The adults estimated that over 90% of youth in their institution felt cared for. However, when they queried youth directly they found that less than 25% of youth indicated that they felt cared for.

Ultimately, the lesson of this study is that school connectedness, and the host of benefits it cultivates, will reach an optimal level only when the public decides that youth should be constituents rather than products. This was articulated by an assistant superintendent with twenty years of experience in education within the study community:

I think that we pay lip-service to the fact that we are there to serve kids, but if a constituent for the school system means constituent in most people's view of the world – those who vote and pay the bills – then no, they are not. Kids don't vote and pay the bills so they are "constituents" only in a very patronizing way. Learning is measured by how they (students) do on standardized tests, and so you have high-end testing. So what becomes important? What becomes important is what's important to the adults – how your school is performing. If you were to ask kids whether or not that was important to them, they would probably say that learning is important, okay, but it's not all encompassing – it would not be the primary focus for what school ought to be about.

Connectedness: Life in the Community

What do youth say makes them feel connected to community?

What conditions are influential in determining how connected youth feel to their community? Whereas the ability to exercise power, participation and autonomy were important to youth in the day-to-day workings of life at school, study participants were consistently uncertain about young people's status, rights, desirability, and literal and figurative place in their community. Occupying public space, adult attitudes toward youth within public spaces, the sense of not being a valued constituency, and interactions with police were prominently linked to community connectedness across all grades. The consistency with which these issues emerged across all study methods reinforce the conclusion that, from a youth perspective, the process of becoming a citizen of their community in their own and others' eyes, is often rarely acknowledged or addressed by adult community members and leaders.

Survey Results

The survey was designed to understand the way demographic characteristics, conditions other than those in the community, and developmental supports within the community contribute to community connectedness. The findings suggest that young people's relationship to their community was complex. While it was clear that many youth perceived a few critical developmental supports, it was also clear that youth connectedness had much

Place & Perception

While it was clear that many youth perceived a few critical developmental supports, it was also clear that youth connectedness to community had much to do with the social and political landscape of the community and of young people's perceived place in it.

to do with the social and political landscape of the community and of young people's perceived place in it. Community connectedness was moderate with a little under half of the respondents indicating that they both perceived that they were well regarded and that they felt positive about the community as well. Over three quarters of all youth surveyed, reported positive relationships with at least one adult outside of their home and family, felt they could rely on the police, and perceived that adults in town did not discriminate based on appearance. Just about half of the participants felt safe in their community and felt that there were enough opportunities for creative engagement. However, only one in five (22.4%) participants indicated that they perceived that youth had meaningful roles in the community.

Chart 5.1 on page 31 illustrates what variables mattered most for community connectedness among youth. For participants in this study, community connectedness was primarily associated with conditions in the community rather than with demographic characteristics or with extra-school factors such as religiosity, group involvement, relationships with peers, or academic achievement. As with school connectedness, positive parental relationships were a significant predictor of community connectedness. Aside from relations with parents and grade, a number of alterable developmental supports were strongly linked to school connectedness.

In order of influence, the **strongest correlates** to community connectedness were:

1. Meaningful roles
2. Creative engagement
3. Police reliability
4. Intergenerational relationships
5. Fairness regardless of appearance
6. Safety

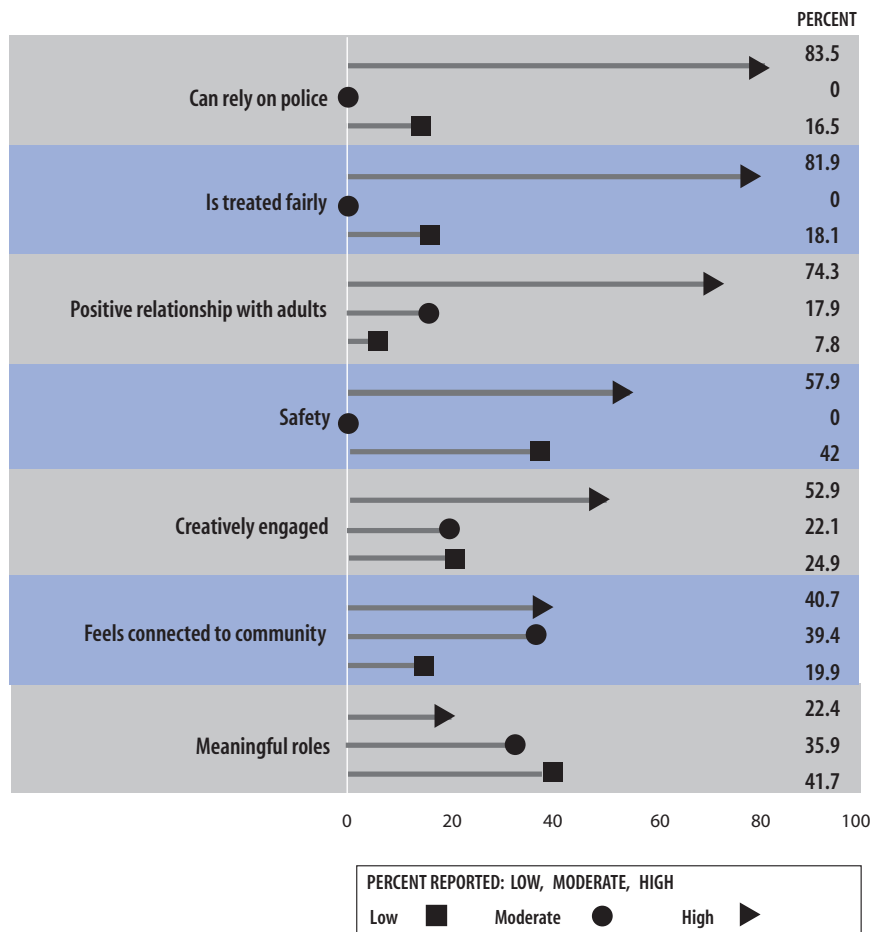
The survey also showed that:

- Older youth (particularly seniors) were far less likely than their younger peers to feel connected, to believe they could rely on the police, and to be involved in community groups.
- The only variable where females significantly differed from males was in the perception of positive relationships with adults in the community (girls perceived more positive relationships).

Developmental supports are the building blocks of social capital for youth and are the means by which communities benefit from youth vitality and talent.¹⁸ The low levels of meaningful roles (22.4%) and the moderate levels of community engagement (52.9%) reported suggest that, at least for youth in this study, the possibilities of building social capital for and between youth and their community have yet to be fully realized.

Focus group discussion helped to explain survey findings by revealing a subtle discussion about belonging, voice, and the desire to occupy public space comfortably. The focus groups also reinforced the importance of

Chart 5.1 Perceptions of Community Life



The chart indicates responses as: "Low" ("strongly disagree" or "disagree"), Moderate (moderate response) and High ("strongly agree").

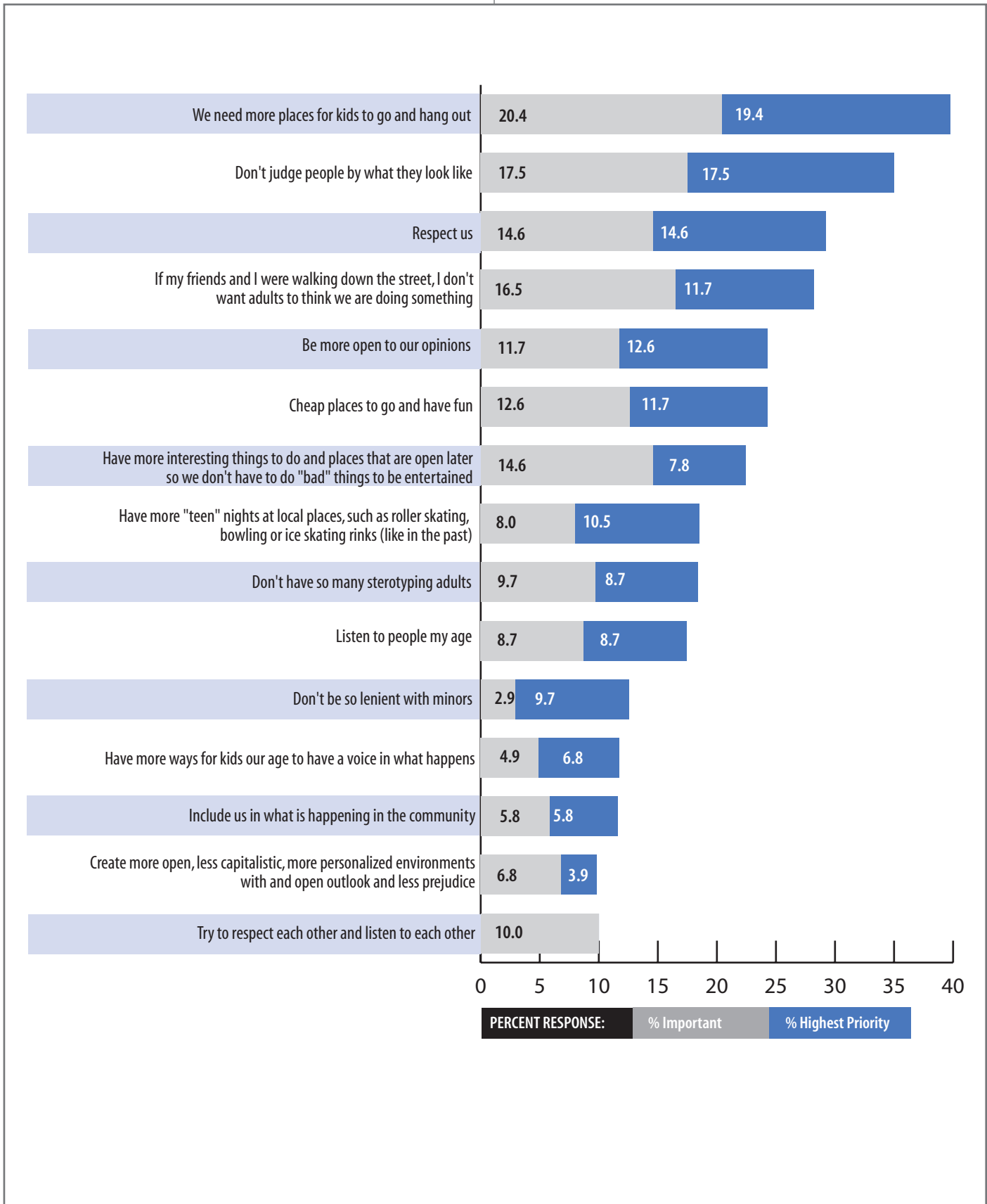
having a role to play, of being heard, of simply being visible and valued in a larger community setting. This method also raised an entirely new dimension of youth-community relations – the psychological effects of **unknown** rather than simply **known** adults on individual and collective youth-adult relations. It is to these issues that we now turn.

Focus Group Results

Focus groups were initiated by asking youth participants to identify comments, made by respondents on the survey, with which they most strongly agreed. (See Appendix A: "Recommendation Agreement Method" for details). Chart 5.2 shows the most common youth recommendations needed to improve life in the community.

Chart 5.2 Teen Recommendations: Improving Life in the Community

This chart shows the most common recommendations youth made about improving life in the community.



Overall, the conditions that arose were parallel to those that emerged in the survey:

- Discrimination by unknown adults because of age.
- The perception of not being welcomed in public, particularly in businesses.
- The desire for more opportunities to socialize, or at least to have better access to the opportunities that existed.
- The desire for greater youth influence in community level decision making, functions, and events.

By and large, the areas that emerged in the recommendations exercise neatly encompassed the dominant themes that came up in focus group discussion as well. The last two items listed on the table above are noteworthy because, although they did not garner exceptionally high levels of agreement here, they reflect a desire for community unity – a theme that emerges more strongly in the focus groups among older youth in particular.

Of course, many of the conditions that arose during the course of discussion were highly interconnected. But not all were linked to feeling connected (respected, cared about, and trusted) to community. Looking for themes that were discussed in relation to connectedness in at least three separate instances across at least two grades revealed four “persistent themes” and seven distinct associated conditions. These youth suggested conditions, shown in Chart

Action Items: Enhance Community Connectedness

- Provide opportunities for youth to be involved in community level decision making.
- Strengthen young people’s access to adults.
- Provide ample community-level opportunities to share talents and interests.

5.3 below, offer the greatest potential for facilitating (or inhibiting) young people in eighth, tenth and twelfth grade in forming connective, productive bonds with their community.

Notably, although entertainment, an area most well-meaning communities devote resources to strengthening, was an important theme, it was dwarfed by issues related to adult treatment of young people and young people’s perceived power to affect community affairs.

Looking for conditions participants linked to connectedness across focus group and grade helped to sort out conditions that affected respondents’ perceptions of their community from those with seemingly little influence. It did not, however, say much about which of the areas identified might prove the most potent in affecting connectedness.

Chart 5.3 Conditions Associated with Community Connectedness

THEMATIC CATEGORY	SPECIFIC CONDITION
Adult–Youth Relations	Attitudes of unknown adults on streets and in businesses <i>(Adult attitudes)</i>
	Police relations <i>(Police Relations)</i>
Creative Engagement	Entertainment options <i>(Entertainment Options)</i>
Power and Voice in Community Affairs	Knowledge of community affairs <i>(Knowledge)</i>
	Venues for input into community affairs <i>(Input)</i>
	Young people’s role in community affairs <i>(Youth as Valued Constituency)</i>
Belonging and Public Space	Adult tolerance/endorsement of youth presence in public space <i>(Place in Pubic Space)</i>

To take the analysis a step further, two additional dimensions were used, the **tone** youth used to talk about the theme and the **impact** youth felt the theme had in influencing their behaviors. These two dimensions were used to develop a matrix that showed how potent each condition was in influencing community connectedness among youth.

Plotting conditions in this way makes it much easier to see how the themes cluster together on dimensions of importance. The matrix presents the conditions in four quadrants of influence: **powerful** (passionate tone, high impact), **impassioned** (passionate tone, low impact), **salient** (moderate tone, high impact) and **uncertain** (moderate tone, low impact).

