

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 445 014

TM 031 551

AUTHOR Pope, Denise Clark
TITLE Caught in the Grade Trap: What Students Say about Doing School.
PUB DATE 2000-04-00
NOTE 44p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 24-28, 2000).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; Educational Environment; *High School Students; High Schools; *Learning; *School Role; *Student Attitudes; Student Motivation

ABSTRACT

Some successful students were asked to reflect on their experiences with the high school curriculum, commenting on their sources of motivation, how they explained their school success, what they enjoyed learning, and what they wished they could have learned. School administrators defined the nature of the students' success, and five students were selected based on recommendations from teachers, counselors, and administrators. Over a semester, each student was observed and interviewed. The five student portraits that resulted examined in detail the daily classroom experiences of these students and the processes they used to make sense of their lives. These portraits show that being system savvy, or conspiring with others to work the system, does not ensure favorable results, but certainly can help. Most of the students knew how to "cheat" by using time-saving, grade-enhancing devices that meant that assignments were not done to the letter of the law. Because of the many messages about success sent by the school, the community, the colleges, parents, and even peers, these students felt trapped. They also struggled with routines that made them feel like robots. Students also often varied their behavior from class to class to suit the perceived requirements of a particular teacher. The evidence from these students suggests that schools teach the need to cut corners or cheat to demonstrate success, and that they must conform and act in ways that lead to high grades, high test scores, and the praise and recommendations of teachers and administrators. However, it was apparent that these students had access to supports that many students in the United States do not have. (Contains 41 references.) (SLD)

D.C. Pope

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Caught in the Grade Trap: What Students Say About Doing School

Denise Clark Pope
Stanford University

April 2000

Paper presented at AERA Conference, New Orleans

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

- This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
- Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED 445 014

Introduction

As a high school English teacher, I often found myself wondering just what was going on inside my students' heads. I wondered: What did these students make of their school experiences? Which educational endeavors, if any, were meaningful and valuable to them? What did they believe were the deep consequences of their compulsory attendance at the school? As I reviewed the literature on adolescents and secondary schools, I noticed a peculiar gap in the research in this area. I found a wide range of studies on adolescent behavior in schools, studies that addressed academic achievement, study habits, classroom discipline, peer culture, and youth dropout rates¹. However, I did not find many studies that addressed the educational experience in school from the adolescent's point of view. The few studies I found that relied on the youth's perspective mostly examined the social aspects of schooling, such as life in the hallways and parking lots,² instead of focusing on topics that lie closer to the heart of the school's mission: the students' classroom experiences and their views of the high school curriculum.

John Dewey (1938) urged educators to have a "sympathetic understanding" of their students, to have "an idea of what is actually going on in the minds of those who are learning" (p.39) in order to help create conditions which are conducive to student growth. When a typical high school teacher might have over 150 students,

¹ See for example Dornbusch, 1989; Feldman & Elliot, 1990; Simmons & Blythe, 1987; LeCompte & Dworkin, 1991; and Phelan, Yu, & Davidson, 1994, all of which offer good reviews of adolescent behavioral studies concerning these topics. Erickson & Shultz (1992) comment extensively about the dearth of literature concerning students' school experiences.

² See for instance, Eckert (1989) and Wexler (1992).

TM031551

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

achieving this kind of understanding is no easy task. By focusing on a few students over the period of a school semester, this research represents an attempt to get to know students as individuals, to convey their experiences and their perspectives in order to help foster the kind of understanding Dewey advocates. Specifically, this research asks a few successful students to reflect in depth on their experiences of the high school curriculum: What about the curriculum is meaningful to them? What are their sources of motivation? How do they explain their success? What are they most excited about learning, and what do they wish they could have learned? In short, it is an attempt to find out what is going on in the minds of our successful students, in order to help educators shape more effective curricular experiences and to give voice to those who are traditionally missing in the educational literature.

Methods

A brief word about methods (a more complete description can be found in the larger study -- Pope, 1999): The study takes place in a comprehensive high school that serves a diverse student population and has a local reputation for having caring teachers, innovative programs, and strong leadership. Approximately 95% of the school's graduates attend college after completing high school, with 50% attending 4-year universities. I asked for a range of students (diverse in gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, academic interests, etc.) in the tenth and eleventh grades whom the administrators considered to be "successful." I allowed school officials to define the nature of the students' success. Five students were then selected based on multiple recommendations from teachers, counselors, and administrators.

