

## **Constructing a Culture of Community: The Contributions of Rural Youth**

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*This study illustrates a cooperative ethos that one midwestern rural school initiated and fostered in its student body. The study observes the students' strategies to compensate for the lack of direct parent and community involvement. The students construct—and flourish in—a school culture that values participation, cooperation, and high expectations.*

The image of a quiet, scenic rural town is inviting and romantic in the minds of many casual observers. What many passers-by assume as they steal a glance from the state highway is that nothing is wrong. After all, rural states like North Dakota, Iowa, and Minnesota produce some of the highest SAT scores in the country (College Board, 1993). In general, small rural schools have high levels of achievement (Swanson, 1988). At the same time, some of this country's highest rates of child poverty, teen alcoholism, and infant mortality are in rural areas (Sherman, 1992).

One wonders about the future for which rural public schools are preparing its students. Farming is seriously on the decline, out-migration from rural areas has been a trend for decades, and there is little industry in rural areas to which one can apply a trade (Nelson, 1990; Stinson, 1986). There are indications that some rural living and schooling conditions are worse than urban conditions (Sherman, 1992). These conditions led me to examine the high school experience of rural youth for the purposes of understanding the future of an entire population of youth who soon will become adults seeking employment or higher education. Who are these students, and what will become of them?

In this study, I explored the high school experience of students in a small, rural town by looking at the context that influences their post-high school educational aspirations. Despite the bleak social, geographic, and economic context in which these rural students obtain their education, I observed a community of rural students who made an apparently unpromising situation work to their advantage. Members of the senior class at Arbyrd High School<sup>1</sup> demonstrated that they are a significant part of their own

educational experience. The small class, which I studied throughout the senior year, shared similar norms, traditions, histories, and values. By their final year of school, these students were tightly bound together by interest in seeing each other succeed. They were a small, cooperative group who had contributed a great deal to their school community and to their own successes.

Through their involvement in school-related activities, they bridged the scholastic divide that tracking had created. From their involvement and experiences with each other outside of the classroom, they became models for each other inside the classrooms and throughout the school. They created a culture that set a standard for success, and they assisted each other in reaching that standard.

Here I will consider the social context in which rural students pursue an education, after which I will discuss the literature on "community" that is an inextricable part of rural students' educational experience. My findings will then point to the culture, or ethos, constructed within this group of rural high school youth that values cooperation, participation, and high expectations. My focus is on the role that the senior class members play in the construction and organization of their own educational experiences—the way in which this small community of students fosters commitment among its members.

### Background

One must consider the interplay of the geographic, social, and economic contexts within which rural students receive their formal education. Geographic isolation from consumer centers, public transportation, and state-of-the-art facilities (e.g., information technologies, libraries) reduces access to social and economic opportunities. Social isolation limits access to social and cultural resources that urban and suburban high school students enjoy (Carlson, 1990) and distances rural youth from mainstream youth culture that is reflected in media and television. Limited school funding sources make it difficult for schools to

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<sup>1</sup>Arbyrd is a pseudonym, as are all names used throughout this article.

obtain diverse curricula, competitive salaries that attract and retain quality staff, and up-to-date technologies in the schools (Monk & Haller, 1986). Present-day school funding formulas based on property taxes only further this imbalance.

Isolation from the general macro-economic and international market forces is one dynamic that plays out in the lives of rural high school students. Expectations for employment among students are low as occupational opportunities appear limited by the lack of an industrial base (Barrows, 1986; DeYoung, 1991; Stinson, 1986).

In spite of this unfavorable portrayal of student existence in rural America, there exists favorable conditions that make for a pleasant and constructive schooling experience. The "family-like atmosphere" of a small school is consistently reflected in the literature (Carlson, 1985; 1989), and the close personal and social relationships among students, teachers, and parents have been noted as well (Monk & Haller, 1986). Finally, social life and pride in a small town often revolves around the school and its accomplishments (DeYoung, 1987).

The importance of close relationships, social life, and family-like atmosphere is inextricably related to the community aspect of small, rural towns. The word "community" is applied in broad and inconsistent ways in the growing body of literature on this topic. Nonetheless, there is a recurrence of many of the same themes: a sense of oneness among community members, though often to the point of control (Peshkin, 1978), and community "connectedness" that is tight, but uses fear of status anxiety to dissuade students from leaving town (Steinitz & Solomon, 1986). In other community studies, there is a cultural message that is conveyed—one that asks community members to properly socialize its members into a way of a shared belief system, norms, and values (Coleman, 1987; Coleman & Hoffer, 1987).