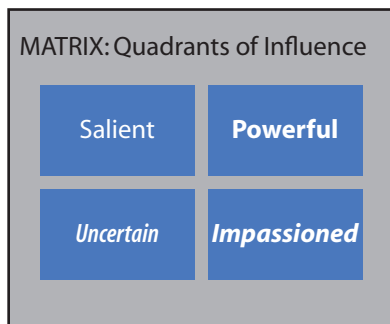
The advantage of ordering the themes in this way is that they suggest a magnitude of effect on connectedness. Conditions in the powerful quadrant are those that exerted the strongest effect on connectedness; those in the uncertain quadrant exerted a measurable but lesser effect on connectedness.

Unlike the school matrix in which connectedness related-conditions were scattered about in all quadrants, distribution of the community-related connectedness conditions show far less variation – the majority of conditions are clustered in the “powerful” quadrant.

Powerful Quadrant conditions include discussion surrounding participants’ **perceptions of adult attitudes regarding youth** including being **unwanted in public**, about the pervasive sense that young people were not a **valued constituency** in their community, and about the **role of police** in young people’s community life.

Entertainment options, the only condition in the Salient Quadrant, was a frequent topic of discussion and was consistently linked to risk behavior due to boredom, but was spoken about with far less passion than those conditions in the powerful quadrant. There were **no items** in the **Impassioned Quadrant**.

Having input into actual **community affairs and access to knowledge about what is happening in the community** fell into the **Uncertain**



Quadrant. These conditions were most weakly linked to community connectedness across group and grade.

Powerful Quadrant Conditions

Don’t discriminate against us, value our perspective on community affairs, welcome us in public, and don’t target us for surveillance simply because we are youth!

Being welcomed in public space was about belonging, respect, opportunities to connect in meaningful ways with each other and the community as a whole. Being welcomed in public space communicated acceptance, invitation, and appreciation. Unfortunately, many felt as though they were unwelcome in public spaces, in business, and on the street. They felt that adults regarded young people as a threat and as little more than potential troublemakers.

The faces of “town” discussed most frequently in the interviews were those encountered **anonymously** in everyday experiences – in stores, in entertainment venues

Being welcomed in public space was about belonging, respect, opportunities to connect in meaningful ways with each other and the community as a whole.

youth frequented, and during encounters on the streets with police and neighbors. These strands of town identity emerged, in part,

because 1) these were the aspects of town that youth had the most direct experience and frustration with, and 2) encounters with suspicious business owners and police formed lasting impressions that represent the town’s identity in the eyes of its young people.

Perceptions of Adult Attitudes Regarding Youth

Youth roaming and loitering are a means of making themselves visible and a part of the larger community but are often viewed negatively by adults. It was abundantly clear from the focus groups that experiencing persistent negative adult attitudes was one of the most profound

This study suggests that seemingly innocuous encounters with anonymous adults during daily life routines may be one of the mechanisms through which young people receive, internalize, and possibly externalize messages about who they are in a community.

ways youth received messages about their place in the community:

It's everybody, not just the cops. You're a teenager... They did the exact same things when they were young, so they think they know what we're up to. My parents assume that if I come home late, I was drinking, because that's what they did. People stare out the windows at you late at night. I have a neighbor who says that the street is his and he watches over it. Youth feel uncomfortable out in the street. There are a lot of assumptions about kids our age.

In eighth grade you're still cute, but in high school you "grew up." People think high-schoolers are a bunch of burnouts.

I feel judged especially by the adults. Like if you do something different they think you do drugs. I always feel like adults are staring at me and watching me.

Youth tend to be very sensitive to perceived slights and not all of what they perceive may be an accurate reflection of adult intentions. However, in many instances, these negative perceptions originated from an assumption that many adults tended to "age-profile" – to make one-dimensional assumptions about capacity or intended behavior based on a caricature of "youth" promoted by the media or via experiences with a small number of adolescents. Indeed, one need not look far to find evidence that such perceptions by teens may be quite accurate. For example, in an effort to thwart disruptive behavior of several young men at a large mall in a nearby urban center, mall managers implemented a new policy in the Fall of 2002: all youth under the age of 17 must be accompanied by guardians over the age of 21 after 4 pm on Fridays and Saturdays. Profiling by demographic features other than age generally elicits public outcries of injustice. In this case, however, there was not even one letter to the editor protesting the assumptions about youth trustworthiness embedded in such actions.

Participant perceptions of discrimination and age-profiling begin to explain why less than half (41.1%) of youth respon-

Action Items: Age Profiling

- Try to avoid making assumptions based on age or appearance.
- Challenge assumptions and assertions made by the media and general public that portray youth negatively.

dents indicated that they felt cared for in their community. It also may explain why youth offered examples of disconnectedness far more often than connectedness. The events and situations most strongly associated with uncomfortable or disrespectful behavior of adults toward youth were those that occurred in two places: 1) on the streets (even their own streets) and 2) in businesses.

The experiences of youth on the streets of their community, whether in their neighborhood or roaming around, contributed to their perception that they were not valued members of the community. Indeed, the second highest ranked recommendation was, "Don't judge people by what they look like" and was followed closely by the third highest ranked recommendation, "Respect us." Businesses were overwhelmingly cited as the most common site of perceived discrimination for young people of all ages. In virtually every group interview, students described a negative experience in a local business. Though the slights were sometimes small, the impact was lasting because it communicated and reinforced many young people's perception that their age made them untrustworthy and therefore an undesirable part of the town:

Me and my friend went to <a local business> and we were the first people there. It was lunch hour and so all these adults started piling in... Our waitress didn't come 'til way after all the adults got served 'cause they think we're not gonna pay them right or give 'em a good tip or whatever, and it's unfair. That's how it is in a lot of places.

Yesterday, I went into the store and the people are like looking at us like we're gonna go in there and take something, and I told them, "I don't steal so you don't have to look at me." It irritates me when people are just sitting there, "Oh just look at him," like I'm really gonna go into the corner store and steal something.

Although the perceived offense in each of these scenarios seems trivial, the message youth perceive is fundamentally the same: "You don't count as much as an adult does." If young people's experiences in businesses were the only places they perceived this message, it may not carry so much weight. Unfortunately, however, stories of perceived discrimination in encounters with unknown adults in town dominated the group interviews. Business was a common site, but anonymous encounters on the streets were another:

There's this little sort of patch of grass in the middle of my street like the little islands and there's like all these trees. Well, me and

my friend, we always used to climb the trees in the middle and this old fart would like come out and start yelling at us. He's like, "Is that your house over there?!" And we're like, "No." And he's like, "Then get off the tree." And the funny thing is it's all public property. It's not private, it's not somebody's front lawn, it's just the middle of the street.

Action Items: Individuality

- Despite the tendency to treat all youth similarly, each of them is a distinct individual.
- Assume the best, give them the benefit of the doubt, and provide ample opportunities in individual and institutional encounters to meet your most positive expectations.

Positive Interactions: Respect

Although survey results indicate that most survey participants had positive contacts with adults in their community (74.3% of survey respondents indicated that they had a positive relationship with at least one adult outside of school and home), very little discussion of those relationships emerged in the focus groups, even when youth were directly asked what aspects of community life felt caring and respectful. Most often when asked about respect, participants identified types of interactions with unknown adults that felt respectful. These interactions were those in which unknown adults assumed the best of youth and treated them with the same courtesy and assumed capacity afforded to adults:

There's this one lady at the bagel store and she respects everyone. She always says whenever we buy anything, "Have a happy day" or "Have a nice day" or something like that.

<Respect is when> adults call us "sir" or "ma'am" in restaurants. When they don't treat us like a different age group – treat us the same as what they are. They talk about politics and everyday life and don't act superior. They trust you and let you do stuff that they normally wouldn't let "kids" do.

Action Items: Respect

- Notice when youth are discriminated against in public places and intervene.
- Be role models by being respectful of youth regardless of their appearance – acknowledge their existence by looking them in the eye, smiling, saying hello, and addressing them with the same respect you would as an adult.

Adults show respect for us when they are positive. They say "hello," they shake your hand, and look you in the eye.

If you're walking on the sidewalk and some people smile at you and say, "Hi." Even better, they actually ask a question. Something different, something that shows that they might actually care.

Unwanted in Public

The potency of the more anonymous, negative encounters many youth reported may reflect a deeper, more concerning message. Central to the discussion regarding perceived adult discrimination was a **yearning to be a part of the community, to belong, to be recognized and appreciated in public places** instead being looked down upon or merely tolerated. Lessening perceived adult discrimination was part of this, but there was more to it than that. Embedded within discussion about place was an internalized belief that adolescents should not be seen or heard:

How come everybody else has a place they can go and hang out, but for some reason there's a lot of teenagers and there's not a lot of places that we are allowed to go to. What are we supposed to do? We're people too! We need places to go. We need things to do. Just because we're teenagers we're not allowed to go to the mall or wherever or stand there. You take up space, we need to be somewhere.

What was so striking about this litany of comments was the hurt that lay below the surface. Without listening carefully, it would be easy to hear only young people's complaints about boredom – something easily written off as a quintessential condition of adolescence. Underneath this, however, was sincere hurt at feeling rejected as a citizen of the community solely on the basis of age. Feeling discriminated against by adults was certainly a strong element, but it transcended this. Connectedness was linked to the right to simply occupy public space with a sense of legitimacy. In addition to prompting youth divestment from their community, perceptions that youth were unwanted were linked, in the minds of some youth, to isolation and to heightened drug use:

Jess: Yeah and they don't make it out to be like we have people there for us whenever we need to talk to someone. I could see how someone could be completely frustrated and like devastated and lonely and not have anyone

to talk to. You really do not feel like there's anyone that you can go to.

Sam: Right, and that leads to like kids doing drugs and getting into trouble because there's nothing to do. You have these problems, but no one to talk to. Some groups of friends are genuine and others like to get you in trouble, so it's just whatever is accepted by you at that point in your life.

Similar comments arose over and over again in a myriad of ways. Being welcomed in public space was about belonging, respect, opportunities to connect in meaningful ways with each other and the community as a whole. Being welcomed in public space communicated acceptance, invitation, and appreciation. Unfortunately, however, many felt as though they were unwelcome in community spaces.

Not a Valued Constituency

In addition to the general sentiment among participants that most adults were not interested in seeing youth, at least without their parents, there was strong agreement that being heard was completely out of the question. Young people are socialized, schooled, disciplined, and entertained in a community but are seldom valued constituents of their community. They lack access to any of the resources necessary to influence the profound role their communities play in their development; they cannot vote, they cannot hold office, they sit on few, if any, decision making bodies. When individual young people serve on town decision-making bodies, it is usually not as true representatives of other young people since adults appoint them. In short, young people rely exclusively on adults to represent their interests. Perhaps this is why, when asked to compare the experiences of being an adolescent now

Central to the discussion regarding perceived adult discrimination was a yearning to be a part of the community, to belong, to be recognized and appreciated in public places instead being looked down upon or merely tolerated.

ACTION Items: A Valued Constituency

- Young people contribute vitality, service and labor, money, and fresh ideas to their communities. In fact, in economic terms alone, teens (ages 12-19) spent \$175 billion in 2003, of which, approximately \$125 billion was teenagers' own money. Teens spend an average of \$103 per week. (teensearch.com, 2004)
- Find ways to systematically think about and treat youth as a valuable constituency.

with what it was like a generation ago, there was broad agreement that expectations, opportunities, and pressures are greater now. There was, however, less agreement about whether young peoples' power and initiative to control their present and their futures are greater now than in previous generations:

We feel like the town doesn't even consider doing what we want... We don't really feel like we can do things and something would happen. It's more like <they just want us to> go out and have a good time, you know.

Kids really can't say anything because they don't want to listen to us. We might have all these good ideas and want to tell people, but they say, "Why would we want to listen to you, you're just like a bunch of little kids."

The resulting sense of powerlessness generated apathy among some and was accompanied by a conviction that their age rendered them vulnerable to injustice. The depth of resentment these feelings generated was evident in the strong statements which arose:

There is a strong barrier where kids just feel that this is just a place where I live and I have no say in what's going on and therefore I don't care!

Role of Police

To some extent, the attention police in the study community paid to youth perpetuated the perception that youth were not a constituency. Strong police presence is a source of pride within the study community – even among youth. It was clear, however, that heavy surveillance of the community's young people was one of the strategies adopted to maintain the community's safety record. Indeed, the community initiated a police program to routinely stop and question youth in public places, regardless of whether they were engaged in disruptive behavior. As a result, the relationship between youth and police was complex. Eighty four percent who answered the survey question about safety indicated that they could rely on the police. Nearly 60% said that they feel safe in all areas of town they frequent.¹⁹ When asked during the group interviews whether they felt safe in town, a strong majority of students indicated they did; that their community is known nationally as a very safe place is an

unmistakable part of the town identity in the minds of its young people.

Nevertheless, the frequency of contact between youth and the police was widespread and somewhat startling. Even among eighth graders, negative encounters with the police were common. In most cases, respondents described

Many young people understood that police officers perform important roles and that youth benefit from the emphasis placed on town safety. The difference between a negative and positive encounter with police was the attitude of the officer(s) relative to the offense... Youth discomfort with police stemmed from a belief that it was youth that officers were supposed to protect the town against.

random stops and questioning, but young people were also struck by what they perceived as disproportionate police responses to offenses.

Comments such as these were common in the group interviews:

Now the cops are just on you like all the time. Like if

you're not even doing anything, just for like being around.

'Cause there's so many of them, they have nothing to do. In the Police Blotter you will see the crazy things the people call the cops for, "There was a suspicious teenager walking down the street. Upon further investigation, it was determined to be the neighbor."

