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ABSTRACT

The philosophy of "Tribes" and the process of the "Tribes Learning Community" are described. The mission of Tribes is: "To assure the healthy development of every child so that each has the knowledge, skills and resiliency to be successful in a rapidly changing world." Central to this approach are two paradigms: (1) "Rather than fixing kids, fix the environments of the systems contributing to and sustaining their problems"; and (2) "Rather than diagnosing and labeling weaknesses, involve teachers, parents and students to identify, appreciate and celebrate each young person's strengths and importance to self and others." Human resilience is increased when systems foster caring and supportive relationships, positive and high expectation, and opportunities for meaningful participation. School cultures containing these components assure the development of physical, emotional, cognitive, social, and moral competence. Training in social skills is provided to facilitate the "learning community." The community building process of Tribes makes it possible to create a transformational culture supportive of all students, which enhances the potential of the school to meet everyone's basic human needs and create an environment in which academic excellence is possible. (Contains nine references.) (EMK)

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ED 430 177

Rather Than "Fixing Kids" – Transform the Environment

By Jeanne Gibbs

Picture a child, who because of environmental conditions at home, speaks only in a whisper to those around her and can only look at the ground with a cowering posture when spoken to by an adult. Now picture this child smiling, laughing and eagerly sharing a favorite experience with her classmates in a Community Circle.

Notice a young man who, when first entering the classroom, brought a sense of wildness, anger and bewilderment with him; a young man who lashed out at teachers and peers alike. Now watch his tears as he expresses great sorrow because of the four-day weekend coming up. He doesn't want to leave the classroom – a place where he feels safe, accepted and loved by all.

Report from Third Grade Teacher, Cathy Allen: Bountiful, Utah

Two students, one dropping out and one acting out are fortunate to be in Cathy Allen's classroom. It is a caring environment in which all kids thrive –all gaining a sense of competency and none feeling labeled as "a problem." This school, like thousands of others throughout the United States, Canada and Australia has become a *Learning Community* using the community building and peer leadership process known simply as "**Tribes**." This school has shifted its focus from adding one more promising curriculum or a tougher set of behavior rules to building a culture of caring throughout the school. It is an environment designed to meet everyone's basic human needs, belonging, of continuity, of being connected to others and to ideas and values that make our lives meaningful and significant (Sergiovanni, 1994).

John Dewey, more than 80 years ago, urged that each public school should be a model home, a complete community. A shared vision, realistic developmental goals and a caring way for people to be and learn together would energize students, staff and parents. Today, more likely than not, that school would be one of several thousand schools using the systemic peer leadership process of Tribes to re-culture their school system.

Consider what typically would have happened to Cathy Allen's students in a school still using the traditional "control-the-kids" teacher-talk approach. It's safe to say that had the behaviors of the two young people continued, they would have been diagnosed and labeled as having "learning problems." Moreover, in time their own self-confirming images would have sentenced them to tracks of failure; ultimately to be listed in statistics for school drop-outs, drug users, youth violence and other behaviors of alienation and despair. Massive categorical funding has been and continues to be allocated to the traditional educational focus to "fix kids" – fix them by initiating more and more programs for individual treatment, behavioral controls, pull-out strategies, special education and various costly remedial programs. This traditional focus driving legislation

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and massive funding continues in spite of the fact that there is growing agreement among researchers and educators that attempting to fix kids is overwhelming our schools.

Two refreshing paradigms give us a blinding glimpse of the obvious:

Rather than fixing kids, **fix the environments of the systems** contributing to and sustaining their problems;

Rather than diagnosing and labeling weaknesses, involve teachers, parents and students to **identify, appreciate and celebrate each young person's strengths** and importance to self and others.

The Transformational Environment

We no longer have to guess about how to establish a positive school environment that can transform the lives of children like those we met at the beginning of this article. We have only to look at two of the most compelling bodies of educational research; namely the long-term developmental studies of resilience and the more than one thousand studies on cooperative learning. The former identify **what** components must be present in child rearing systems (whether school, family, peer or community groups) if youth are to succeed. The latter studies tell us **how** to create and sustain these essential components within learning systems.

Our respected colleague, Bonnie Benard, has given the field of youth development and education a significant framework by synthesizing the impressive longitudinal studies on resilience. We only have to ask ourselves,

> *What if every school community recognized that the daily environment enveloping children's lives is the primary factor predictive of success or failure? What if all school site councils learned that in spite of serous life stress factors or high risks in the families or the community, a majority of children would succeed in life if the school community intentionally established a supportive caring environment for growth and learning?*

Human resilience, the capacity to overcome deprivation and adverse conditions in life, becomes a reality when systems actualize caring and supportive relationships, positive and high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation (Benard, 1991). The protective factors as proven by years of research and defined by Bernard, fall into three succinct categories. A child's capacity to overcome deprivation and adverse life conditions becomes a reality when systems foster:

Caring and supportive relationships –Caring relationships within systems convey compassion, understanding and respect. They are grounded in attentive listening and establish safety and basic trust.