In each of these studies, community is recognized as an influential factor in the way students operate. In *High School as Community*, Bryk and Driscoll (1988) define school-as-community as

a social organization consisting of cooperative relations among adults who share a common purpose where daily life for both adults and students is organized in a way which fosters commitment among its members. (p. 2)

Like their community study predecessors, Bryk and Driscoll give credit to the adult community members' influences over the students. What is recognized in the present study at Arbyrd High School is that the *students* construct their community; they share cooperative relations and foster commitment among themselves.

## Method

In order to capture the cultural and social actions in the lives of these rural youth, an ethnographic methodology was employed because the initial research questions were exploratory and descriptive in nature. I used an orienting framework to guide data collection, but did not embrace a strict theory. In this way, I could assure that the data informed the guiding framework rather than allowing the framework to inform the relevance of the data. I attempted to elicit meaning from life experiences, routines, and social context (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983) to explore students' perspectives regarding their educational experiences and aspirations.

The method required in-depth interviews, observations, and thorough review of documents. I spent an academic year in Arbyrd observing the school and the community two days a week. I initially approached data collection from a macro perspective of community members, board members, and parents, and narrowed the focus to a micro perspective of school administrators, teachers, and students. Research began with community observations (civic events, pedestrian traffic, coffee shop business) and community member interviews; review of the community newspaper and town board meeting minutes followed. School administrators and school board members were then observed in board meetings and in school and interviewed either after meetings or throughout the school day. The focus of the observations and interviews was on the level of involvement with and commitment to students. Publically available school documents were reviewed and analyzed to determine what school items were discussed in newsletters and bulletins, and the amount of detail that was included.

Interviews with and observations of students and teachers followed. These observations examined classrooms, hallways, the cafeteria, the women's washroom, and school events. Students allowed me to review some of their class notes, personal notes, and school papers. The interviews and observations with students and teachers were rich in detail and emotion, for the students and teachers routinely participate in the school schedule and they have an "explicit agenda of activities" (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988).

Interviews were conducted with the assistance of an audiotape recorder; the nature of classroom and community observations allowed for note-taking that was mostly unobtrusive. After each school visit, I categorized notes, tapes, and documents by recurring themes.

## Findings

*Profile of Arbyrd*

Arbyrd is a town of roughly 1,000 residents. It is an hour outside of a "standard metropolitan statistical area." At first glance, it is a picturesque village in a rural county, but upon closer examination one begins to notice the abandoned downtown businesses and the string of trailer homes that are crowded together on small lots. There is enough local business to provide only the necessities: a convenience store, a hair salon, a hardware store, an accountant's office, two cafes, and a tavern on each corner of the downtown intersection.

Because there is limited industry and declining farming in this community, over half of the working population commutes 20 to 40 minutes for work (United States Census Bureau, 1990). According to school district records, 31 of 45 teachers at Arbyrd School District are non-residents of Arbyrd. Part of the reality in this rural town is that many adults, other than teachers, are not visibly present during the day: their work takes them outside of town. Teachers, because they tend to be non-residents, are not seen during the evenings and on weekends. Consequently, adult role modeling and influence over the students by adults is minimized. Adults are not visibly a part of the school life of students. It appears from observations and interviews that many of the adult members of the Arbyrd community are restrained, in three ways, from fully participating in the students' educational experiences: apathy, a communication gap, and a blind faith that educational professionals are single-handedly taking care of the business of education.

*Apathy.* According to the students, apathy exists among parents, school staff, and the general community. One senior student had this to say:

The parents of this class are the type that sit back and are told what is going on or what it's all about, instead of being the ones who speak and tell the school how they would like it. They grumble, but they don't say anything.

The village board clerk stated unequivocally that "the town is apathetic over school issues. They rarely come to town for meetings." A student put it more bluntly: "The community sucks. They're not involved unless it's sports or their own kids."

*Communication gap.* Another restraining factor, the communication gap, is perhaps a result of the geographic and economic conditions described earlier. Many parents and community members are gone during the day, so there is little contact with the school staff. The French teacher suggested that the lack of communication might have to do with the lower levels of education among Arbyrd adults.

The principal shared his experience with this matter:

We put things in the newspaper and newsletter, but I'm not so sure [the community] understands. I have had to write the curricular process three different ways, and someone will tell me they don't understand.