Although negative experiences with the police were widespread and generally regarded as offensive by young people, some youth described positive encounters. In these cases, young people either knew the individual police officers that patrolled their neighborhood or had non-threatening, even pleasant, encounters. Many young people understood that police officers performed important roles and understood that they benefited from the emphasis placed on safety in their town. There were differences, though, in their feelings about how the town police performed their duties. Echoing the themes that ran through youth comments about their relationship to school and town, the difference between a negative and positive encounter with police was the attitude of the officer(s) relative to the offense:

"Me and a bunch of friends were playing roller hockey in some parking lot or something like that. And I remember somebody kept complaining about us and the cop kept coming. We must've

talked to him for about an hour just about tons of different stuff. Like all the way from his job to hockey or whatever. I mean and then the guy came back because they complained again and he still didn't really care, he just told us to move down farther down the parking lot a little bit. I know a couple cops like that."

Other students, however, had a more negative view of how officers performed their jobs. Their discomfort stemmed from a belief that it was youth that officers were supposed to protect the town against. Indeed, when one group asked whether they felt safe in town, there was a chorus of "Yes!" followed by a young person's comment, "We're the only ones people feel scared about, so we don't need to be scared about each other."

Salient Quadrant Conditions

We need places to gather together, to hangout, talk, and have fun.

Entertainment

Having more public venues for socializing with friends was an issue that arose often and that participants often linked to behavior. Despite the criticism focus group participants often leveled at this topic, half of all survey respondents indicated that they felt creatively engaged in their community. In light of the fact that the study community has dedicated significant funds and energy toward creating social outlets for young people, looking deeper for the reasons underlying participant discontent was important. On the surface, the issue was clear and echoed complaints issued by youth everywhere, "There's nothing for us to do in this town." And, as has become nearly common knowledge, out of boredom spring risk behaviors as youth attest:

I put more places for kids to hang out because like if there were more places that kids could go, then they wouldn't have to resort to doing stuff like blowing up mailboxes. There is nothing to do! I know kids who sit in people's basements every weekend getting high or drunk or doing sexual stuff.

Boredom, a couple of students recognized, emerges from more than a lack of community provided opportunities; it comes from rapid changes within as well:

It's just that like you could take the most fun thing in the world and do it 20 times in a row and then it's boring and that's what we do. Like, we'll take that, do it a lot and get sick of it, and then have no where to go. Like I think that's a problem with us not looking at what's available already.

Action Items: Entertainment

- Recognize and actively address the age-related differences in youth tastes and desires.
- Younger adolescents want structured entertainment options.
- Older youth “tastes” are more similar to adults – they do not want to be “babysat.”

A closer look, however, revealed some interesting facets. Younger participants, those without their own transportation, were often positive about activities around the community and simply wanted more varied structured opportunities – dances, skating, and “teen” nights, for example. Among older youth, however, discussion around socializing opportunities seemed to run headlong into confusion about their developmental needs. For example, they complained of boredom as well, but were very disdainful of what many regarded as ploys to “babysit” them. The organized activities their younger peers desired were distasteful to older participants. House parties among older youth, for instance, are very common in the study community and are one of the reasons for high police surveillance of youth.

Uncertain Quadrant Conditions

We want to have input in community affairs and we want to know what is happening in our community.

Community Input

Although most youth indicated a desire to be formally recognized or heard by “the powers that be” in their community, a smaller number of youth expressed the desire to have direct input into public affairs. Though rarely overtly articulated, one young man summed it up by stating:

There’s not anything for us to really be a part of, like we can’t be in planning an event or discussion about something.

When asked directly about community input, youth offered few suggestions. A few seniors suggested town meetings, the creation of youth representatives from different age groups, and teen advisory committees. Although not certain about which issues need youth input, there was consensus that efforts to create youth-specific entertainment venues would benefit immensely from youth input. As one young man stated:

They think they know what we want even when they really don’t. It’s old men deciding what we want to do.

Discussion around input almost inevitably led someone to bring up the fact that, while having input would be nice, it was rare that young people had any knowledge about what was happening at the community level – particularly if it did not directly concern entertainment options for them. Furthermore, although the community has initiated progressive opportunities for youth to be involved with town governance, very few study participants were aware of them. In part, this is because such opportunities were limited to small numbers of youth – all of whom were nominated by their schools and Town Board. These positions were most often offered as rewards to youth already active in their school and community and not to those youth most in need of meaningful roles – those least likely to be “rewarded” with opportunities to participate. Moreover, although youth were appointed to the Town Supervisor’s Task Force,²⁰ there existed few, if any, mechanisms for letting other youth in the community know that people their age were represented in some form in town governance and had exercised meaningful input.

Action Items: Community Input

- Create venues for active youth participation (with real input) in community affairs such as: town meetings, youth representatives, and teen advisory committees.
- Market current opportunities, youth actions and accomplishments.
- Create opportunities to participate in community affairs regardless of academic performance or assumed leadership abilities. The youth most likely to benefit from involvement are those least likely to possess these traits.

Discussion

Whole communities are rarely overtly regarded as important arenas for adolescent development, although many intuitively regard the world outside the home as a profoundly important site for acquiring and testing new skills. As communities yield to the increasing pressures progress and time have brought – greater migration, sprawl, and technology, for example – most look to parents and schools as the “raisers” of children. In the case of young children, ascribing parents and schools such a weighty role is quite reasonable. However, as young people enter adolescence, forging an identity and role outside of the home is a primary developmental mandate. During this time human beings are particularly receptive to messages about their value, use, and place in social worlds outside home and school.²¹

In small details and in large choices, the message that care does not matter in public life trickles down to those we most want to protect from it, our children. To understand why care has been so devalued in modern society, we must look carefully at the attitudes and assumptions that undergird our culture. Cultural values are expressed not only in rituals and special events, but in the structure and organization of everyday life. The mundane interactions of everyday life, the structure of our most ordinary institutions, the ways in which we treat children, young people, and the aged all contain deep metaphors about our fundamental beliefs about human nature and our purpose in life.²²

The findings from this study suggest that despite prevalent expectations, adults encountered by adolescents teach young people volumes about how to be an adult, how to treat others, and how to be a part of a community. Subtle exchange between adolescents and adults within their community, known and unknown, appeared to convey potent messages about the value youth hold in their community. The underlying message describes citizenship which incorporates the central notion of membership and evokes a host of other related themes – belonging, independence and equality, responsibility and participation, and shared existence and identity.²³ Although youth enjoy the formal entitlements of citizenship, very few are extended the rights to exercise influence.

The clear desire among study participants to occupy space, publicly and alone with friends, clashed mightily with the perception that adults hold largely negative attitudes toward

youth as group. This tension took a heavy toll on positive youth feelings about their community. Most participants believe that young people are not permitted some of the most basic rights of citizenship – namely mechanisms and opportunities to participate in the formal and informal processes for creating community. The belief that one young man stated so concisely, “**We don’t have any rights,**” was followed by an astute observation by an adult who shared:

When you talk about governments in terms of what they do for young people, you always end up having a conversation about what I call a “caretaker mentality.” The adults will tell you, “This is what we do for kids – we offer them recreation programs, we offer them all these activities, we offer them these opportunities.” But never do they ask the kids, and then they can’t understand why kids won’t go... I think that if government wants to create a different view of what they can do for kids – start talking about decision-making, talking about activities that may not be recreational but may be service orientated. Create an expectation of some kind of meaningful activity that someone can point to and say, “Hey man you did a good job, you know that was a wonderful activity and helped someone.” I don’t see us doing that for young people. We always end up asking what activities can we plan for these kids that they’ll come to. It’s the wrong question and it always ends up in my mind with the wrong results – we got more of what kids don’t want.

The Connectedness “Slump”

Do school policies inadvertently promote burnout?

Anyone who works with, studies, or parents young people knows that the capacities, perceptions, and needs of eighth grade youth (ages 13-14) are often vastly different than those of twelfth grade youth (ages 17-18). As with young children, a lot happens in the space of just a few years. Nevertheless, the approach of schools and larger communities to adolescents, regardless of their age, is quite constant. Juniors and seniors in high school may be granted a few more privileges because of their age, but generally experience the same basic structures as youth in seventh or eighth grade.

This fact emerged loud and clear in this study. Seniors, in particular, appeared to be in a “connectedness slump.” Not only were their survey scores lower than their younger peers, the tone they used when talking about their relationship to school and community was far more negative and passionate. They were also more aware of the role that policies and programs, rather than just individual adults, played in structuring their lives.

The Eighth, Tenth, and Twelfth Grade “Character”

As the figures on the next page show, levels of connectedness and several developmental supports tended to decline as grade increased. In most cases, the differences were

One Size Fits All?

Anyone who works with, studies, or parents young people knows that the capacities, perceptions, and needs of eighth grade youth are most often vastly different than those of twelfth grade youth. Nevertheless, the approach of schools and larger communities to adolescents, regardless of their age, is largely quite constant.

most obvious when comparing twelfth graders to the eighth and/or tenth grade youth. This decline in connectedness and perceived developmental support is not entirely surprising. The sparse literature available in this area, such as data from the Search Institute and the California Health Kids survey²⁴ suggests similar trends, but why?

The age differences in connectedness and developmental support were very apparent in the focus groups as well. Indeed, when considered together, a “character” of each grade clearly emerged, which are summarized on the next few pages.

Eighth Grade

I am not so sure adults see me anymore, but I still watch and trust them.

Virtually all of the conditions eighth graders linked with connectedness were in some way or another linked to adults – either in their perception of adult attitudes and behaviors toward them or in their concern that adults viewed them favorably. Eighth graders cared a great deal about what adults thought of them and wanted to be well regarded by adults in general. Although they were somewhat aware of policies and protocol governing school as a whole, the perceptions of most eighth grade youth were filtered through classroom experiences, some with individual adults

Chart 6.1 Grade-Related Declines in Developmental Support in School

This chart shows the decline in levels of connectedness to school by grade level.

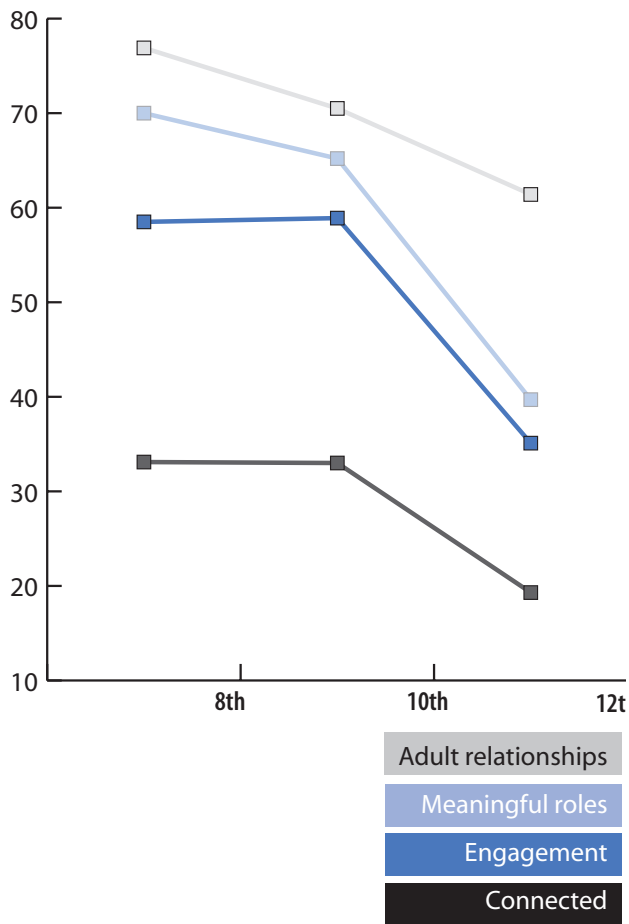
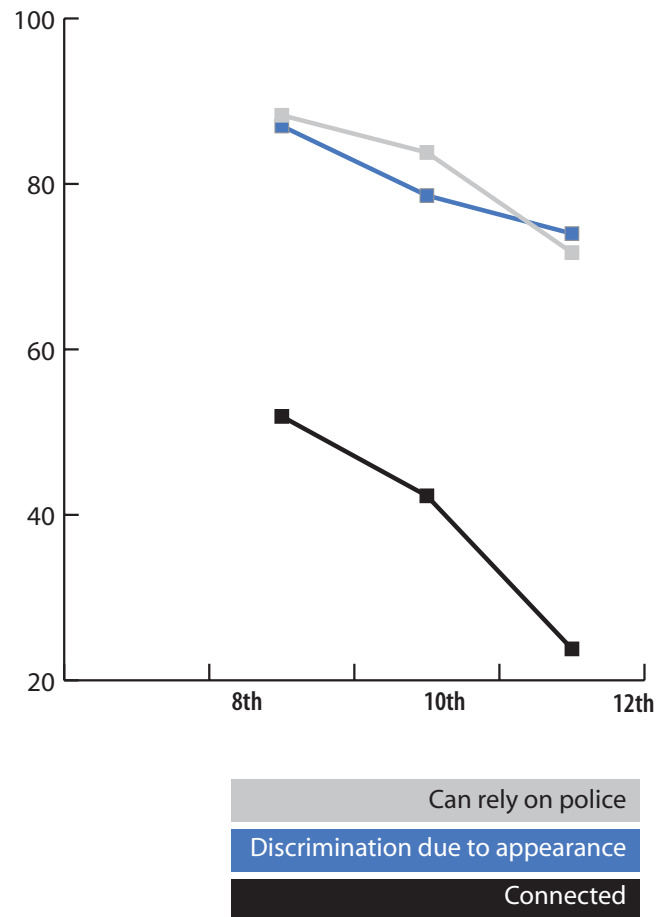


Chart 6.2 Grade-Related Declines in Developmental Support in Town

This chart shows the decline in levels of connectedness to town by grade level.



such as teachers or counselors, and others with peer representatives in student government. As a result they either saw individual adults as being responsible for policies or, more often, allowed the positive elements of their relationships with individual adults to compensate for whatever other frustrations they felt about school structure.

