CHAPTER 2

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THE DECLINE OF COMMUNITY

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Mr. French had been a highly respected principal at a large Title 1, high-poverty, elementary school for over 10 years when we met. Yet, 80 days into the school year, he was worn down and out of ideas for how to help his staff and students. So, I was asked to help him implement a system of behavior supports. Over the past few years, the rate of problem behavior among his students had steadily climbed in severity and intensity. Incidents of physical aggression toward staff were becoming pervasive, with teachers being hit, kicked, bit, and more. In the first month of school, multiple students had to be restrained and classrooms evacuated when chairs were thrown, desks overturned, and materials on the walls torn down by students in crisis.

With over 20 years of experience as a principal and teacher at this neighborhood school, Mr. French was respected by the staff and families. However, he was out of ideas and resources; the pervasive needs of his students and staff were testing his credibility and motivation. As we toured the school, he talked about his efforts to implement numerous programs designed to support the social emotional needs of students. Meditation groups, peer counselors, mentoring, social emotional curriculums, and restorative justice had all been tried. Yet the number of students demonstrating alarming behavior continued to climb. Teachers were struggling to implement complex behavior plans and scaffold lessons to support the 70% of students academically behind, implement social emotional curriculum, and keep up with pacing calendars. Staff and student morale was low and frustration was high.

As we talked, it became clear that the days of assuming kids arrive at school eager and ready to learn had passed. Despite the pressures to raise academic achievement, the ability of his staff to teach reading, writing, and arithmetic was being undermined by the need to teach students how to

get along, solve problems, control their bodies, cope with traumas, and manage severe depression or anxiety. His teachers were in need of a whole new toolbox of skills. Increasingly, being a teacher also means being asked to be social workers, behavior analysts, therapists, and entertainers. As we talked about how to create systems of support, he explained that previous efforts were overwhelmed by the number of students needing intensive supports for complex mental illnesses and trauma-related experiences. No longer were we talking about a few kids who liked to be the "class clown" or test the teacher's authority. Even kindergarteners were arriving to school with prescriptions for antipsychotic medications to manage their complex mental health and behavioral needs.

Unfortunately, Mr. French's troubles are not unique. All levels of education have been struggling to meet the rising tide of student social emotional needs. Whether in rural towns, charter schools, suburban schools, or large urban schools, educators at all levels are increasingly overwhelmed and unable to consistently meet the needs many students are bringing to school. Understanding today's youth, and how to help them, requires us to go past trying to understand why individual children are struggling. We need to begin questioning why being a child has become so difficult. As such, this chapter examines evidence documenting the decline of community and how this may be causing many young people to grow up with unmet belonging needs.

SOCIAL CAPITAL IS THE CURRENCY OF BELONGING

In Chapter 1, we saw that on physical, psychological, and neurological levels, humans have a basic need to belong to a community. Not only is belonging critical to the well-being of the individual, it is also important to the whole. In 2000, highly regarded Harvard political scientist, Robert Putnam, published the important book *Bowling Alone*. His book examined the value of belonging, using the term social capital, which Putnam describes as the networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular society, enabling that society to function effectively. As Putnam explains, social capital makes citizens happier and healthier. It also reduces crime, improves academic achievement, allows for more effective governance, and improves economic productivity. In this book, Putnam's second major point is that, for over 50 years, our society has experienced a steady decline in social capital. Since approximately 1970, the United States has demonstrated a shift away from cooperation and partnership and toward competition and individualism. The result of this shift has been a steady decline of social capital at all levels of society.

Putnam provides a detailed explanation of why belonging and community have a fundamental role in the health of society. First, with more cohesion between groups, collective problems can be more easily resolved, creating improved social environments, and resulting in safer and more productive neighborhoods and schools. Second, since people trust each other, there is less need to spend time and money enforcing contracts and laws, making business transactions easier. As a result, economic prosperity increases. Third, social capital widens our awareness of our mutual connectivity, which tends to improve the quality of our civil and governmental institutions. Fourth, a sense of belonging and community increases the amount information exchanged and speeds up the flow of information, which improves education and economic production. Finally, by satisfying our basic belonging need, social capital improves our health and happiness through both psychological and biological processes. We are social beings, so community is necessary for the health of individuals and groups.