Positive and high expectation –High expectations communicate firm guidance, structure and challenge, and most importantly convey a belief in a young person's innate resilience. They highlight strengths and assets as opposed to problems and deficits.

Opportunities for meaningful participation –Opportunities for meaningful participation, leadership and contribution to the community may be actualized through

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decision making, listening and being heard, with each person being included with valued responsibilities (Bernard, 1991). It is no surprise that these protective processes work. They meet our basic human needs for love and belonging; for respect, challenge and structure; for involvement, power and ultimately, *meaning*. In other words, they meet our human need to be included – to be of value to a community.

Cultures containing these components assure the development of physical, emotional, cognitive, social and moral competence (Werner and Smith, 1992). School communities that create and sustain environments rich in protective factors should celebrate at high school graduations the achievement of social and moral competence as well as cognitive and physical competency in students. As predicted by the longitudinal studies, students from such schools would have developed the life-long abilities of:

- **social competence**: responsiveness, cultural flexibility, empathy, caring, communication skills and a sense of humor;
- **problem-solving skills**: planning, help-seeking, critical and creative thinking;
- **autonomy**: a sense of identity, self-efficacy, self-awareness, task-mastery and adaptive distancing from negative messages and conditions;
- **a sense of purpose with belief in a bright future**: goal directed, educational aspirations, optimism, meaning, and spiritual connectedness, (Bernard, 1991).

The Community Building Process

The question becomes, *How can we bring this about for all of the students in our school?* Educators throughout thousands of school communities in the United States, Canada and Australia are now using the Tribes Learning Community (Tribes TLC®) process to establish caring systems for human development. Begun over twenty five years ago to aid youth at risk through positive peer groups, the Tribes approach drew upon research throughout the years to incorporate studies on cooperative learning, group process, brain-compatible learning, multiple intelligences, thematic instruction, conflict resolution and interactive teaching methods.

Tribe is a *process*—not just a curriculum or a set of group activities. It is a step-by-step sequence of appropriate strategies to attain the goal of youth development. The caring process becomes an on-going culture within the school because it is facilitated and monitored by students within peer groups (tribes). The culture is transformational for learning and development –kindness, respect for diversity and social support in this way become a reality throughout the school.

The stated mission of Tribes is:

> *To assure the healthy development of every child so that each has the knowledge, skills and resiliency to be successful in a rapidly changing world.*

This ambitious mission can be systematically achieved as the school community engages all teachers, administrators, students and families in working together as a learning community that is dedicated to caring and support, active participation and positive expectations for all students (Gibbs, 1995).

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The Tribes approach involves all of the groups mentioned above in long-term membership in mini-communities (tribes-small groups of 4-6 members); parents in classroom groups, teachers in faculty groups and students in cooperative learning tribes. The decentralized structure provides energy and inclusion within any group of peers no matter the age, culture or stage of development. Appreciation for each person's uniqueness (race, culture, gender, abilities and contributions) is assured with the tribes. A parent from Ontario, Canada wrote:

> *When I first realized that the Tribes process would be an integral part of my son's education, I was intrigued by the concept of cooperative learning, but plagued by the typical doubts associated with group learning. However, during the times that I have been involved with the classroom activities, I have been quite impressed with the Tribes approach. The students are learning so much more than just the required task at hand. To listen to one another, to help each other, to express oneself, to compromise, to look for the good in others and in oneself...these are concepts that are constantly reinforced and they are the tools that will prove invaluable throughout their lives.*

The sense of community that all age groups seem to seek today becomes a reality as people work together on meaningful goals, tasks and challenges. The strength of the process evolves out of the special quality time that is spent to build inclusion whenever the groups come together. No one is an isolate, no one fears to talk or ask question s in the midst of the caring groups. A central concept of Tribes is that people who do not have inclusion within a group gain inclusion (attention) by asserting influence: they act out or drop out. Those two young students mentioned early in this article were doing just that and would continue to do so if it were not for the positive culture of their classroom. This is why schools report a 75-85% decrease in discipline problems within the first six months of using the Tribes process in classrooms; and why teachers report they have more time to teach now that they are not busy managing disruptive behavior.