Their concern regarding adult perceptions also existed in community settings where eighth grade youth were more likely to cite being targeted for surveillance in local businesses and on the streets by unknown adults. Eighth grade youth linked connectedness to being a constituency in their community, but even their discussion of the extent to which youth were and were not a constituency

ACTION Items for Eight Grade: Capitalize on Tendency to Trust Adults

- Build as many bridges to adults as possible, as early as possible. Use the natural trust many junior high school students have for adults to build numerous strong lines of communication and support – particularly for youth with fewer internal and external resources.
- Encourage junior high youth to seek out and use creative outlets for their interests and talents.

revolved around emotional rights and obligations and their relationship with individual adults (rather than the legal rights and obligations of which seniors focused).

Although individual relationships with adults were significant in fostering school and community connectedness, they were not as important as meaningful opportunities for engagement in both settings. As with the seniors, the impact of meaningful roles in school and in the community stood head and shoulders above all other factors for eighth graders. Parental closeness and being engaged, both academically and creatively, also showed strong influence on connectedness. The importance of creative engagement may explain why the eighth graders were more likely than their older peers to be engaged in extracurricular and religious activities – in and out of school.

Tenth Grade

Help me survive the academic pressure and to be liked by my friends.

Sophomores, although clearly occupying an “in-between” place in their perceptions of developmental support and connectedness when compared to their older and younger peers, also conveyed distinct sensibilities. When they did show patterns similar

to the other grades, they most often resembled the eighth rather than twelfth grade youth. Although survey results revealed that positive relationships with adults were strongly linked to tenth grade connectedness in school, the focus groups indicated that tenth graders were far more focused on academic achievement and its accompanying pressures. This may reflect that tenth grade is a pivotal testing year in high school with very important ramifications for college and other post-high school plans.

In many ways, the sophomores most displayed the self-absorbed attitudes popularly associated with adolescence. They were very preoccupied with school demands and with socializing with peers. Compared to their older and younger peers, they spoke with comparatively little passion and ascribed little importance to the conditions they did link to connectedness. Indeed, it was at times difficult to imagine how this group of young people might within two years become concerned with the issues targeted by seniors.

ACTion Items for Tenth Grade: Alleviate Academic Stress

- Find ways to alleviate academic stress by reassuring sophomores that success in adulthood is not dependent on academic perfection.
- Encourage sophomores to form and participate in study groups and other groups that can help them fulfill their social needs while simultaneously helping them survive tenth grade academic requirements.
- Help sophomores find positive ways to let off steam – persistent pressure is a common reason given for engaging in negative stress releasing behaviors such as drug and alcohol use.

Indeed, the only four pervasive conditions mentioned by tenth grade participants were all related to the quality and pressure associated with academic well being: relevance, the future, meaningful versus busy work, and participatory learning in the classroom.

Unlike their younger peers whose mental representation of school did not seem to encompass an awareness of the institutional policies and practices, sophomores did show awareness, but very little engagement in what that meant for them. In the one instance that institutional policies and practices emerged as a point of discussion in a tenth grade focus group, the conversation revolved entirely around a recent antagonistic event between the school administration and the seniors. In many ways, the sophomores most often displayed the self-absorbed attitudes popularly associated with adolescence. Indeed, it was at times difficult to imagine how this group of young people might within two years become concerned with the issues targeted by the seniors and discussed in the next section.

Tenth graders were very preoccupied with school demands and with socializing with peers and were, at times, very hard pressed to answer questions about what in their school and community environment most conveyed respect or disrespect, caring or lack of caring. Compared to their older and younger peers, they spoke with comparatively little passion and ascribed little importance to the conditions they did link to connectedness in either setting – particularly the community. They did, however, show a greater interest than their eighth grade peers in fostering trust and cohesiveness in the larger community.

Twelfth Grade

I feel frustrated by the fact that I have changed, but much about my world has not. See me, help me prepare for the real world, and let me and others my age meaningfully participate in structuring our lives in ways that give us the opportunity to develop a sense of meaning and purpose beyond ourselves.

In comparison to their younger peers, seniors show a striking degree of “consolidation” in the variables that appear to influence connectedness in school and in community. Meaningful roles in school and in the community and police reliability in the community were **the only variables** on the survey that explained senior connectedness scores in each setting. This selective receptivity to a particular variable means that compared to eighth and tenth grade youth, there may be fewer avenues available for enhancing connectedness among seniors. Those that do must acknowledge the powerful role that senior perceptions of meaningful roles play in promoting connectedness.

Positive relationships with adults were far less influential for seniors than for eighth and tenth graders, probably because, although relationships with adults at school are critical sources of instrumental support, they are also highly complicated by power struggles. Seniors departed from their peers in a series of rather articulate, passionate and complex discussions about autonomy and power. Indeed, virtually all of the conditions linked to connectedness in the focus groups revolved around the balance of power and autonomy they perceived youth their age are and are not allowed to exercise. By and large, their comments reflected both their frustration level and growing confidence that they, and people of their age in general, possessed the capacities needed to not only exercise greater autonomy, but to contribute more directly and meaningfully in creating community within school and town.

Perhaps this is why all of the conditions that repeatedly emerged in discussions with seniors were linked largely to institutional forms of connectedness. Even when talking about issues seemingly unrelated to their relationships with adults or struggles over power, seniors typically brought up the ways in which school and/or community structures or policies affected their capacity to exercise autonomy and influence.

For example, curriculum relevance, typically discussed by younger participants in terms of the extent to which they were able to take classes that interested them, was consis-

ACTion Items for Twelfth Grade: Avoid Power Struggles

- Recognize that youth in their last 1-2 years of high school are particularly sensitive to ways in which they are and are not allowed to exercise power in influencing their day-to-day lives.
- Find ways to accommodate their growing need for independence, autonomy, and need to prepare for their future in other than academic ways.
- Advocate for and adopt the recommendations made by the National Commission on the Senior Year in High School: 1) accelerated transition to college, 2) apprenticeships in local business, and 3) creation of “middle college high schools” that assist potential “drop out” students.

tently raised by seniors as an example of how school policies and procedures inhibited their preparedness to enter adulthood.

Most often, however, seniors spoke directly about how relationships with adults or with adult institutions, attitudes, or policies enhanced or frustrated their ability to satisfy evolving needs, to develop skills and to become independent and productive members of society. This is presumably why institution-youth and teacher-youth relationships accounted for nearly all the issues seniors identified at school and why so many of the conditions they identify in town are about power, relationships, and place in public space. As a result, seniors were far more likely to complain of boredom, to feel powerless to effect change, to discuss academic pressure in terms of the limits it imposed on opportunities to explore and develop more faceted aspects of their identity and futures, and to link resultant power struggles to risk behaviors. The frustrated tone they used was unmistakable and was remarkably consistent across all focus groups, particularly in relation to school:

I get so much more hostile to everyone in the school when they try to put me on a leash. The administration walks past the line quite a bit – with rules such as no excuse policies for being late to class and pass orientations for going to the bathroom. They have to realize that the past four years they had dominion over us in school – the entire environment will change for each student as they go into life – so why not prepare us in preparation for that? I mean, that’s a part of school.

Despite the negativity, their comments conveyed a sophisticated understanding of the roles and rights of youth and adults in school settings. Indeed, listening to the way conversation tended to evolve along these lines suggested the ailment we call “senioritis” might have more to do with the tension inherent in the clash between relatively inflexible school environments and the highly dynamic needs of young people teetering on the edge of adulthood. The comments of several seniors capture this tension:

Just get out of our way. Let us go through high school so we can graduate, so we can actually pursue our dreams, you know!? Just get out of my way!

It’s just like you go to school because you have to, but really you should want to. Instead it almost feels like an institution, like prison where you’re just stuck here.

These issues cut across academic status – even high performing seniors exhibited the same degree of negativity and general frustration as less academically inclined youth who felt on the periphery of school and community life. For college-bound seniors, however, school was at times stressful, but at least purposeful. Even if they found certain aspects of their lives disempowering, they could at least take comfort in a positive vision of tomorrow.

Less academically inclined seniors, uncertain about what they were preparing for appeared to experience a uniquely stressful challenge: forming a positive identity in the absence of positive expectations of now or later. It was clear that seniors facing an uncertain tomorrow in a less than satisfying today perceived school, and adolescence, as something barely survivable. These students showed a deep sense of frustration and hopelessness at their perceived

For college-bound seniors, however, school was at times stressful, but at least purposeful. Less academically inclined seniors, uncertain about what they were preparing for appeared to experience a uniquely stressful challenge: forming a positive identity in the absence of a positive perception of now or later. It was clear that seniors facing an uncertain tomorrow, in a less than satisfying today, perceived school, and adolescence, as something barely survivable.

powerlessness to find a means of establishing a positive identity. These feelings, in turn, seemed to cultivate a sad cynicism about school and town that heightened divestment from each domain and, more disturbingly, from positive images of themselves:

Gil: I just want to get out of here. I’m just pushing through. I just want to finish. I don’t even know what I want to do. I just want to get out of here because like it’s mandatory and I just have to do it...it’s a routine that I hate but I just do it because I have to and that’s just the way things are.

Researcher: Why do you hate it?

Gil: I just hate it because I get up in the morning, it’s the same thing every day and it’s so early and you’re so tired.

Jeff: We don’t care about what we’re learning now. We don’t, you know, we don’t care about this stuff. It doesn’t make any difference to us. We just want to get out, get a job and make money doing something we want to do.

Laura: In the past I think there was a lot more like leniency about just everything and so you had your own space to develop and you did what you wanted to do and that became acceptable. Now you’re told what’s acceptable and you do a lot of things that you don’t want to because you have to do them.

Shane: It’s been like this for like 100 years. We’re talking about this for no reason. It’s really useless... I’m doing this for myself. I don’t care. I’m looking at through everybody else’s perspective because I, I mean, I can really care less about what the teachers think about me and like what anybody else thinks about me.

The last comment, “I can really care less about what the teachers think about me and like what anybody else thinks about me,” captures very well the general defensive position many seniors, regardless of achievement status, tended to take in response to their perceptions of power imbalances and resulting frustration. This was particularly evident among older youth facing difficulty with school and uncertainty about who they would become as they moved into adulthood. The tendency to check out, however, was not limited to at-risk youth or generated as a particular response to school but was clearly evident in discussion of community among all seniors in the study. Most of the comments about “hating” their town originated from twelfth grade participants – most often from those at risk of disconnection in school. Virtually all seniors expressed criticism of their community, spoke passionately, and often

Action Items: Recognize the Increased Frustration of Less Academically Inclined Youth

- Youth who lack at least average academic standing often confront a number of other life challenges that make support within school and community even more critical.
- Actively engage these youth in meaningful roles, help them find innovative ways to feel powerful and intelligent within and outside of school by intentionally using pre-existing and innovative school and community opportunities.
- Utilize national community leadership models that employ youth-adult partnerships to address community wide challenges and solutions. Models such as Leadership Cayuga (Cayuga County, NY) utilize youth (juniors and seniors) as full contributing members of a leadership program to find sustainable solutions to community identified challenges. As part of graduation requirements, youth-adult teams present recommendations to the County legislature.

linked their complaints to negative behaviors. **Moreover, although seniors consistently** articulated strong feelings about their community, they were far less likely to care what unknown adults thought of them than their younger peers – particularly their eighth grade peers.

In the language and perceptions of senior age youth was an understandable discomfort with their unmarked status as neither child nor adult. Lacking full adult status – the markers of which felt elusive and frustratingly unattainable – but clearly no longer children or even young teens, many of these older adolescents felt wedged in between childhood and adulthood.

And yet, they also recognized that they vacillate in between developmental desires. Although feeling bored was a problem for youth of all ages, older adolescents recognized that they are bored more quickly and easily than their younger peers. Compared to their eighth grade peers, seniors were significantly less likely to be part of organized activities such as religious activities or extracurricular groups within or outside of school and were less likely to report positive relationships with their parents. These tendencies were worse for at-risk youth who were even less likely than their same age peers to perceive positive relationships with parents or to be involved in extracurricular activities within or outside of school. Mostly this was because seniors were decidedly uninterested in these structured opportunities that interest many of their younger peers, namely dances, skating, and “teen” nights. Instead, entertainment and socializing preferences for older adoles-

cents tended to be far more exclusive and to parallel adult tastes: pool halls, cafés, and places to eat and hang out. Not surprisingly, older adolescents, particularly seniors, were far less enthusiastic about adult supervision which they equated to “babysitting.” For some, this reflects a desire to engage in activities they know will not be accepted by adults – such as smoking, drinking, or physical interaction with each other. Mostly, however, they just wanted places to go “hang out” in an environment that affirmed their fledgling adulthood.

When questioned further, it became clear that even when satisfying entertainment venues were available, seniors reported feeling bored and unengaged – an indication that lurking beneath the façade of entertainment needs lies something even more important – the need to **do something** with meaning and purpose beyond themselves. Their words conveyed an unconscious desire to become more in their community than children who need to be entertained. The problem many older adolescents face in finding satisfying ways of spending leisure and social time stems from something in between a natural decline in their appetite for childhood games and a need for more challenging, adult-like forms of engagement.

Entertainment and socializing preferences for older adolescents tended to be far more exclusive and to parallel adult tastes... lurking beneath the façade of entertainment needs lies something even more important – the need to do something with meaning and purpose beyond themselves.

because they had little voice in what happens in town; only seniors indicated that they desired direct input into community happenings. They were also the only group in which several members looked to community-wide events as a means of fostering community connectedness for

Viewing only these elements of the senior portrait, however, fails to convey the entire image. For example, although youth in all grades felt that young people were not a constituency

people their age. And, on a survey question which asked youth to identify which three activities they were most interested in spending time doing at this point in life, on average, seniors ranked spending time with family the second highest preferred activity.

Explaining the “Connectedness Slump”

Levels of connectedness and key developmental supports to school and community were weak for youth of all three grades, but clearly decreased with age. Why? What accounted for this “connectedness slump?” When this question was posed, the vast majority of seniors in the study invariably came back with something akin to the following comment:

I think it's `cause we feel like we're growing up and turning onto adults, yet we're in an institution like this where they basically treat us like eighth graders.