By examining indicators of social capital, such as volunteerism, union participation, sports participation, civic participation, and surveys of civic trust and then comparing these data over time, Putnam concluded, "by virtually every conceivable measure, social capital has eroded steadily and sometimes dramatically over the past two generations." Measures of social capital utilize surveys, asking questions such as:

- ► How many of your neighbors' first names do you know?
- ► How often do you attend parades or festivals?
- ► Do you volunteer at your kids' school? Or help out senior citizens?
- ► Do you trust your local police?
- ► Do you know who your U.S. senators are?
- ► Do you attend religious services? Or go to the theater?
- ► Do you sign petitions? Or attend neighborhood meetings?
- ► Do you think the people running your community care about you?
- ► Do you feel that you can you make a difference?
- ► How often do you visit with friends or family? (Rowland, n.d.)

Researchers use these questions to measure the amount of social capital members of a community possess. Then, by comparing how answers to these questions change over time, they can understand how cultures are changing.

There are many examples that highlight the power of social capital, the military community, churches, sports teams, cultural organizations, community groups, and more. However, no group better demonstrates the power of social capital

than Black communities. The outsized impact this community has had on the country and world despite centuries of slavery, Jim Crow, mass incarceration, and continued racism is certainly not the result of tangible resources or privilege. This community has relied on strong social bonds to help one another through the tragedy, grief, and pain of being a member of an oppressed group. These bonds and trust allow impoverished communities to pool their resources and work together to create opportunities. The drive that many Black Americans have to represent their community and make a path for others offers a depth of character that has helped Black people have a transformative impact on their communities and the world.

Similarly, many immigrant communities rely on social capital to compensate for a lack of resources and privileges. Often, newcomers rely on one another for social support, to pool resources and develop a positive identity. These strong social bonds allow these communities to access support and resources that many wealthier communities are not able to buy. Unfortunately, the data suggest these behaviors are not being fully utilized by the broader population.

Social capital has the potential to grant children exposure to different people and cultures. As children grow, these experiences give them confidence, as well as communication skills to talk and work with people who are different. Having a wide range of family and friends can create a greater sense of community and strengthen bonds outside of immediate family members. Similarly, the exposure to different people and experiences often sparks otherwise undiscovered interests and skills in children. These connections can create mentorship opportunities, where wise elders are able to share their wisdom and experience to guide younger generations. This improves a child's social skills and better prepares them to be confident in an increasingly diverse world. Additionally, a diverse social network allows developing children to learn different languages and cultures that will enhance their knowledge and understanding of the world, as well as, their knowledge and understanding of self.

In 2020, Putnam published *The Upswing* which confirmed and further examined his earlier thesis. Since the late 1960s, there have been steady declines in social capital, in trust of strangers, and in social connections. It appears the downward trends in social capital are consistent across demographics and regardless of population size. One way to characterize this change in culture is a shift in thinking and focus from "we" to "me." The idea that each person must always do what is best for him or herself and that those willing to adopt this individualistic view deserve to be rewarded with exorbitant riches has become such a common

narrative that Putnam describes American culture as "teetering on the edge of narcissism." However, there is a tradeoff when moving from "we" to "me" and young people may be paying the price.

TRUST AND COMMUNITY

One of the key elements of social capital is trust, which has eroded significantly. Social trust is the basic idea of giving most people, even those we don't know, the benefit of the doubt. In the late 1960s, 75% of citizens trusted the federal government, today fewer than 20% do. Similarly, in the early 1960s nearly two-thirds of Americans trusted other people, two decades into the twenty-first century two-thirds of Americans did not. As low as these levels of trust have become, experiences of racism and bias cause many members of the Black and Latinx communities to have even lower levels of trust.