The editor of the town newspaper confirmed this:

We're publishing something in the paper right now that the Gifted and Talented teacher wants to put in. It's bad. It's so bad.

Interviewer: It is poorly written?

No, it's too technical. It puts a newspaper at a certain disadvantage or obligation. I would much prefer that she write her piece in layman's terms. I think if you're not personally involved in it, it's not interesting.

*Blind faith.* As parents pull onto the state highway each morning, there is blind faith that school professionals are in it alone to educate the children of Arbyrd. The guidance counselor, a non-resident of Arbyrd, expressed this general perception that parents and the community have an unquestioned faith in the school:

There is a general expectation that the kids work hard in school, and that there is order in the classroom. On the other hand, we don't have a PTA here. People are in their own little worlds.

A senior put it this way:

They are the silent partner . . . yeah, "silent partner" is how I would describe the community. They know the teachers and they cooperate with each other, but I don't always see them coming into school.

*The Student Community of Arbyrd High School*

The students of Arbyrd High, for the most part, have been together since kindergarten. Of the 30 seniors at Arbyrd High, most of them have known only Arbyrd as their home town. The students know each other's rank in the class; they know who did what, who dates whom, and who cried when. "Very little is private," the math teacher said.

In spite of the absence of the adult community, the senior students that I observed and interviewed revealed how they contribute significantly to their own educational experiences. Through cooperation, participation, and high expectations, the students have created a community among

themselves that works to promote academic attainment and higher educational aspirations.

The ethos of a school community that values participation, cooperation, and high expectations is constructed by the senior class as a way of making the most of their limited resources. By pooling together their inherent strengths and talents, the students willingly participate in creating and shaping their own educational experiences.

As a way of illustrating the culture of community that the students created among themselves at Arbyrd High, I begin at the end—the end of the school year, the end of the seniors' schooling experience at Arbyrd High—with the Senior Class Night.

*The culture of participation.* Annually, a night is set aside the week before graduation to honor the graduates with awards and scholarships and to present their "wills and prophecies." On this night, the 30 seniors in the class of 1991 each prepared wills to bequeath something to another member of their class. The prophecies are written by students to fellow students. An example of a prophecy was the prediction that George, who is going into aviation mechanics, will design a turbo plane engine that fastens to his tractor so he can finish his chores on the farm twice as fast.

In a small gymnasium with a crowd of parents, school mates, and neighbors looking on from the bleachers, it was not difficult to notice who was overlooked during the ceremony of honors (12 of the 30 seniors received no award or scholarship). Yet, those whose names were not called remained relatively still and polite in their metal folding chairs, as they did during the school plays and pep rallies that I observed. In support, they each applauded as their classmates received their medallions, certificates, and checks. This night was a culmination of cooperation, participation, and expectation.

The ceremony and the gifts symbolize the value that this small school and community places on scholastic participation and involvement in activities. But participation is not a one-sided coin. To be involved in academics alone is not as valued as being involved in activities *and* academics. "It makes you a well-rounded person, and that's what colleges look for," a senior told me in an interview. To be involved in activities alone, such as athletics, is not valued either. There were students who did not receive awards, but who actively participated in extracurricular activities. However, they did not fully participate in the balance of the equation: scholastic commitment. They did not participate in the culture of high expectations.

Participation in activities, of course, comes at a cost. Those students who do not demonstrate athletic prowess or perhaps those who farm could not afford to commit the number of hours that extracurricular activities require. However, one senior was committed to his scholastic endeavors in agriculture classes *and* the activities of the

Future Farmers of America (FFA). He received two scholarships at Senior Class Night; his participation and commitment were recognized.

Even though not all names were called to receive awards, the membership of the 30 students in this school-community was not undervalued. A slide show of pictures of these 30 students from over the past 18 years brought Senior Class Night to a close. The slides showed groups of students with arms around each other, couples in prom or homecoming outfits, several students building a parade float. The photos from various occasions recorded the memories of these students' lives that are joined by a singularly shared experience: their years in the Arbyrd school system.

*The culture of cooperation.* In Arbyrd, there are benefits of involvement and commitment besides monetary awards and paper certificates at public ceremonies. Cooperation within the senior class socializes and integrates students into a culture that values scholastic performance and participation. As the wills and prophecies and the slide show testified, the cooperative community created by the seniors is not exclusive. Those who do not possess athletic prowess are not overlooked; their participation and cooperation in the school are rewarded.