The academic term for this student's description is lack of “stage-environment fit.”²⁵ Stage-environment fit theories suggest that when individual developmental needs do not “fit” with adequate opportunities in the environment to meet those needs, it is more difficult to develop healthfully. Although this makes sense, the stage-environment fit approach is rarely consciously used to shape school and community environments, as well as opportunities, after the elementary school years.

In essence, not caring about their community was a way many older youth reflected the negative messages they felt they had received about where and how young people belonged in the larger community.

Many felt closed out, even though they felt developmentally ready to be regarded as more adult than kid. On the survey, only 21.1% of seniors indicated that they felt cared for in their community, but 52% of seniors indicated that they cared about their community. The gap between caring, but not feeling cared for, is telling. It means that there are a significant number of older youth that would like to contribute to their community, but feel closed out of venues for doing so.

The gap between caring, but not feeling cared for, is telling. It means that there are a significant number of older youth that desire means of contributing to their community but feel closed out of venues for doing so.

Summary

All the evidence gathered in this study suggests that the connectedness slump may indeed be a product of decreasing fit between environment and development. Evident among all youth in the study, but most notably seniors, was a clear indication of an imbalance between young people's perceived developmental needs and their larger school and community environments. The primary difference between eighth and twelfth grade youth was not their recognition of these imbalances, but the faith they placed in adult willingness to address it. The sophomores' focus on achievement in conjunction with their seeming lack of self-confidence rendered them in some ways best suited to their highly structured and future-oriented social environment.

It is easy and commonplace to assume that much of what was found might easily be attributed to “senioritis” – a predictable, and many would add natural, disregard among youth in their senior year for academic and institutional expectations. Senioritis, however, is most commonly written off as an inevitable malady that emerges from a natural lack of incentive, ill-timed assessment systems, ill-prepared teachers, and what the National Commission on the Senior Year in High School²⁶ calls the “tyranny of low expectations.” The findings suggest that the senior slump may be the result of a dynamic between young people and their schools that begins far earlier than the senior year. If so, before measures are taken to improve senior's attitudes, timing of assessment, or the need for new senior challenges, it may wise to examine the ways in which traditional school structures thwart the need for autonomy in youth of all ages. In other words, “senioritis” may simply be a manifestation of the latent mismatch between adolescent development and school structure present long before the senior year.

Fortunately, among the remedies for senioritis, advanced by the National Commission on the Senior Year in High School, are “bold and wide sweeping reform efforts” aimed at raising achievement standards during the last two years of high school. They also recommend adopting practices that change the function of high schools from sorting institutions into institutions that help all youth succeed by providing more (and more rigorous) alternatives to the monotony that characterizes much of the work in high school. This includes such practices as allowing for accelerated transition to college, for apprenticeships in local business, and for creation of “middle college high schools” that target high school students with the potential for dropping out.

The National Commission on the Senior Year in High School recommendations could be strengthened if they acknowledged:

- a) that one or more **roots of “senioritis” might begin much earlier** than the senior year and stem from long tolerated negative adult attitudes toward youth and their capacities – both in and out of school.
- b) the **critical role of opportunities in offering some degree of ownership** for conceptualizing, implementing, and managing the day-to-day policies of school and community life, even before the senior year.
- c) the degree to which **experiences in school and community are related** – “senioritis” does not abate when young people leave their school campuses.

Such reforms, if undertaken in broad and innovative ways, could go a long way toward alleviating the tedium and dissatisfaction that typify the senior year.

Is Disconnectedness Inevitable?

A Case Study of School Conditions That Promote Thriving

Is disconnectedness inevitable? How do we know that youth, and older youth in particular, are simply destined to catch the detached disgruntlement associated with adolescence regardless of the context? This study suggests that disconnectedness and the gradual decline in connectedness by age is not inevitable. Instead, results from a group interview conducted with seniors from a small alternative program provide further support for the idea that schools and communities can enhance youth connectedness and performance by assuring opportunities to meet core developmental needs.

The youth interviewed from the alternative school were remarkable not for their checkered pasts or abilities, but for the amazing strength of their connection to their school. The program in which they were enrolled was established as an alternative high school for youth at-risk of dropping out of school or who experienced difficulty in the traditional high school setting. Several key features make the school alternative:

- limited class size and flexible class structure
- individualized instruction
- continuous instruction year round
- later start to the school day
- fewer and longer class periods
- credit for paid and non-paid work and internships
- community-building activities
- evening tutoring

Lessons From An Alternative School

Experience with an at-risk population shows that disconnectedness is not inevitable if the school environment addresses students' developmental needs.

- community service projects
- field trip experiences
- a student wellness program

Students are admitted to the program based on a referral from school counselors or other school officials. Students can self-refer as well. Those referred undergo a series of interviews with program staff to assess fit with program goals. Although youth admitted are those deemed unlikely to graduate on time from a traditional school setting, it is not a last resort court-mandated option for highly troubled youth.

This targeted program addresses the deficits perceived by students in traditional high school settings by meeting numerous core developmental needs. The school structure, with its emphasis on providing students with ways to impact school policy, and the attention paid to cultivating positive relationships between adults and youth commanded strong student loyalty, connectedness, and productivity.

These students were so loyal that every one of them disagreed with all but one of the comments on the list of student comments given to them at the outset of the focus groups which read, "Our school is just right the way it is."

Their immensely positive experience provided valuable insight into what promotes connectedness and the focus group was thus devoted to talking about what their school could teach the world about creating environments in which youth thrive. Students who had dropped out of school

or who were at-risk of dropping out talked proudly about their academic successes (including admirably high state mandated exam scores), their goals for the future, and their strong connection to each other and their school.

Chart 7.1 provides a few excerpts alongside comments made by seniors in traditional school settings. The differences are striking and one might easily conclude that the comments made by individuals on the left side of the column come from “advantaged” or high achieving students while those on the right come from largely disenfranchised youth. The difference, according to the participants, lies in the way the policies, school and adult-youth relationships are structured. The alternative program departed from the traditional school structure in several key ways. In particular, the students pointed out:

- **Students regard their school as a kind of “family”** in which they are consulted, individually visible, academically and emotionally supported, subject to high, but achievable expectations.

- **Teachers and staff clearly demonstrate that they believe in their students**, that they have faith in their capacities, that there is room to falter and room to grow, that progress and positive development by individual students will be recognized and rewarded.
- **Teachers and staff are physically and emotionally accessible** – committed to doing whatever it takes to help individual students accomplish their goals.
- **Students participate in making day-to-day decisions** ranging from meals to class structure and field trips.
- **“Success” is measured and actively rewarded** in a myriad of ways that range from good test scores to overcoming personal challenges seemingly unrelated to school.
- **Class sizes are small** enough to permit concentrated individualized instruction – a fact that communicates respect, visibility and a strong sense of being cared for to students.
- **School size is small** enough to prevent fractured, hierarchical peer groupings.

Chart 7.1 Senior Comments about School: In Nontraditional and Traditional High School Settings

Comments from Seniors

Nontraditional School Setting

We get to decide what field trips we go on. Sometimes we get to decide what we’re going to be learning in class, as a class. Everything, everything is class decided!

If we say something that we think is wrong there’s a good chance it’ll change, or they’ll try to change it. But over at <traditional high school>, they just like really don’t care, so a lot of the times it’s just like “Why would I even bother?”

Here, you know, they don’t encourage swearing or nothing, but they encourage you to speak your mind.

I’m real worried about leaving here ‘cause you know everybody’s going their different ways. And even the teachers are a big part of my life, you know? I come in and I talk to them about my problems just like they were my parents or my friends. I worry about not having them!

Comments from Seniors

Traditional School Setting

They expect us to act as adults in school, to act responsibly and follow rules, but they turn around and treat us like we are still in grammar school. No responsibility, no decision making.

In this school there’s no way for you to actually like change anything about the way it’s run...If you look through the rules in the student handbook, they’ve got a clause there that basically says, “Any rule that’s not in this handbook doesn’t mean that they’re <the administration> exempt from doing anything.” So that means that they can nail you on anything!

Some teachers will be so condescending. They ask you what you think, but they don’t give you three seconds to try and catch up and respond. No matter what you say, there’s no reasoning, there’s no in-between.

I just want to get out of here. I’m just pushing through. I just like want to finish. I don’t even do it because I want to get something I like to do, because I don’t even know what I want to do.

The testimony of students to the effectiveness of the program, at least in shifting attitude, is echoed in the survey findings as well. Chart 7.2 compares seniors by school setting (traditional vs. nontraditional) and by achievement level (advanced placement vs. at-risk).

Defining the Groups

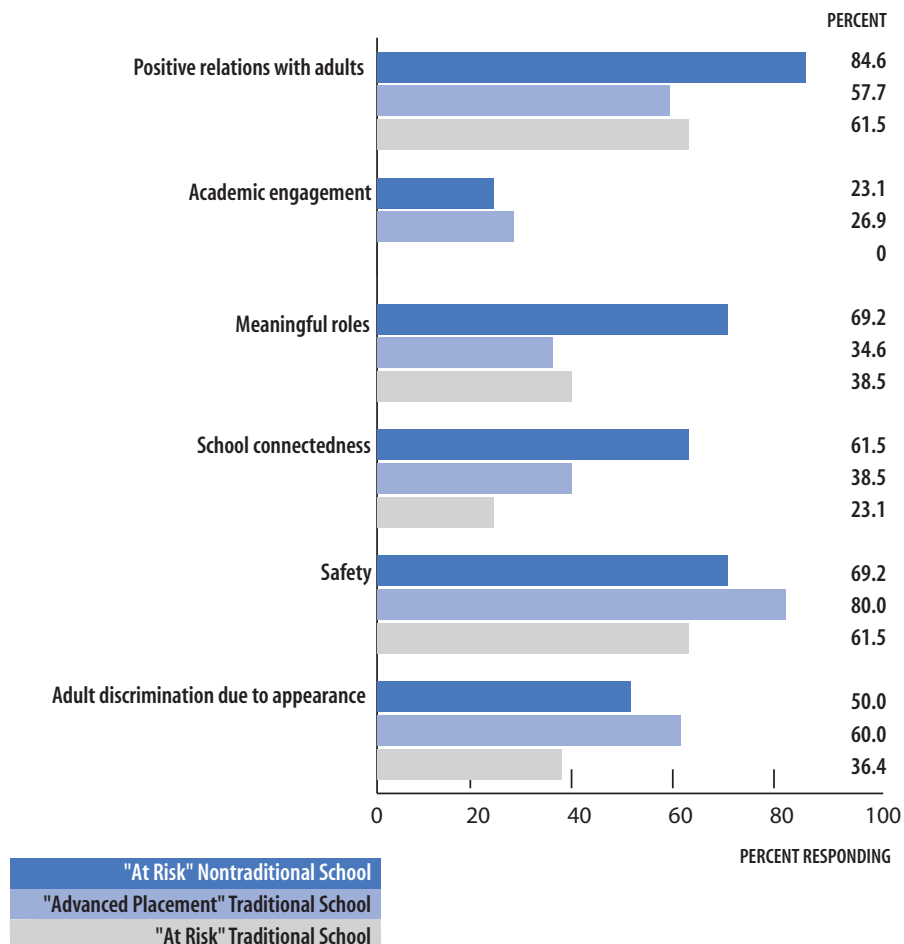
The students in the “non-traditional, at-risk” school were enrolled in a program residing in a separate building with a separate administration and faculty, but located on a campus next to one of the traditional high schools. The “traditional, at-risk” students took special classes in a traditional school setting. The “traditional, advanced placement” students took AP classes in a traditional school setting.

Of the three groups, AP seniors (n=31), at-risk seniors in traditional school settings (n=13), and at-risk seniors in a nontraditional schools setting (n=13), the graphs suggests that school setting is a more powerful determinant of perceived developmental support than academic achievement.

The differences among key developmental support variables in school, particularly meaningful roles and school connectedness, are striking. At-risk youth in the non-traditional program perceived significantly higher levels of meaningful roles, positive relationships with adults at school, and school connectedness. These youth also reported feeling more engaged than at-risk youth in the traditional school setting. At-risk youth in the regular school setting were not significantly different than their AP peers except that not a single “at-risk traditional” student reported feeling engaged at school.

In this case, it was exceptionally clear that administrator, staff, and faculty efforts to create a highly supportive environment in the non-traditional school setting were highly successful. In addition to the program’s main goal – keeping at-risk students from dropping out of school – there were multiple pay-offs to the program structure. Students shared their pride at achieving very good scores on state mandated exams (some in the 80th and 90th percentiles) and voiced nearly universal desires and intentions to further their training and education after high

Chart 7.2 Comparison of “Connectedness” Among Seniors by Achievement Status and School Setting



school. Equally important however, these students, all of whom left the traditional school setting because they were **dangerously** disconnected, exhibited a high degree of loyalty and responsibility to their school, the adults, and even school rules...all of which were not at all evident among any of the other youth participating in the study. Comments such as these were common:

We really fight for this program. Like severely fight for this program.

It's gotten to the point where this place matters more than me than anything else. I'm willing to rat any student out any single day to save this program.

The least we can do is respect the rules, you know, respect them. Plus, everybody respects [the adults]` cause they did so much for us, you know, you gotta` do something for them.

Youth in the nontraditional school setting and their at-risk peers in the traditional school setting were significantly less likely than their high achieving peers to be engaged in positive intergenerational relationships, to view police as reliable, or to feel connected to community.

Community Connectedness

It was abundantly clear, however, that if this particular group of seniors possessed a tendency to report the positive, it went no further than their school walls. Indeed, as Chart 7.3 shows, “at-risk youth in the nontraditional setting” were **significantly less likely** to feel supported in their community than their “at risk” and AP grade mates in traditional school settings. The results shown in Chart 7.3 are far more consistent with what is generally assumed about the perceptions of high academically achieving and low academically achieving youth.