Trust impacts our willingness to intervene when we see children in danger or to help another person in need. In communities where people trust each other, children tend to flourish. Trust in others and in civic organizations are key elements of civic participation. Trust also contributes to lower levels of violence and abuse of others. Trust increases business opportunities, improves education, and eases access to health programs. As trust declines, people further disengage from social networks and community. Mistrust reduces commitment to work, family, and community. Additionally, it undermines people's willingness to share information and resources. Von Hoppel summarizes the important impact of trust, explaining, "...Without trust people focus on self-protection and become unwilling to make themselves vulnerable." This has important implications on parenting practices and shapes the lens through which young people learn to see the world.

Trust also plays a fundamental role in the learning process. If children don't trust their teacher, the lessons may fall on deaf ears. Additionally, growing up in a distrusting world likely undermines children's mental health. Today, many kids are taught directly and indirectly that other people are dangerous, leading many kids to feel unsafe. The competitive ethos of an individualistic society further adds to the stress of childhood. From the earliest ages, young children are competing against each other, measured, judged, and labeled for everything from a range of academic skills to their character. If we are in constant competition with everyone else, it can be difficult to trust. The decline in trust has had important implications for parents, children, communities, and schools.

THE LOSS OF COMMUNITY IMPACTS CHILDREN

The decline of community is having a profound impact on all levels of society. As Ethan Kross explains in *Chatter*, "Not having a strong social-support network is a risk factor for death as large as smoking more than fifteen cigarettes a day, and a greater risk factor than consuming excessive amounts of alcohol, not exercising, being obese or living in a highly polluted city." The 50-plus-year decline in community is shifting how we parent, the communities we live in, and reshaping schools. Kids are simply a reflection of the times in which they are growing in. So, they allow us to see the impact of the decline in community most directly.

Jean Twenge's book *iGen* examines a wealth of longitudinal data that track the health, well-being, and social trends of adolescents and young adults. Twenge identifies youth born since 1995 as iGeneration, because the invention of the iPhone resulted in large shifts in the behaviors and well-being of youth. Twenge's 2018 book predicted that this generation of youth are at the forefront of the worst mental health crisis in decades. Echoing her concerns, in October 2021, the American Academy of Pediatrics that the pandemic had accelerated the worrying trends in child and adolescent mental health, resulting in what it described as a "national emergency," a conclusion the U.S. Surgeon General confirmed in December 2021, when he issued a public health advisory about the emerging mental health crisis among youth (Blume & Gomez, 2021). According to the Surgeon General, 1 in 4 children show symptoms of anxiety and 1 in 5 have the symptoms of depression. No longer can we approach childhood mental illness as isolated incidences, resulting from neurochemical imbalances in individuals, trauma, or something that happens to "other kids." The pervasiveness of mental illness across demographics points to a broader underlying cause.

Twenge's concerns about the well-being of iGen youth align with many of Putnam's descriptions of the shift in values away from community. Growing up in environments that favor individualism over community limits the number and quality of social connections young people have throughout their development. As a result, youth frequently point to feelings of loneliness as impacting their mental health. Further, the shift from growing up in a cooperative community to a competitive one reduces the sense of psychological safety. Researchers and authors have described a pervasive concern for safety among young people. Growing up with frequent messages that the world is not safe undermines the innocence and playfulness typically associated with childhood. Finding a balance in the messages so children are and still able to trust and appreciate the many good things in life is an important part of raising a safe and happy child. Additionally, when people don't feel safe, their behavior and thinking changes in

profound ways that can further undermine belonging; we will explore this in Chapter 5. The decline of trust limits the ability of young people to learn and connect with other adults and peers. As a result, many children are being raised without the metaphorical village necessary to raise a child.