There is little evidence of competition between these classmates; the group of 30 is small and cohesive. Their interest in each other's welfare was documented in observations and interviews. "We coach each other," one senior told me. "We want to see each other succeed," another senior said in an interview. This theme was confirmed by the frequency with which examples of student-to-student interaction were observed. Pooling resources among themselves was a form of compensation for the lack of human and social resources from the surrounding community.

Several examples of cooperation among peers were demonstrated in the classroom interaction. Although ever-so-slight cognitive gradations exist among these students, a non-competitive, or cooperative, nature is present as well. Field notes from the Advanced Math class illustrate this point well:

No one seems bothered, interrupted, or judgmental about the fact that Donna has asked the teacher for help three or four times in the course of 20 minutes. She is at his desk for quite a while. Meanwhile, Leo gets frustrated keeping his hand up for the teacher's attention. Kyle notices Leo's frustration and offers to help him out. Kyle is taking Calculus on an independent basis, but meets with the teacher during the same hour as Advanced Math. Kyle teaches Leo a mnemonic device to work out the problem. He tells Leo that is what he used on his ACT and SAT tests. The two talk about college entrance test scores. Kyle says to him that the standardized tests

are difficult. Leo asks if it's the test where it is better to not answer a question if you don't know the answer. Kyle confirms this and suggests the process of elimination, then answer it, or don't answer at all. His older brother taught him that trick, he told Leo.

An excerpt from field notes from a career planning class further reveals this idea of cooperation:

The students sit in groups of two. The assignment is to read through several articles and to synthesize the information into a small "map" on "How to Write a Resume." When it is Robbie's time to present, he asks if he can read his "map" instead of writing on the board. [It is well-known among the other students that Robbie is uncomfortable with reading out loud and writing.] The teacher says 'Everyone listen to Robbie . . . however he wants to do it.' The students all listen attentively, although they have been loud and rowdy for the most part of this class.

Other examples of cooperation among the students came out in interviews:

Denise: We know how we all do, because we share scores. I tell everyone; many of us do. We study together in study hall; we get a lot of help from each other.

Kyle: I think there are more pro-achievers than not. You'll see a lot of people helping each other with homework in classes, in the library, at home after school.

Teacher: Small groups of lower-end students have improved since freshman year. They take school more seriously now. Peer group support helped.

*The culture of high expectations.* There is little differentiation among the students. As the high school English teacher commented, "if there are sub-groups, they are microscopic." The industrial arts teacher (who is also the cross-country running coach) said he was hard-pressed to categorize the students, and he commented that the students do not put themselves in categories: "No one is a 'jock,' 'brain,' or 'nerd' here." Students with learning and emotional disabilities are integrated into the Arbyrd school system as well. In fact, from observations it was difficult to detect the students who were labeled "LD" or "ED."

The English teacher stated that "there is a lot of cross-over," referring to students in her College English class (advanced) and her General English (non-advanced) class. Indeed, had I not sat in on the various classes but only

observed social interaction in the cafeteria and corridors, I would not have been able to distinguish who was in the advanced classes and who was not.

Scholastically, the school curriculum has created a divide that separates the students. Because there is only one teacher for most subjects in this small school, the students must be divided to accommodate the class schedule, I was told. Of the 30 students, over half are in advanced classes; the rest are in non-advanced classes.

On the other hand, the seniors do detect a "microscopic" sub-group among them. A senior referred to a divide between his classmates: "Overachievers and those who feel they are okay." My understanding of the Arbyrd senior class criteria that separates the "over-achievers" from those who "feel they are okay" is defined by those students who plan to attend a four-year college and those who plan to attend either a two-year college or none at all. Nearly all students were considering some form of post-high school education, as they explained in interviews. The guidance counselor told me that three or four seniors were going on to work, and one was going into the military. He said 75% had two or four-year college plans. The students explained to me that college was their "future," but they were not sure where, for how long, or in what field they would study.

The overachievers have set the standard against which the others measure themselves. By not rejecting the culture that values commitment, students participate in the school community by maintaining high expectations and stacking themselves up against the standard set by the advanced students. Statements from several students appear to validate this:

Sarah: There aren't a lot of underachievers. It isn't cool to fail.

Bill: It pays to be smart. People you hang out with have better grades, so you want to keep up; it's not completely cool to blow off.

Laura: No one has ever pushed in a negative direction to fail or drink and stuff like that.