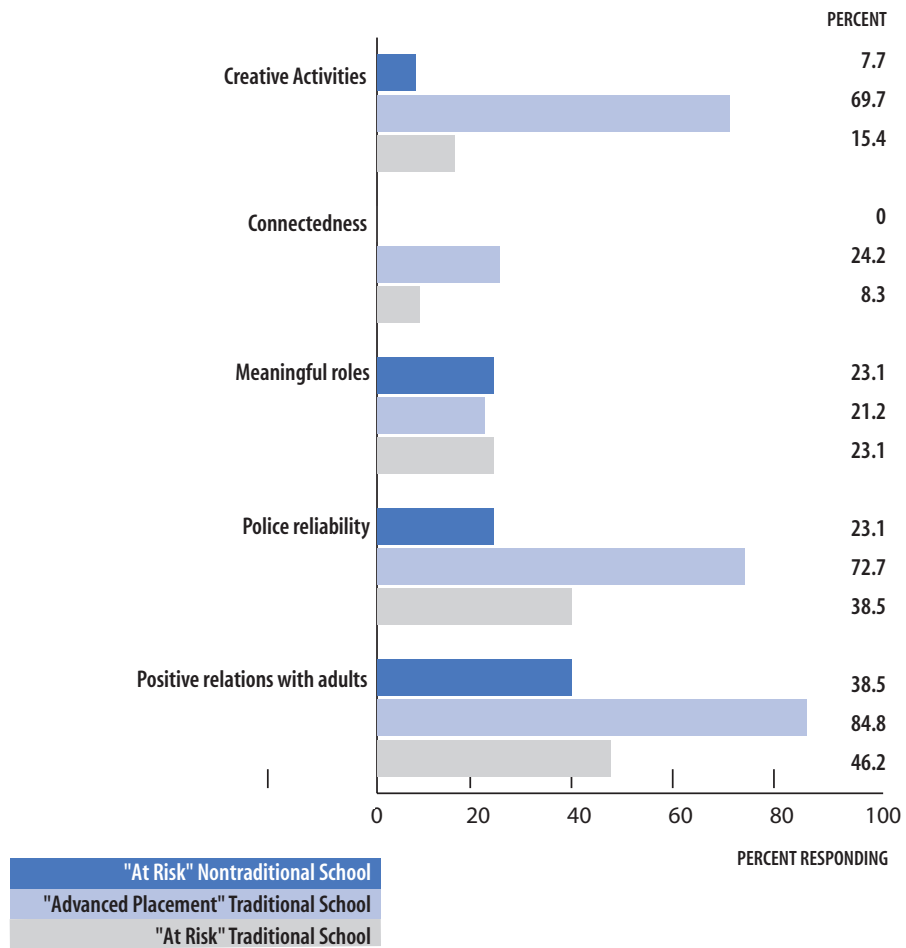
Youth in the nontraditional program perceived significantly higher levels of: 1) meaningful roles, 2) positive relationships with adults at school, and 3) school connectedness. Youth in the nontraditional school setting reported 4) feeling more engaged than youth of the same achievement level in the traditional school setting.

When these same three groups of seniors were queried about perceived developmental support and connectedness in their community, seniors in the nontraditional school setting and their at-risk peers in the traditional school setting were **significantly less likely** than their high achieving peers (in the traditional setting) to be engaged in positive intergenerational relationships, to view police as reliable, or to feel connected to community. Moreover, they were less likely than either group of peers to be creatively engaged in the community.

How do we explain these findings? In many ways, chart 7.3 depicts the comparisons between groups that might be expected in all context areas given the demographics and history of each group. For example, it is not at all surprising that more high performing youth report positive relationships with adults, feel the police to be reliable, or perceive creative opportunities. Moreover, it is quite common for high performing youth to be actively recruited or rewarded with opportunities to get involved at the community level and to fraternize with adults – especially when compared to their at-risk peers.

Although the alternative school was created to meet the special needs of at-risk students, this research suggests that the school’s success rests on its ability to address the developmental needs of **all** youth – regardless of academic standing or capacity. It suggests that because of the flexibility afforded it by school administrators and the public, the alternative school simply does a better job of creating an environment that matches the developmental needs of youth.

Chart 7.3 Comparison of Community “Connectedness” Among Seniors by Achievement Status and School Setting



Cultivating Connection Between School and Community

Is there synergy between connections formed in school and in the community?

Are school and community connectedness interdependent? Does the quality of developmental supports and connectedness in one setting affect young people's perceptions of connectedness in the other? Considered together, the findings suggest that there is an "ecology" of connectedness in school and community settings – the more connected youth felt in one setting, the more likely they felt connected to the other setting and vice versa.

This helps to explain how developmental support and feelings of connectedness or disconnectedness accumulate. Youth who feel disconnected in one setting are likely to carry those feelings into other settings. One possible reason for this is that possessing supports in one setting provides skills, access to important social capital resources, optimism, and confidence transferable to other settings. Conversely, lack of developmental support in one setting may hinder the ability to develop human and social capital in another setting. Although this study did not look at family or peer connectedness, it is likely that perceptions of developmental support and connectedness in these settings are also interrelated to connectedness in other key socializing environments.

Chart 8.1 shows the survey variables that were most important in predicting school and community connectedness. It was clear that feeling connected to school and

Ecology of Connection

We exist not as a mass of independent individuals, but rather in the context of a vast web of relationships; and these connections are what allow us to pursue collective action effectively...

Every sector has a role to play in a caring society, whether by supporting, facilitating, or directly providing care to youths and those in need.²⁸

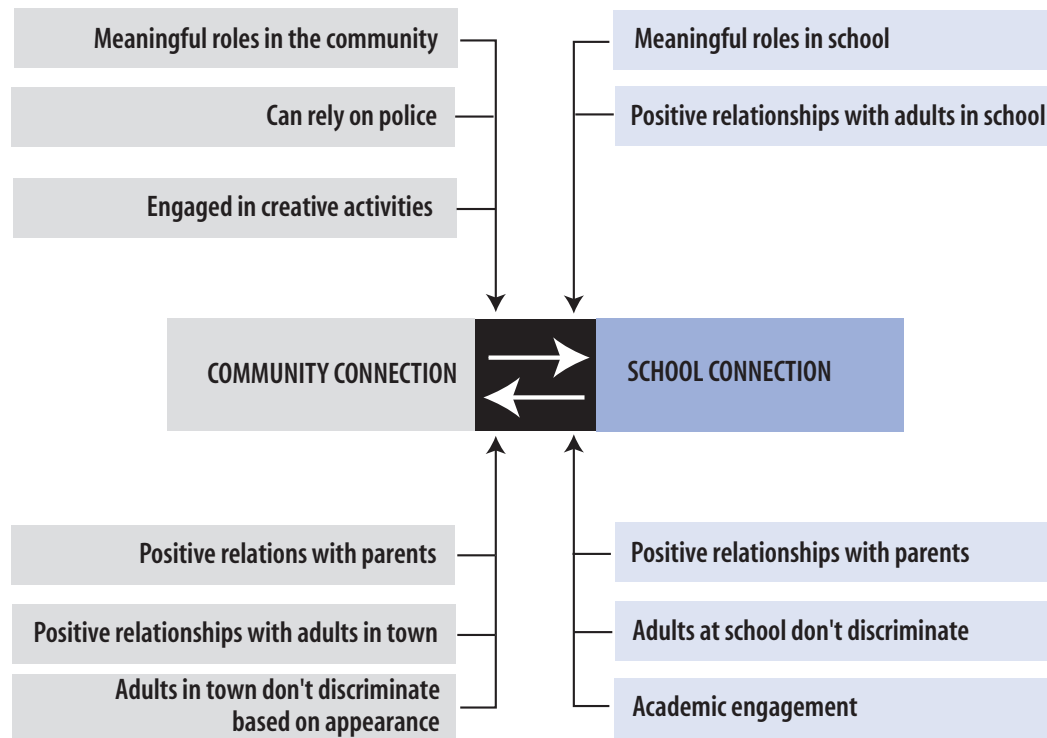
feeling engaged in school are strongly interrelated – a fact that matters in considering how to strengthen youth productivity and learning in school settings. The findings suggest that it is not enough to have things to do or even to know someone likes you. This study demonstrates that connectedness to school and community, among the young people in this study, leaned on instrumental and meaningful opportunities to participate, express oneself in creative, academic, and social venues in a way that allowed youth to perceive themselves as valued and purposeful.

Considered together, the findings suggest that there is an "ecology" of connectedness in school and community settings – the more connected youth felt in one setting, the more likely they felt connected to the other and vice versa.

Is Connection Cumulative?

In a nutshell, yes. For youth in this study, school and community connectedness tends to increase as youth experience more developmental supports in either setting. In other words, it did not matter whether youth perceived developmental support in school or in the community, the more developmental support they reported across both

Chart 8.1 Variables that Support School and Community Connectedness



settings, the more respect, care, and trust they were likely to perceive and to give in each setting.

The findings suggest that it is not enough to have things to do or even to know someone likes you.

The following charts show that as developmental supports increased so did connectedness scores. They also show that there is ceiling effect after which adding more supports (at least as defined here) did not significantly increase connectedness scores for school. In community there was no ceiling effect; adding developmental supports continues to augment connectedness scores, at least up to the maximum of ten possible in this study.

Creating “Connected” Environments

The data indicate that for students to feel moderately or strongly connected to school, they need **at least five** developmental supports in **school or town**. To feel strongly connected to their **community**, they need **seven or more** developmental supports. How many youth in this study met these critical thresholds? Despite the study community’s many resources, less than one in eight youth in the study

sample met this requirement and most of these supports were derived from the school setting. A little more than half of the youth in this study possessed the five or more developmental supports needed to feel connected to school. Only about one in four possessed the seven or more developmental supports needed to feel connected to community. Five youth reported no supports and ten youth reported possessing all ten supports.

The fact that even youth with all ten possible developmental supports did not report perfect connectedness scores (4.0) is indicative of the complexity in cultivating connection.²⁹ More precisely, for youth in this study, being connected in one setting enhanced the likelihood of connectedness in the other.

Although we think of youth experiences in school as separate from community. This study suggests that they are, in fact, quite interrelated.

It did not matter whether youth perceived developmental support in school or in the community, the more developmental support they reported across both settings, the more respect, care, and trust they were likely to perceive and to give in each setting.

Chart 8.2 Impact of Number of Developmental Supports on School Connectedness

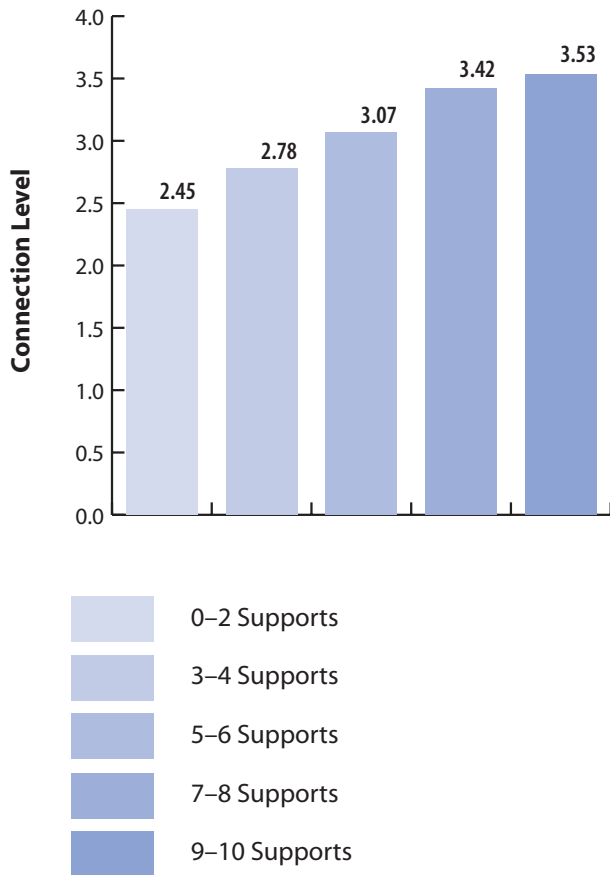
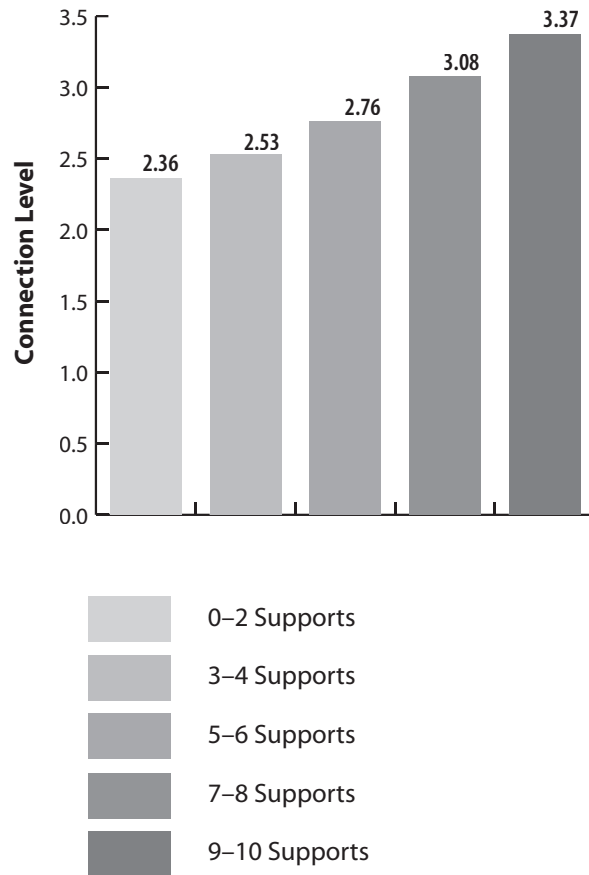


Chart 8.3 Impact of Number of Developmental Supports on Community Connectedness



“Modernity partitions each human life into a variety of segments, each with its own norms and modes of behavior. So work is divided from leisure, private from public, and corporate from the personal. So both childhood and old age have been wrenched away from the rest of human life and made over into distinct realms. And all these separations have been achieved so that it is the distinctiveness of each and not the unity of the life of the individual who passes through those parts in terms of which we are taught to think and to feel.”³⁰

Discussion

Acknowledgement of the complex and interlinked nature of support and connectedness variables in promoting or thwarting adolescent development is a fundamental

assumption of youth development scholars and practitioners. It is not, however, an assumption readily reflected in the way social environments and developmental trajectories are conceived of and designed. In the contemporary US, human beings are segregated most often on the basis of age, their socialization assigned to whatever particular domains have been awarded responsibility. Families, schools, and youth serving organizations are those charged with socializing adolescents and are, understandably, those most often studied in relation to adolescent development.