Growing up in an individualistic and competitive society, without needed social supports, contributes to anxiety and depression in even the most optimistic child. In 2022, *The New York Times* detailed a "cognitive implosion" of anxiety, depression, compulsive behaviors, self-harm, and suicide that is plaguing today's youth. When the authors interviewed psychologists and adolescents, a deep sense of loneliness was identified as a main source of the mental health challenges young people are facing. Somehow despite the explosion of social media, teens around the world are increasingly feeling lonely. This feeling of loneliness is not uncommon, 25% of Americans now feel they do not have a single close friend or family member. In the past 20 years, the number of people reporting that they feel they have no close confidant has tripled (Prinstein, 2018). Feelings of loneliness contribute to anxiety and depression, which continue to climb:

- ► The average high schooler today has the same level of anxiety as the average psychiatric patient in the early 1950s (Leahy, 2008).
- ► According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, using data from the CDC and National Institute of Mental Health, in 2020, 1 in every 6 adolescents aged 12–17 experienced a major depressive episode, and 3.8 million young people had serious thoughts of suicide. 2020 also saw a 31% increase in mental health-related visits to the emergency room (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2022).
- ► Suicide rates, among 15- to 19-year-olds, increased 46% between 2007 and 2015.
- ► Nearly 20% of high school students considered suicide in 2021 and 9% actually attempted it
- ► On measures of the well-being of 15-year-olds, UNICEF places the United States at 36th, out of 38 wealthy nations (UNICEF, 2020).
- ► On physical health of children, the United States ranks last (UNICEF, 2020).

BALANCING BELONGING AND INDIVIDUALITY

The pervasive messages students receive about their uniqueness and encouragements to be themselves have great value. These messages help young people understand their strengths and how to use them. However, when these

messages are not balanced with prosocial skills and the ability to make friends, students can feel isolated and rejected for being unique. When this occurs, unique can mean different, create a sense of otherness, or cause students to wonder what is wrong with them. Additionally, these messages can have the unintended consequences of furthering isolation. If a child has come to believe that they are unique, that no one is like them, when they are struggling, they may conclude that no one can understand their pain, that there is no one they can talk to, and no one can help them.

Balancing our desire to be unique with our need to belong is often a constant process of adjustment, as we try to meet conflicting needs. In order to help students, overcome feelings of isolation, it is important that they identify their strengths and interests; then to identify similar strengths and interests in others. Relationships are built on similarities and shared experiences, so helping young people shift their focus away from what is different to the things they have in common with others can ease feelings of isolation. Many young people experience intense social anxiety, especially when entering new environments. By teaching students basic social rules and strategies for navigating complex social environments, we can replace the anxiety of uncertainty with the confidence that comes from knowing how to connect and build relationships.

Often the alarming behavior or words kids say or do to each other are unskilled attempts to belong. By directly teaching students how to start conversations and to make friends, we can remove the anxiety, guess work, bullying, and rejection that often accompany efforts to figure out how to navigate the social world for themselves. When one has experienced repeated rejection, it can be scary to try again. So, it is important we provide students with frequent direct instruction and practice how to interact with peers. This has been especially true, since COVID-19. COVID-19 caused many young people to miss valuable social interaction experiences. Efforts to help students understand their need to belong and the skills to get this need met bring a balance to valuable messages about individuality. With this balance, kids are better able to embrace their uniqueness, without feeling the isolation associated with being different.

VIRTUAL COMMUNITY

Even prior to COVID-19, teens were less likely to take part in face-to-face social activities and spend less time interacting with peers in person than any previous generation. An average American checks their phone more than 96 times a day, approximately every 10 minutes. Young adults tend to check their

phone even more, nearly twice the national average. High school seniors highlighted in Twenge's 2018 book spent about 2 hours a day texting, 2 hours a day on the internet, 1.5 hours a day on electronic gaming, and about a half an hour on video chat, in total 6 hours a day with new media. As a parent or educator working with youth, you likely do not need research to tell you that the ways youth interact have changed dramatically. This trend toward virtual community has sped up in recent years and has led to another generational shift. Increasingly, today's youth are coming to be known as "Zoomers." In addition to even greater social media and cell phone use, they have spent much of their formative years on the virtual meeting application zoom.