In the absence of many adult academic role models, the students model after each other. A positive consequence of this is that many students take more challenging courses, such as more math and science, than is required for graduation. According to the guidance counselor:

More students are taking upper level courses, not because they are sure about college, but because their friends are taking these classes, and because they want to leave the option of college open.

Even though the curricular divide runs between them, involvement in activities and commitment to school appear to lend opportunities for “cross over” or a “pulling up.” Socialization through high expectations, school participation, and cooperation seems to be the bridge that crosses scholastic differences. The bridged chasm is reflected best by two representative seniors: Kyle and Bill. The following illustrations from interviews and observations portray how students provide the opportunity for “cross over” through constructing a community that values expectations, cooperation, and participation. In the following example, Kyle set the benchmark and Bill worked to meet it.

*“Everything’s goin’ my way.”* Kyle Sweeney best defines the overachievers. He collected 14 awards on Senior Class Night, is the only National Merit Honor Scholar in the county, has been teaching himself math independently since the ninth grade, and has maintained a 4.0 grade-point average in all of his subjects throughout high school.

Kyle is also very involved in extracurricular activities. For example, he is on the cross-country team and the forensics team; he is in band and choir. He also starred in the school musical “Oklahoma!” as Curly. “Everything’s goin’ my way” is no understatement for this young man.

One of eight children, Kyle is headed to an out-of-state Big Ten university after high school where he wants to double major in English and Theater—“so I can teach English and not wait on tables when I can’t get an acting job,” he told me. His family recently was featured in the town paper as “Family of the Year.” The article mentioned that Kyle’s father works in maintenance and his mother is a nurse. Kyle told me that his older brothers and sisters were all valedictorians. His response to “What is your biggest fear?” was “Keeping up with the Sweeneys.”

Kyle described himself as competitive, driven, and intense; he also used terms like insecure and not confident. However, Kyle denies that he is competitive with his classmates: “I compete with myself.” Kyle likes to see himself as a teacher, a tutor:

I like helping people out in English. I save all my papers, and if someone is reading a book I know, I’ll help them find quotes and that. I like English. I study with my friends a lot.

Even though Kyle is at the top of his class scholastically, he is not isolated from his classmates, nor does he allow his status as valedictorian to alienate his classmates from him. Upon being questioned about his competitive nature, Kyle responded with a cooperatively natured response:

I think people are willing to help as long as it doesn’t hurt [their own work]. Lending notes won’t make

your [own] grade worse, and it will help them. You’ve got to keep it in perspective. Everybody has been here since kindergarten. You gotta realize that a friend is important.

Kyle has set a tone at the school. He is well liked, very visible in the school and community, and is quite friendly. He has not alienated his peers with his accomplishments. On the contrary, he has gone out of his way to be inclusive.

*“Captain Capable.”* Bill Cummings falls into the category of students who “feel they are okay.” He is one of the 10 seniors not in College English, and one of eight seniors not in Advanced Math. Early in his senior year, Bill was contemplating attendance at a four-year college, although he was not tracked into college prep classes. He wants to take an algebra class during the summer so that he will qualify for admission to a four-year state school. In the late spring when I spoke to Bill during Senior Class Night, he was still wavering between going to a two-year or four-year school. “Time and money,” he said, were the two factors that made him lean toward the two-year school.

Bill is the number one runner on the cross country team. It is the only extracurricular activity in which he has ever been involved. From conversations with him and from observations, he seems to be very proud of his team membership and the contributions he has made to the team. The team has been champions several years in a row. It is a source of pride to the community, reflected, for example, in store-front windows that boast “We’re Number 1.”

The coach, in a later interview, said that he would have never taken notice of Bill before he joined the team. He thought Bill was “trouble.” Now, after team membership for three years, the coach said he is struck by Bill’s commitment: “Bill displayed real leadership qualities and he beat my expectations. I can’t believe I’m using these adjectives to describe this kid.”

In an English class exercise, Bill used the phrase “Captain Capable” to describe himself. In an interview, I asked him to apply more adjectives to himself. “Athletic, out-going, open-minded, reliable, capable—a leader” were his responses. The coach said that considerable influence over Bill came from team members. “There were two seniors on last year’s team who brought him up.” Reflected in the coach’s language is that Bill was “pulled up” by the influences of school peers. A standard was modeled to him and he lived up to it.