Action Item: Focus on Number and Depth of Supports That Matter Most

Seek to increase the number of developmental supports while simultaneously focusing on those most potent in conveying support.

The deep and complex interrelations noted by youth development and ecological scholars are one of the reasons that youth development theory emphasizes cultivating what scholars call “developmentally attentive cultures.”³¹ Developmentally attentive cultures are those in which young people are “surrounded, supported, and guided with a sustained network of adults, in addition to their parents, who choose to know, name, support, affirm, acknowledge, guide, and include children and adolescents in their lives.”³² Implicit in the idea of a developmentally attentive culture is the notion that community matters – that youth “get” culture from the larger community as well as from the settings assigned to socialize them, namely families, schools, and designated community institutions.

The findings reported here support the assumption that investment in creating developmentally attentive cultures strengthens the capacity of

other key socializing settings, such as schools, to foster positive youth outcomes. It challenges the often unspoken assumption that socialization is a product solely of experiences garnered in the microsystems young people inhabit, families and schools for example. It suggests that while individual relationships with known adults are critical in promoting connectedness, the anonymous encounters and exchanges youth experience in their communities and the consequential degree of connectedness they perceive influence the quality of their experience in school.

The finding that community and school experiences are intertwined and reinforcing may be one of the reasons why experimental community school models show such promise. Although community schools are rarely evaluated

on the degree to which they foster connectedness, the findings reported here suggest that one of the mechanisms through which community schools work is

Action Item: Focus on Dual Strategy

Simultaneously seek to increase the number of developmental supports and focus on those most potent in conveying support.

Connectedness begets connectedness...and lack of connectedness in one setting undermines young people’s ability or willingness to establish connectedness in other settings.

to augment the number of developmental supports youth receive across both school and community contexts. By enhancing the breadth and diversity of young people’s experiences in each setting, community-school approaches may provide greater opportunity for accruing developmental supports and thus enhancing connectedness and the host of positive outcomes it engenders. The findings reported in this and in earlier chapters suggest that connectedness begets connectedness and lack of connectedness in one setting undermines young people’s ability or willingness to establish connectedness in other settings.

Overall, young people in this study demonstrated that quantity and potency matter. The results yielded interesting findings – the number of supports matter, but not all are created equal. From a policy or program perspective, these findings yield dual implications: 1) to increase connectedness one should simultaneously seek to increase the number of developmental supports and 2) to focus on those most potent in conveying support. This dual strategy is easy to pursue simultaneously and may be why the community school model has such potential.

Community-school programs link community and schools to engage youth in real life problem solving in their larger communities. The approach allows youth to acquire, apply and hone academic skills while simultaneously assisting communities in solving problems that affect the day-to-day lives of the community’s citizens. By engaging youth in this process, the programs help to reduce longstanding age barriers between young people and adults in their communities, add vitality to communities, and enhance school functioning and student learning.³³

Despite the tendency to ascribe to schools the power to almost single-handedly socialize youth in the skills necessary for fulfilling future social, societal, community, and professional obligations the results of this study show that youth experiences of school and community are largely interrelated. Cultivating able workers and engaged citizens certainly begins at home. From there, however, these findings suggest that schools and communities bear parallel responsibilities. After all, schools are but microcosms of their communities; the responsibility for fostering positive youth outcomes must begin at the outmost level.

Recommended ACTION Items

How do communities and schools convey respect for youth and foster connectedness?

This study found that connectedness for young people boils down to respect, the power to influence the conditions of their day-to-day lives, and the sense that they mattered in school and community life. Youth who perceived that they were respected in school and/or in the larger community were more positive and optimistic than their peers who did not feel respected. Moreover, respect was not simply a by-product of a young person's individual relationship with adults; it was also a product of the silent norms, values and system of treating youth in institutions and public spaces.

How do communities and schools convey respect and foster connectedness? The section that follows, lists thirteen broad recommendations for practitioners and policy makers in schools and communities hoping to augment connectedness in each setting.

CREATE ENGAGING OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH OF ALL AGES IN AS MANY LEVELS AS POSSIBLE.

“Meaningful roles” – voice, visibility, and power – emerged from this study as the single most powerful correlate to school and community connectedness. The capacity to garner acknowledgement, to effect change, and to use their voices to participate in creating school and community environments were central to the overall themes of agency and constituency that knit together the findings in all

What Really Matters

Connectedness for young people boils down to respect – the power to influence the conditions of their day-to-day lives, and the sense that they matter in school and community life.

elements of the study. It is not enough to simply award roles without also assuring that they encase the potential to provide larger meaning as well.

Meaningful involvement can take many forms and operates at many levels. It need not be resource intensive. Not all young people in the study desired direct and sustained input at the school or community level. It was clear that for some youth, simply knowing that people their age had

direct input felt meaningful and satisfying. Most participants, however, desired the opportunity to be consulted in some way about the issues that affected their lives or the lives of other youth. A few study participants were very interested in direct input through leadership roles.

Because meaningful roles and relationships with adults are positively and significantly correlated in both settings, opportunities to work in partnership with adults on projects of benefit to some larger purpose may also help to build both connectedness-linked supports.

DIVERSIFY THE RANGE OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH TO PARTICIPATE IN COMMUNITY LIFE; OPPORTUNITIES NEED NOT AND SHOULD NOT BE SOLELY RELATED TO ISSUES DIRECTLY AFFECTING YOUTH.

Most often, when youth are invited to participate on

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decision-making bodies, they are bodies with direct influence on youth services in one form or another. Youth participants in this study expressed interest in participating on bodies that affect their community at large. This is important and worthy of attention for several reasons. First, youth are often characterized as being self-centered. While this charge is thought to have developmental underpinnings³⁴ it may in part be due to the fact that youth are intentionally segregated from adults for exceptionally long periods of time, encouraged to fraternize with peers, and assumed to want involvement only with issues affecting them or their friends. Inviting young people to acquaint themselves with the myriad of issues that affect the lives and well-being of other community members (environment, commerce, housing, urban planning, etc.) begins to erode assumptions both adults and youth make about themselves and each other. It also helps to educate young people about the many facets of the world that will likely influence the social and environmental contours of adult life. Lastly, in broadening the total number of opportunities for youth to participate in community life, communities will likely augment the number of youth involved in civic affairs.

The following organizations offer successful models for youth-adult community service learning and engagement:

- Leadership Cayuga
- Learn and Serve America
- National Youth Leadership Council
- Youth Infusion

PROMOTE LINKAGES BETWEEN SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY TO PROMOTE/FACILITATE LEARNING PARTNERSHIPS.

In this study, school and community connectedness were strongly associated, rivaling only meaningful roles as the most powerful predictor of connectedness in the

other setting. Moreover, community connectedness was a stronger and more stable predictor of school connectedness than the reverse. This interdependence contains important implications. The primary implication is that community matters. Young people are most likely to feel and act productively and civically connected to their school and community when they feel developmentally supported and connected in the other setting.

Because of this strong interdependence, it seems apparent that strategies to enhance school or community connectedness should incorporate strategies for fostering connectedness in the other setting. The most obvious means of fostering connectedness in both settings is to develop school-commu-

nity partnerships that permit adolescents to spend satisfying and productive time in each setting – ideally through functions that promote active problem solving and engagement, satisfy academic requirements, and contribute to a larger purpose simultaneously. Fortunately,

there are many innovative models for such undertakings that range from whole school models, such as the University-Assisted Community School Program in Philadelphia, to simply adding service-learning components to existing school curriculum.

More research is needed in this area to assess the extent to which any of these models serve to increase connectedness attitudes and behaviors across both settings, but the findings from this study suggest that school-community partnerships may yield a number of mutually reinforcing positive outcomes.

In this study, school and community connectedness were strongly associated, rivaling only meaningful roles as the most powerful predictor of connectedness in the other setting. The primary implication is that this interdependence matters. Young people are most likely to feel and act productively and civically connected to their school and community when they feel developmentally supported and connected in the other setting.

CREATE A “DEVELOPMENTALLY ATTENTIVE CULTURE” IN SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY BY TARGETING ATTITUDE CHANGE AMONG ADULTS – PARTICULARLY THOSE WITH REGULAR BUT ANONYMOUS CONTACT WITH YOUTH SUCH AS POLICE, BUSINESS, AND GENERAL COMMUNITY MEMBERS.

Youth perceptions of how known and anonymous adults regarded them were powerful correlates to connectedness. It was abundantly clear that everyday youth-adult encounters, though seemingly insignificant, shaped how study participants came to see their place within their community. Simple exchanges with adults in business settings and on the streets of their neighborhoods were

Simple exchanges with adults in business settings and on the streets of their neighborhoods were evaluated by participants according to the respect, civility, and encouragement offered.

evaluated by participants according to the respect, civility, and encouragement offered.

It seems highly likely, however, that most adults

have absolutely no idea how powerful these simple transactions can be. Particularly for adults not directly engaged in the youth serving sector, awareness of youth presence and sensitivities are often limited. Although it is unrealistic to expect the average adult to show developmental attentiveness, it is highly feasible to expect adults to refrain from actively discriminating on the basis of age. Targeting key community business leaders, police, and community leaders for awareness campaigns is a good start. Building a community wide awareness campaign using radio public service announcements and other media is a next step.

INCREASE THE NUMBER OF DEVELOPMENTAL SUPPORTS YOUNG PEOPLE PERCEIVE IN SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY.

The findings show that developmental supports, as defined in this study, are cumulative – the more supports youth possess, regardless of the nature of the support, the higher their connectedness score in school and in the community. The study’s cross-sectional design makes it impossible to assume causality, but the results do suggest that augmenting

supports may directly or indirectly augment connectedness. Both school and community connectedness scores were primarily reported in the high level with none in the low level when respondents possessed 8 or more developmental supports. Nearly 50% of youth in the study possessed between 4 and 6 supports.

Schools and communities can readily assess the presence or absence of perceived developmental supports without having to implement costly and time-consuming assessments of behavior change. Using the data received from such assessments, they would also be in the position to identify developmental support areas in need of attention.

IN DESIGNING INITIATIVES, FOCUS ON THE SUPPORTS AND OPPORTUNITIES THAT CAN CREATE THE GREATEST BREADTH AND DEPTH.

The old adage, “get more bang for your buck” applies here. By enhancing developmental support in areas in which few youth perceive support, the initiative is more likely to succeed in increasing perceived support among a broader number of youth. In the study community, the areas most likely to increase the number of perceived developmental supports in community for the greatest number of youth include: meaningful roles, creative engagement, and positive relationships with adults. For school, the supports are nearly identical: academic engagement, meaningful roles, and positive relationships with adults.

RECOGNIZE AND ACCOMMODATE GRADE-RELATED DIFFERENCES.

Tailor the approach by grade, age, and/or developmental stage. While this study does offer insight into grade-specific dynamics in each setting, the focus of the grade-related analyses contained here yielded far more insight into seniors than into their younger peers. Additional study may be necessary to determine what specific approaches to enhancing connectedness might most benefit eighth and tenth grade youth.

RECOGNIZE AND ADDRESS THE POSSIBILITY THAT DECLINING CONNECTEDNESS SCORES ACROSS GRADES MAY BE THE RESULT OF A POOR FIT BETWEEN DEVELOPMENTAL NEEDS AND ENVIRONMENTAL OPPORTUNITIES TO FULFILL THESE NEEDS...AND THAT “SENIORITIS” MAY BEGIN EARLIER THAN THE SENIOR YEAR.

Senioritis is a notorious phenomenon that is finally receiving attention among policy makers interested in understanding and addressing the ailment. As will be addressed in the next recommendation, the emerging suggestions are quite broad and innovative. This study suggests, however, that the causes of senioritis may begin far earlier than the senior year. It suggests that

This study suggests however, that the causes of senioritis may begin far earlier than the senior year. It suggests that levels of frustration, unmet need for greater autonomy, and growing cynicism that such needs will be met in school and community settings, increase as youth advance in age.

levels of frustration, unmet need for greater autonomy and growing cynicism that such needs will be met in school and community settings, increase as youth advance.

The vastly positive experience of one group of alterna-

tive school seniors who left a traditional school environment because of extreme disconnectedness and low productivity provided testimony to the power that stage–environment fit has on connectedness and academic functioning. Survey and focus group results indicated that these youth were all thriving in a setting where opportunities to fulfill several of the core developmental needs identified here were abundant, including meaningful roles – the most powerful associate of connectedness for seniors.

Clearly more research needs to be conducted to confirm the poor stage–environment fit assumption. If the assumption can be validated by more rigorous studies, a variety of implications and recommendations could follow, including the recommendation to examine the viability of replacing the current assessment–driven industrial school model with a developmentally driven model. Several templates for this currently exist, but are largely confined to alternative, private, or experimental schools.

CONSIDER SUBSTANTIVE SENIOR YEAR REFORM IN KEEPING WITH THE RECOMMENDATIONS ISSUED BY THE NATIONAL COMMISSION ON THE SENIOR YEAR IN HIGH SCHOOL.

Although they did not set out to study connectedness, the National Commission on the Senior Year in High School has issued a series of recommendations that if implemented in their entirety would likely strengthen twelfth grade youth connectedness to school and to community. Alongside the customary recommendations aimed at mandating greater accountability, expectations, and incentive for K-16 educational institutions, the Commission takes the critical step of recommending the adoption of practices that increase opportunities for seniors to meet unsatisfied developmental needs in school and in the community.