Cell phones and technology have created many advances, conveniences, and greater access to information and social networks. However, emerging research warns there is a need to be aware of the potentially harmful impact of the resulting increased social pressure on young people's psyche. As Twenge explains, "There's not a single exception all screen activities are linked to less happiness…" Recall that humans process social rejection through many of the same neural pathways as physical pain. Also, people are roughly twice as sensitive to pain as pleasure. So, while social media apps can increase access to the pleasures of social connection, the increased exposure to rejection, bullying, and alienation can outweigh the benefits. Additionally, in virtual settings there seems to be a tendency to be more judgmental and harsher than in person.

In her recent best-selling book, *Dopamine Nation,* Stanford psychologist Anna Lembke explains the risks of relying on social media to meet our communal needs. As she explained in one interview, social media has turned our belonging need into a highly addictive commodity (Williamson, 2021). Social media utilizes the same neural chemicals that create the good feeling we get from intimate social connections and turns them into a new form of addiction. This powerful chemical connection between social media sites and belonging needs has important implications for childhood well-being. Helping young people find a balance between their virtual community and in-person relationships can improve their well-being in important ways.

PARENTING ALONE

Twenty years ago, when Brittany was a kid, her parents let her ride her bike to and from school, play in the street, and talk to neighbors—activities traditionally associated with growing up in a community. Families also trusted that schools would prepare kids for the future. Enrolling your kids in "good"

schools, raising them in a low-crime neighborhood, and helping them find an extracurricular activity that fits their unique talents was a solid definition of successful parenting 25 years ago. In the past, if your child got good grades and stayed out of trouble, they had many options for their future.

Today, Brittany is a single mom who loves her two children dearly. She wants nothing more than to be a good mother, protect them from the hardships she experienced, and provide them every opportunity to pursue their unique interests. As a result, she rises early and prepares breakfast and lunch for her kids before dropping them off at school. Then she is off to manage a busy insurance office as an administrative assistant. Money is tight, but she finds a way to make sure her children stay busy and have opportunities. Time is even tighter, as she works full time and shuttles her children around town.

She rushes out of work in the early afternoon to pick her children up at nearby schools then drops the younger one off at soccer practice and the other at home. Two hours later, she has wrapped up the workday, drops off her older daughter at dance practice, and then picks her son up from soccer. They head home, where she prepares dinner just in time to pick her daughter up from dance. By 7:00 at night, her day is finally done and she rests preparing to do it all again.

When we met, she seemed worn down, concerned that she seems to be becoming increasingly inpatient and angry with her children. All the time and money she spends doesn't seem to be enough—her kids weren't doing particularly well. Her son was struggling. He was being bullied, taken advantage of online, and the school was recommending he be assessed for possible learning or attention disabilities. She saw the opportunities the partners in her insurance office were able to give their kids. Their children seemed so happy and successful with all their trips, summer camps, trophies, and awards. Her fears of not being a good mother seemed to be coming true. No matter how hard she tried, she was not keeping up and her kids were falling behind.

THE LOSS OF COMMUNITY IMPACTS PARENTS

As the pace of childhood becomes faster, parents are investing more time and money to prepare their children to compete in a highly individualistic and competitive world. For many families, raising children has become an intensely competitive process starting with admission to prestigious preschools and culminating, in extreme instances, with bribing college admission offices. The demands of this competitive child rearing process are leaving many families with little time or resources to be a family and develop strong bonds. This process can

make childhood an anxious time, and for the many kids that don't meet the increasingly high standards, it may be discouraging. Additionally, the decline of quality social supports limits the resources and options families have for help when in need.