The use of cooperative learning groups (or for that matter the practice of democracy) may be difficult unless people learn how to get along – how to work well together. Renowned researchers David and Roger Johnson warn educators: *Placing socially unskilled students in a learning group and telling them to cooperate will not be successful. Students must be taught the social skills needed for collaboration and be motivated to use them* (Yager, Johnson and Johnson, 1985). The Tribes TLC® community building process teaches twelve essential collaborative skills and transfers the responsibility to students to help each other honor four positive agreements: attentive listening, appreciation/ no put-downs, the right to pass and mutual respect. Every academic learning experience (lesson) in a Tribes classroom has two objectives: the academic content to be learned and the social skill to be practiced. Each lesson begins with the teacher announcing the objectives to the students and each learning experience concludes with the tribes assessing the extent to which they achieved the objectives while working together. Often students themselves help to decide what content and skills they want to learn to practice together.

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If indeed we want to improve academic test scores, teachers need to learn how to transfer leadership and individual accountability to peer groups. Studies have shown that *group interdependence consistenctly increases student achievement more than control methods* (Steven and Slavin, 1995). The inclusion and safety within tribe groups takes peer leadership and responsibility to exciting new levels of learning and development.

The Tribes philosophy and methodology is premised on the power of healthy peer groups to connect, to heal and to give voice to the disempowered. In *What are Schools For? Holistic Education in America* Ron Miller writes, *ultimately our work is not about a curriculum or a teaching method... it is about nurturing the human spirit with love.* Over the many years of working in this field, my head and heart have come to agree with him. The many problems of youth –alienation, violence, drug abuse, gangs, school dropouts, suicide, delinquency and despair will never lessen until school, family and community systems include youth as leaders in building systems that work for kids in solving problems and in reaching out to each other. We need to envelop all children and youth in unbounded inclusion and respect. Acting out and dropping out are the signs that we have failed to meet their basic human need for community.

Yet, as one Tribes principal states, *Whatever we want to have happen for kids, first has to happen for the staff of a school so that we can model the skills and behaviors that we want students to learn* (Gibbs, 1998). School personnel, like all human beings, long for inclusion, respect and supportive relationships with peers. Then they too will tap their innate capacity for resilience –for motivation and learning, engagement, empathy, insight, creativity optimism and change –when their school system becomes a culture of caring. Judie Fenton, former principal in a Whidbey Island school in Washington, believes that every member of her staff feels supported 100% of the time. Judi says, *Without this caring support as a foundation, we could not go nearly as far academically. I've never seen people who were more closely bonded or caring than in this school.*

The connection between cultures of caring and academic excellence can be observed throughout all levels of education, from preschool to university classrooms. I was particularly impressed one very cold day while visiting a high school an hour's drive out of Oshawa, Ontario. Deep in the blizzard, the warmth of the school was symbolic of the learning environment in Gloria Woodside's senior economics class. Eighteen young people, heads together in five groups, were analyzing the implications of cutbacks in different sections of the Canadian national budget.

Discussions were animated and intense in each tribe. Mrs. Woodside asked each group to select a member to present their group's viewpoint in a panel discussion. The first student protested any cuts to transportation services. *But*, said another, *maintaining the level of national health services is more important than new roads.* The debate continued. *Our study group is unwilling to have education set back due to other priorities.* The students drew upon information gained from government documents, newspaper articles and their own individual perspectives on political pressures. The rest of the class was rapt with attention and after twenty minutes I realized the students were no longer just involved in a classroom discussion. They were weighing the implication to their own lives, their

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province, town and families. It was democracy made real, young citizens getting ready to influence the direction of their country.

The blizzard subsided and the sun sparkled over the shining fields as we drove back to the city. I thought to myself, *This is what it is all about. Caring community environments give us a way not only to support human leaning and resilience, but perhaps our only path to nurturing the development of future compassionate citizens capable of leading the democratic communities most of us long to live in.*

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"Safe Place" (contained in *Tribes* 1995, p. 104) written by teacher Gilbert Rees of Ontario, Canada.

SAFE PLACE

In a safe place
I am wanted
me, all the edges
and the angles
and the hidden
parts of me.

And no one says
"You just won't do.
You'll never be
the things I want
you never will."
No one says that
in a safe place.

And no one comes
with sudden anger
or a "What am I
going to do with you?"
look...in hopeless eyes.
Not in a safe place.

For there
if I reach my hand out only a little
if I gently touch someone,
then someone reaches back
as gently,
as softly,

And no one breaks
apart our reaching
and no one tears apart our silence
In the safe place-
we make together.

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