These include, but are not limited to, allowing for 1) accelerated transition to

college, 2) apprenticeships in local business, and 3) creation of “middle college high schools” that target high school students with the potential for dropping out of school.

Many of the youth invited to participate in meaningful roles at the school or community level are those who are already support and opportunity rich. Functionally, this systemic reward-based selection bias serves only to widen the gap between support-rich and support-poor youth, and thus, positive and negative outcome trajectories.

However, following through with the Commission’s recommendations may not fundamentally address the roots of poor–stage environment fit noted here and elsewhere among middle or early high school age youth, but they would go some distance toward addressing the cumulative frustration, disengagement, and disconnectedness noted among all but the alternative school seniors in this study. And, were they to be implemented through development of school–community partnerships, in which seniors were provided opportunities to apply their skills to something with added meaning or ramifications outside of themselves, the results could be quite powerful for youth and for their communities.

ACTIVELY RECRUIT HIGH-RISK AND/OR LOW ACHIEVING YOUTH FOR INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY LEVEL LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES.

Being both relatively resource rich and dedicated to youth, the community Town Youth Board and its three school districts worked hard to create a variety of opportunities for involvement and leadership at both the school and community level. Unfortunately, as is true in many places, many of these opportunities are available largely to youth who have proven academic or leadership capabilities. In most schools, for example, a minimum GPA is often required before a student can run for office. Moreover, the majority of appointments made to the Town Advisory Council come from area high schools whose administrators have strict grade requirements for participating and thus tend to select highly capable and academically talented youth. As a result, many of the youth invited to participate in meaningful roles at the school or community level are those who are already support and opportunity rich. Functionally, this systemic reward-based selection bias serves only to widen the gap between support-rich and support-poor youth, and thus, positive and negative outcome trajectories.

The literature suggests that the outcomes of this gap and the disconnectedness it fosters can be negative for individual youth and for society as a whole.³⁷ Strategies to counter this very common trend are sorely needed. Targeting support poor youth for special services, the backbone of most prevention strategies, is critical but does nothing to address the bias built into access to school and community opportunities to effect change and to make one's voice heard. This study suggests that such opportunities are central to connectedness and should be used to support rather than reward.

Strategies for helping youth representatives to actually represent youth need not be cumbersome. Helping to arrange something akin to town meetings, focus groups, or even youth developed and administered surveys, administered in and/or out of school periodically would help to mitigate this problem.

CREATE FORMAL STRUCTURES OR FORUMS FOR YOUTH REPRESENTATIVES TO SOLICIT INPUT FROM THEIR YOUTH CONSTITUENTS.

Adding youth representatives to committees, boards, advisory councils, and other overseer bodies has become a quite popular means of adding “youth perspective.” Such moves surely originate from laudable goals and intentions. However, in addition to the many logistic and youth-adult style issues that commonly emerge in such arrangements, is the problem youth representatives face of having little formal means to solicit input from the young people they are supposedly representing. To ask one or two youth to represent an entire age group (or several groups) assumes homogeneity of opinion and perspective that simply does not exist. To ask them to do so without access to those they represent is unfair, is a missed opportunity for building human and social capital in and among youth, and is fundamentally disempowering.

Strategies for helping youth representatives represent youth need not be cumbersome. Helping to arrange something akin to

town meetings, focus groups, or even youth developed and administered surveys, administered in and/or out of school periodically would help to mitigate this problem. Such strategies have the added benefit of 1) helping youth without direct input feel involved through the consultation process, 2) advertising the opportunities for leadership, and 3) disseminating information about how young people actively participate in effecting change.

This study suggests that one of the reasons youth perceived widespread adult discrimination and lack of input opportunities may be, in part, a result of a normative assumption that adults, in general, are not inclined to respect or care about youth opinions and perspectives.

CAPITALIZE ON THE OPPORTUNITIES ALREADY PROVIDED TO YOUNG PEOPLE IN SCHOOLS BY CLEARLY ADVERTISING THE ROLES YOUTH PLAY AND THE EFFECTS THEY HAVE ON SCHOOL LIFE.

The study community, like many other communities, boasts a number of meaningful opportunities for youth to participate directly and indirectly in school and community affairs. They do not, however, have formal mechanisms for letting other youth know about what youth representatives have contributed or accomplished. For example, although nearly a dozen youth participate annually on the Youth Advisory Committee to the Town Supervisor, the value and results of youth participation are rarely publicized, especially among other youth.

Consistent with social norms theory,³⁸ this study suggests that one of the reasons youth perceived widespread adult discrimination and lack of input opportunities may be, in part, a result of a normative assumption that adults, in general, are not inclined to respect or care about youth opinions and perspectives. This attitude is reinforced by lack of evidence to the contrary since few schools or communities invest resources in publicizing the effects of youth participation to other youth. Schools and communities do sometimes publicize youth participation in venues accessible to adults interested in such news, but it is rare that youth learn about the efficacy of youth participation in school or community affairs. Efforts to demonstrate that youth representatives are valued, respected, and efficacious in their appointments would go a long way toward changing normative beliefs among youth and stimulating greater youth involvement in school and community affairs.

GENERATE AND IMPLEMENT STRATEGIES FOR ENHANCING SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT.

Like a number of other studies, this study unveiled widespread boredom among youth, especially in school. One classroom of at-risk youth in a traditional high school setting reported a 0% rate of engagement. High rates of boredom are lethal for productivity. This study suggests that boredom may stem from lack of a sense of relevance (this is particularly the case among at-risk youth), classroom education techniques, class size, lack of teacher motivation,

over emphasis on standardized testing, quality of adult-youth relations, and general school climate. This study also suggests that school connectedness and school engagement are circularly related – engagement may be both an outcome and a predictor of connectedness – working to enhance connectedness may also enhance engagement.

Final Note

Young people in this study revealed a deep hunger for something more than most adults regard as the best they have to offer – high academic expectations and preparation, varied activities in school and town, or even meaningful relationships with adults. Young people want what they call “respect.” They want to belong to their community and to their schools, to be endowed with meaningful rights and privileges, to be heard and adequately represented. In short, they want to participate in deciding and in creating the environments that so deeply affect their development during a time in life in which they are especially receptive to learning how to be citizens outside their homes. This sentiment came up regardless of age, but was especially salient for the seniors who see themselves as well prepared academically, but very ill-prepared civically to assume the mantle of adulthood looming before them.

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Appendix A: Detailed Methodology and Analytical Approach

Study Design

This study was a collaboration between Janis Whitlock, three School Districts, and the Town Youth Board in a resource rich community (just over 100,000 residents) in the northeastern United States clearly dedicated to cultivating the capacities of its youth. Students enrolled in all of the three participating school districts are disproportionately Caucasian (89% Caucasian, 5.0% African American, 5.9% other) and middle to upper economic class. A concerted effort was made to assure balance in gender, ethnicity, economic status, and other variables that might affect perceived connectedness to school. School administrators assisted in identifying classes likely to meet these criteria. The following chart outlines the overall study design.

Community Partners

The study community's Youth Board and each of the school districts assumed various coordination tasks that profoundly simplified the implementation of the study. The Youth Board, for example, was highly instrumental in facilitating logistics associated with the study. They also provided generous in-kind support in the form of travel accommodations, copying, work space, research assistance, and pilot testing.

Similarly, each school took on the task of recruiting teachers into the study, as well as relaying communications with teachers prior to administration of the survey. Consent forms were also handled collaboratively.

Chart A.1 Summary of Study Phases, Activities, Sample and Response Rate

Phase	Activities	Sample	Response Rate
I – October 2001	School and Community Connection Survey	Six eighth, six tenth, and seven twelfth grade classes across all three districts (n= 350).	318 surveys analyzed*
II – December 2001	Youth Focus Groups & Recommendation Agreement Method	Three eighth, three tenth, and four twelfth grade classes across all three districts (n =108).	10 focus groups (n =108).

**Of the 318 admissible surveys, 130 were from eighth graders, 112 were tenth graders, and 76 were twelfth graders. The survey sample was generally representative of the ethnic, gender and grade proportions of the study population across all three school districts with a few exceptions: 1) The sample contained a slightly higher percentage of students identified as ethnically "other" and 2) slightly lower percentage of Caucasian students. The survey sample also contained a slightly higher percentage of eighth graders and a slightly lower percentage of twelfth graders than the actual student body.*

The principal investigator worked with the school assistant superintendents to draft a consent form that was understandable to parents and comprehensive enough to satisfy Cornell University’s Committee on Human Subjects. Consent forms were then distributed through each school’s point person, a process that greatly facilitated student participation.

School and Community Connections Survey

The SCCS was comprised primarily of closed-ended (Likert response scale) questions but also contained two open-ended questions intended to gather recommendations from students about how schools and communities could better meet their developmental needs. The open-ended questions were placed at the end of the survey and asked: 1) What can your school do to make this a better place for people your age to grow up? and 2) What can your community do to make this a better place for people your age to grow up? Demographic (control) variables included: gender, grade, ethnicity, religiosity, group involvement, relationships with peers in school and in the community, and academic achievement. The survey consisted of 105 items and was designed to be administered during a 50-minute class period. In order to control the potential effect of academic achievement and to ensure equal representation across all school districts, the following sampling table was utilized:

Data Analysis

Initial cleaning and preliminary data exploration were conducted in SPSS. Confirmatory factor analysis, regression, and ANOVAs were also run in SPSS and then modeled in AMOS to compensate for random missing data. Because construct factors were strongest when the fifth response category, “not sure,” was coded as missing rather than as the midpoint of the response scale and because of the large number of variables, the raw survey data showed a significant amount of missing data. Further analysis suggested missing data were randomly distributed and no individual measures were dropped due to rates of missing data exceeding 15%.

Focus Groups

The purpose of the youth focus groups was four-fold: 1) to solicit youth interpretations of the trends that had emerged in the survey data, 2) to uncover any other variables or issues that might be at play in shaping youth connectedness to school and the larger community, 3) to identify the conditions youth linked to connectedness in each setting, and 4) to identify grade-related differences in how youth in eighth, tenth and twelfth grade described or interpreted their relationship to school and the larger community.

A total of 10 focus groups (total n=108) with eighth (n=36), tenth (n=31), and twelfth (n=41) grade youth from all three

Chart A.2 SCCS Survey: Youth Participant Sample Selection by Academic Achievement

Sample Size: 19 Classes* (Overall 2 per grade/school district)	School District A	School District B	School District
eighth	Low	Moderate	High
tenth	Moderate	High	Low
twelfth	High	Low	Moderate

Low = class of youth judged by school staff to include significant number of low achieving youth
Moderate = class of youth judged by school staff to include significant number of moderate achieving youth
High = class of youth judged by school staff to include significant number of high achieving youth

* After realizing that a particularly low number of moderate-connection seniors were surveyed, one of the school districts agreed to include an additional class in the study, which brought the total number of classes surveyed up to nineteen. Nine of these participating classes participated in only the survey and ten of the classes received both the survey and focus group. In addition, a pilot focus group was conducted with youth associated with the Town Youth Board as a means of field-testing the survey and focus group tools.

school districts were conducted in December 2001. Focus groups consisted of 8-15 participants and were selected from the original classes of students who took the survey. Teachers were asked to unsystematically select participants, but to ensure that the group was demographically balanced and likely to represent a varied set of perspectives. As with the survey sample, the focus group sample was generally representative of the ethnicity and gender of the whole student body except it contained a slightly higher percentage of youth identified as ethnically “other” and a slightly lower percentage of Caucasian and Black youth.

The length of the focus groups were determined by the school principal and varied from 60 minutes (one class period) to 1.5 hours depending on the structure of the particular school and class. The questioning route for all focus groups tended to move from general to specific and integrated key questions into a generally loose questioning structure. The “Recommendations Agreement Method” described in depth below comprised the centerpiece of the focus groups. The exercise identified the issues particularly salient to focus group participants which were then explored in greater depth through a series of structured questions. Key questions (questions asked in all groups) were integrated into this section of the group interview.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data analysis included four ways of cataloguing connectedness passages: 1) particular conditions linked to connectedness (caring, trusting, respecting, or valuing) by multiple participants (**frequency**), 2) a perceived magnitude of impact (**impact**), and 3) three distinct affective tones used to convey the magnitude of impact (**tone**). This coding scheme proved highly flexible and valuable in revealing interesting relationships and trends in connectedness language.

Recommendation Agreement Method (RAM)

The goal of the RAM analyses was two-fold: 1) to identify the areas of greatest concern to all students regardless of grade and 2) to discern whether there were significant grade level differences that might permit insight into development-environment fit. During the focus group, students were given a sheet of paper with a cross section (36 statements) of student responses to the questions: 1) “What can your school do to become a better place for students?” and

2) “What can your town do to become a better place for people your age?”

After initial discussion, students were asked to identify up to five comments that they agreed with and to identify up to two with which they most strongly agreed. The researcher then went around the room and students listed their top two for each setting – school and community. The principal investigator recorded the priority areas on a master form and then used those comments most commonly selected to facilitate discussion during the remainder of the interview.

Data Analysis

To identify key themes, the original 36 statements were clustered into 18 thematically similar constructs for school and 20 thematically similar constructs for community. A total of 108 RAM forms were collected, though only 103 were eligible for analysis. Five of the RAM forms were disqualified because more than five preferences were marked. Quantitative analysis was conducted using SPSS. Each respondent’s preferences (up to five) were recorded along with the respondent’s grade level. Each preference was assigned a score of 1 if it was selected. Priority preferences (each student was asked to indicate up to two priorities with which they most strongly agreed) were weighted by adding an additional point for a total possible score of 2. Differences and similarities were then analyzed using cross-tabulation and ANOVA to look for grade level differences.

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- [12] The mostly non-diverse sample prohibits drawing any conclusions.
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