Raising a child today has become high stakes. Children who get into the elite colleges have more and better opportunities, while those who do not attend these elite colleges often miss many opportunities which are only available at the most prestigious universities. In the book *Love, Money and Parenting,* economists examined how income inequality impacts parenting styles. The authors found a clear connection between parenting practices and the degree of economic inequality in countries all over the world. Consistently, the greater the inequality, the more intensive the parenting style. Intensive parenting is described as being a child-centered, time-intensive, expensive approach to raising kids. This parenting style places considerable pressure on parents and children. The winner takes all nature of competitive and individualistic societies pressures parents to prepare their child to compete for admission to elite colleges at very young ages, over allowing children to be kids and enjoy their youth. In competitive and unequal societies, the stakes are simply too high for kids to waste time playing and making friends; they need to be cultivating their skills and distinguishing themselves from their peers.

Parents today are often described as "helicopter parents," hovering over their children, protecting them from potential harm, and ensuring that they are successful in every activity. In 2010, mothers spent an average of 4 more hours per week with their kids than in 1965. Much of this is doing the "concerted cultivation" of driving kids to extracurricular activities or helping them with their homework. This intensive parenting style is expensive. High-quality childcare, music, sports, enrichment classes, and private tutoring do not come cheap. For example, in Silicon Valley it is not unusual for quality tutors to earn $100,000 or more helping adolescents with their math homework. Similarly, access to high-quality teachers, coaches, and tutors are increasingly only available to those who can pay handsomely.

These investments take considerable time and money, resources that many families like Brittany's are unable to access. As the economists Doepke and Zilibotti concluded, "A straightforward effect of rising inequality is that it exacerbates the gap in resources available to households from the bottom and the top of income distribution, making intensive parenting relatively cheap for the wealthy and unaffordable for others." Putnam highlights the challenge this cycle creates, explaining "The basic fact remains rich kids get more face time,

while poor kids get more screen time," suggesting that not only are the majority of American children missing out on these opportunities, but they are being further exposed to devices that likely undermine their well-being. As community has declined, parents are increasingly without direct and indirect social support. Fewer children have the wealth of familial and communal connections that create a sense of safety and provide mentorship. As a result, both parents and children are feeling the pressure of trying to keep up in a competitive, expensive, and lonely world.

DIVIDED COMMUNITIES

The shift in values toward competition and individualism contributes to the growing economic inequality that is making access to a brighter future out of reach for more and more families. The average annual wages when adjusted for inflation have changed little over the past 50 years. However, from 1974 to 2014, inflation-adjusted annual income for those in the top 1% increased by nearly a million dollars, $929,000. For the top 0.1% of earners, the wages rose nearly 5 million dollars, a startling $4,846,718. The cultural shifts in values and behaviors away from community, combined with this growing economic inequality, create near *de facto* segregation along class lines. In contrast, nearly 6 in 10 young people are on free or reduced lunch, because families are struggling to afford quality meals for their children.

In 2015, Putnam published *Our Kids, The American Dream in Crisis,* detailing the emerging reality that across this country, affluent and low-income kids grow up in vastly different worlds. "From academic self-esteem, academic ambition, social friendships, and volunteering the kids who could be described as the 'haves' grew in confidence and engagement while their not-so-well-off contemporaries slipped further into disengagement with every year," states Putnam. However, these changes are best understood at the community level, where resources have increasingly been drained. Putnam highlights one town, where on the surface they have had impressive success in the 1990s, the per capita income grew by 54%. In reality, that growth was concentrated to a few people, as over that same time the number of residents living below the poverty line doubled and the ratio of high to low earners went from 7-to-1 to 12-to-1.

This rise in economic inequality has had a large impact on equity efforts in education. Economic inequality contributes to class-based housing segregation, which has led to increased segregation in schools. The sorting of households into distinct neighborhoods by income was significantly higher in 2010 than it was in 1970. Today, houses near high-performing schools can cost hundreds of thousands more than those near a low-performing school. This sorting process

has served to restore the school segregation that the Civil Rights Era and Supreme Court sought to end in the 1960s. In 1968, around 77% of Black students went to predominantly nonwhite schools (Orfield & Jarvie, 2020). That fell to 63% in 1988, but then rose again and reached 81% in 2018. Schools today are actually more segregated than 50 years ago.