Statements from Bill about his involvement in extracurricular activities sums up his experiences at Arbyrd well:

I was encouraged to run my sophomore year. A kid said the coach wanted to see me run; I had never been into it. I couldn’t see the point of running. The coach hadn’t asked him to ask me, the kid just wanted to see me go into running. It paid off. No one knew who

I was. Now I've been on the team three years. I get recognition. It makes me feel good. Now I can be a part of the school (he gestures to the trophy case). Like when grads come back, we know who they are because they made a name for themselves. They did something here; they're a part of history here.

In the hallways and in the cafeteria, I observed Bill socializing with friends from the cross-country team who are in the advanced classes, such as Kyle Sweeney. "I'm friends with everybody," he said to me in a later conversation.

Bill's experiences demonstrate how involvement and participation bridge the curricular divide, and how easily "crossover" occurs in this school-community. During his senior year, Bill's attendance was good and he participated in classroom discussions. He is committed to "being a part of this school," to being a part of the cooperative community created by the students that fosters achievement and high expectations through commitment and participation.

The statements made by Kyle and Bill and the observations made of them by school staff, school peers, and by me demonstrate the essence of the school ethos created by the students at Arbyrd High. Kyle's cooperative nature to assist his peers in academic matters seemed to be of benefit to others; Bill's involvement in extracurricular events seemed to sustain his interest in his schooling. By way of crossover, Bill and Kyle were not only peers but also teammates and friends. Much of the literature on school-aged youth suggests that a "brain" and a "jock" as friends would be an unlikely combination (Brown, 1989). The culture fostered by the students at Arbyrd High appears to counter the conventional understanding of high school youth, and Kyle's and Bill's schooling experiences are notable as a result.

#### Discussion

The senior students at Arbyrd High School have, for the most part, lived in the same town and have spent nearly 180 days a year together for the past 12 years. They are tightly integrated within their peer group, both by choice and for structural reasons: There are only 30 of them. To their credit the seniors are considered unbiased, despite the track lines that divide them, and are "very accepting of each other," according to teachers, school staff, and parents. These characteristic properties of the senior class are what led me to recognize the extensive socialization and cooperation occurring within the school. The observations of senior students at Arbyrd High revealed that they constructed and were committed to their own community that valued involvement, cooperation, and high expectations. While at Arbyrd, they made conditions work to meet their own standards of success and students lived up to them.

The community that the senior class has constructed at Arbyrd High School is, in part, due to the nature of a small, rural community. The economic, social, and geographic conditions that are a reality in this small town restrain the adult community members from being fully participating players. The students compensate for the lack of human and fiscal resources by relying on themselves and each other. They have received enough messages from adults and from economic and social indicators that the bleak landscape before them is no longer the fertile land of opportunity that it once was. No longer are sons inheriting farms, nor are daughters inheriting housework. Rather, the message is to "get out there."

I suggest that students' school successes are also due, in part, to their understanding that they need to succeed at a vehicle—education—that will take them out of an unpromising situation. They have made certain that they have created avenues for themselves by participating in school, cooperating with one another, and having high expectations within their school-as-community, despite the conditions around them.

One can only speculate as to why the cooperation among these students exists or how it is nourished. One argument is that cooperation and participation in a community is not a new concept for rural areas. Rural cooperatives, in fact, are common and have been the keystone to rural economic viability (Nelson, 1990). Rural electrification, gas, and food cooperatives are examples of this. Because of the high costs of overhead for farming equipment, labor, and supplies, rural community members pool their resources together and benefit mutually.

Why the students of Arbyrd High were able to counter the odds stacked against them may be based on the recent literature on resiliency (Benard, 1993; Garmezy, 1991; Masten, 1992). Resiliency in educational settings refers to the creation of "family, school, and community environments rich in the protective factors of caring, high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation" (Benard, 1993). Resilience in an individual refers to successful adaptation despite risk and adversity. And while this literature may be based in psychology, there are socio-psychological origins in every community—a need to belong, to care, and to flourish (Masten, 1992).

The findings here are not exactly in line with conventional studies of high school youth or with rural school studies that portray the dismal schooling experiences of rural youth. I would argue, however, that perhaps Arbyrd High is not as different from other rural schools as rural research depicts. Furthermore, little research in rural schools focuses specifically on students as constructors of their own experiences. This study does not suggest that all rural students enjoy a high degree of cooperation, expectation, and participation among their peers. What it does suggest, however, is that research has not yet touched on the contri-

butions that students can make to their own lives. Positive and negative schooling experiences are not always constructed for students, but perhaps by them.

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