The popular belief in the American dream that anyone can rise to any heights with hard work has given way to the reality that the United States has one of the lowest rates of social mobility in the world (Isaacs, 2016). For example, if you come from a family in the top 1% of wealth, your chances of attending an Ivy League school is 77 times greater than if you come from a poor family. The decline in social mobility has important implications for educators, as we aim to empower students with optimism that anything is possible. It also contributes to the pervasive financial concerns of developing young people, adding to their anxiety and feelings of stress. Increasingly, the lack of social support in a highly competitive, winner–take–all social structure is causing good, hard-working families to struggle. Additionally, these large inequities cause many students wonder what value an education has in their future. Finally, this cycle allows long established social inequities to continue to grow and plague our schools and communities.

THE TOLL ON SCHOOLS

Addressing the impact of the decline of community, the mental health crises and inequality have fallen largely on the shoulders of schools. Many other social supports have dried up with the decline of social capital. In response, school districts have built teams of psychologists, social workers, therapists, behavior analysts, and school counselors all aimed at meeting the growing social emotional needs of students. In the classroom, teachers are learning to apply mental health first aid, crisis management strategies, teach social emotional skills, and lead restorative justice principles as quickly as possible. However, as Putnam warned, "schools and neighborhoods don't work so well when community bonds slacken..." Systems can't replace community, the increasingly unmet need for belonging seems to be creating more physical and mental needs than our education system can keep up with. As a result, schools have struggled to meet the growing needs of students, and increasingly teachers, principals, and district leaders are feeling, like Mr. French, who we highlighted at the beginning of this chapter, overwhelmed and worn out.

The dramatic rise in mental illness, lack of social skills, and problem behavior is taxing schools. Additionally, Figure 2.1 summarizes the range of academic skills

Figure 2.1 • *Instructional levels needed in an average fifth-grade classroom*
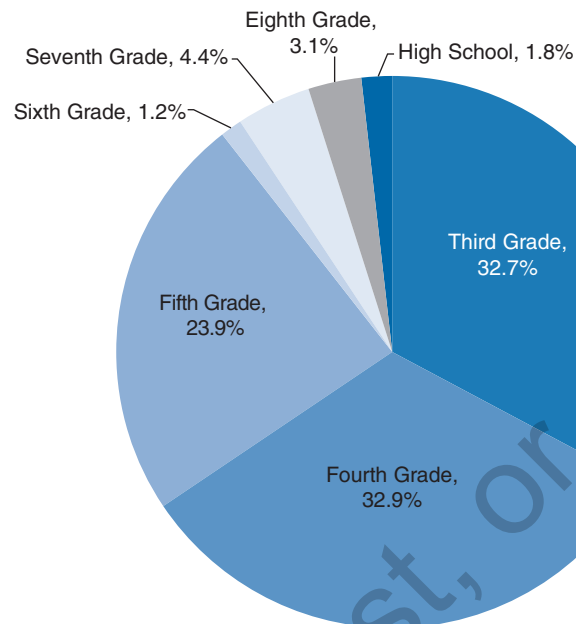
in the average fifth-grade classroom. This range of student skills challenges teachers to differentiate each lesson to accommodate and challenge the third of students nearly two grades behind, as well as the nearly 10% of students above grade level. Even prior to COVID-19, research found that in some underserved communities, the average classroom of 30 students may have as many as 17 students needing varying degrees of academic and/or behavior support (Baker et al., 2006). Combined, the range of academic and behavioral accommodations needed in today's classrooms requires educators to have a great deal of time, confidence, and an even wider skill set than in the past.

The decline of community has undermined instruction. It is simply hard to learn from someone if you do not trust them. This lack of trust also contributes to the most frequent causes of behavior problems in classrooms, defiance, and disrespect. Finally, when students haven't developed key social skills or positive modes of communication, instructional time is lost to teaching fundamental social skills and responding to the problem behavior that often results from these issues. The decline of community has changed ideas about the

student-teacher relationship in ways that have important implications for learning and the expectations on teachers.

Unfortunately, systems cannot replace community. Despite massive efforts to build capacity to support the complex needs of today's youth, many schools are struggling to keep up. In response to the overwhelming demand, veteran school psychologists have come to encourage a "triage" process of assessing and responding to the numerous social emotional challenges students are facing. Typically, the idea of triaging is related to addressing injuries in combat or an overwhelmed emergency room. Today, many schools have become the battlefields, and support personnel are having to triage the complex social emotional wounds students are bringing with them to school.

COVID-19 AND COMMUNITY

In a first look at the potential impact of COVID-19, a January 2021 survey of educators concluded that two-thirds of teachers believe a "substantial number" of students are in danger of suffering long-term mental health issues. Ninety percent of the surveyed teachers report that poverty, social distress, social isolation, emotional trauma, and upheaval are barriers to effective teaching and learning. The teachers also consistently agreed that districts lack the support personnel necessary to meet the social emotional needs of students (The Inverness Institute, 2021).

The early indicators are that COVID-19 has increased the effects of the breakdown of community as reported in the April 2021 *USA Today* article titled "Students crushed by stress, depression are back in class. Here's how schools meet their needs" (Wong, 2021). From January to September 2020, 315,220 people took the anxiety screening, nearly doubling the number of anxiety screens from the previous year. Also, 534,784 people took the depression screening, a 62% increase over the 2019 total number of depression screens according to a Mental Health America report. From 2019 to 2020, the rate of mental health-related emergency department visits increased by 24% for children aged 5–11 and 31% for adolescents aged 12–15 (Mental Health America, 2021). A November 2020 Harris poll of parents found significant declines in child well-being just 8 months into the pandemic. Parents reported:

► 12% of elementary-age youth displayed a constant worrying, up 6%.
► 17% of middle schoolers displayed reduced interested in everyday activities, up 9%.

- ▶ 16% of middle schoolers displayed difficulty concentrating or procrastination, up 8%.
- ▶ 15% of middle schoolers displayed lack of interest in relationships or reduced social interactions, up 8%.
- ▶ 11% of middle schoolers displayed frequent sadness, up 6%.
- ▶ 26% of high schoolers displayed low energy, up 10%.
- ▶ 17% of high schoolers displayed quickness to anger or more dramatic responses, up 4%.
- ▶ 16% of high schoolers displayed constant worrying, up 4%.

In February 2022, a poll by the Kaiser Family Foundation reported that nearly 1 in 3 parents say their children's mental health is worse now than it was before the pandemic. In the Surgeon General's public health advisory about the emerging youth mental health crisis, he explained that symptoms of anxiety and depression have doubled during the pandemic (Blume & Gomez, 2021). Similarly, the available reports consistently show that those Black and Latinx families experiencing poverty have been disproportionately hurt by COVID-19. Families have had to invest more time and money to find ways for their children to get high-quality supports, and schools appear to be even more overwhelmed and unable to meet the mental health and social emotional needs of all students.

The pandemic took a toll on children, families, communities, and schools. As uncomfortable as it may be, in order to begin rebuilding social supports, it is necessary we identify root causes to the troubles our youth are facing. A major purpose of this book is to provide a detailed analysis of our need to belong and its role in child well-being. This purpose of this chapter was to document why a lack of belonging and the decline of community are problems that we should be concerned about. So, this chapter focused on the contribution belonging makes to healthy societies and then examined some of ways the shift in values toward individualism and competition has impacted the world children are growing up in. Over the course of this examination, I touched on how these changes are interconnected with broader social changes such as the rise in mental illness, segregated communities, and income inequality, and then, how these changes are impacting families, communities, and schools. Each of these issues is complex, interactive, and dynamic. It is not my intent to provide a comprehensive review of these issues. Instead, I wanted to advocate for the impact these well-established social shifts are having on children, families, and schools.