Over the course of a school semester, I shadowed each of these students, closely observing their behavior in classrooms, accompanying them to all school-related events, talking with them at length during the school day, and interviewing

them each week to help them reflect on their experiences. I also used student journals, essays, and class notes when appropriate to discern the students' perspectives on the curriculum.

The research led to the development of five individual student portraits which examined in detail the daily classroom experiences of the students and the processes they used to make sense of their school lives. One purpose of the portraits is to show that each student experiences the school curriculum as an individual with specific needs. The purpose of this paper is to compare some of these student experiences described in the portraits and to illuminate common traits and behavior patterns that appear to help the students achieve "success" as sanctioned by the school. Though most of the youth depicted here acquire high grades and commendation from teachers, administrators, counselors, and parents, in the process of achieving this success, all engage in behavior that runs counter to explicit or implicit school rules and guidelines, and that opposes what might generally be considered the type of behavior that schools should foster. As Kevin reminds us:

People don't go to school to learn. They go to get good grades which brings them to college, which brings them the high-paying job, which brings them to happiness, so they think. But basically, grades is where it's at. They're the focus of every student in every high school in every place in America and otherwise. Period.

In essence, the phenomenon of "doing school" successfully, of implementing strategies and techniques to manage the workload and achieve high grades, contradicts the kinds of values and traits high schools have championed and which many parents, students, and community members expect schools to instill. Instead of cultivating an environment that promotes intellectual stimulation, where honesty and trust prevail, where students are encouraged to take risks, accept challenges, work together, and celebrate their accomplishments, the learning

environment described here undermines intellectualism, suppresses risk-taking, impedes collaboration, and ultimately promotes deception. This paper is devoted to describing in more detail these aspects which comprise the phenomenon of doing school successfully, to examine the motivation behind the "doing," and the nature of the "grade trap" the students face.

Doing School

A Faircrest guidance counselor notes with pride, "These students represent our best and brightest." In fact, there is more truth in that statement than the counselor may realize. The students in this study, to varying degrees and some more consciously than others, have all determined what kind of behavior gets rewarded in school and have devoted their school careers to honing the strategies needed to achieve this kind of success. They see an instrumentality to receiving high grades and earning good reputations in school. For them, school success is inextricably linked to success in life, and thus, many are motivated to "do what it takes" to get ahead. For most (Michelle is the possible exception), the ultimate sign of achievement is the semester grade point average. All five students maintained at least a 3.4 GPA for the semester, and three (Kevin, Eve, and Michelle) achieved averages of 3.7 or higher. In doing so, they each manifested similar behavior and characteristics which I describe in Table 1.

Table 1

Common Student Behavior Exhibited in Pursuit of Success

Category	Behavior	Kevin	Eve	Teresa	Michelle	Roberto
System Savvy	Establish allies/form treaties (with teachers, parents, administrators, and/or peers)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
	Cheat (copy work, alter records, "wing it," and/or cut class for extra study time)	Y	Y	Y	N	Y (Once)
	"Multi-task"	Y	Y	Y	Y	N
	Complete minimum 2 hrs homework each night	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
	"Do the max" (more than required on academic assignments)	N	Y	N	Y	Y
	Enroll in non-traditional course or program (not including honors or AP courses)	N	N	Y	Y	Y
	Become squeaky wheels (contest teacher's grade/ decision)	Y	Y	Y	Y	N
Tolls of Success	Struggle to fulfill extracurricular or non-school commitments (5 hrs. or more per week)	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
	Experience severe anxiety or breakdowns	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
	Suffer persistent health or sleep problems	N	Y	Y	Y	N
	Compromise values or ideals	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

Note. Y = Yes, behavior was exhibited. N = No, behavior was not exhibited.

System Savvy

When students are system savvy, they understand (to varying degrees) the complex systems and structures within the school and learn to negotiate these systems creatively to achieve favorable results. For example, since the school schedule is designed so that students have relatively little time to interact with teachers one-on-one, and since teachers tend to be overwhelmed by their responsibilities, the school world has been described as a place where, too often, students feel anonymous and powerless (Sizer, 1984; Noddings, 1992; Heath & McLaughlin, 1993). Few teachers and school administrators are aware of the particular day-to-day struggles their students encounter, and few have the opportunity to see a larger picture of their individual students, one that moves beyond institutional categories of GPA, track, and seat assignment. Such limited knowledge of students is understandable given, for instance, the large class sizes, the relatively short class periods, and teachers' and students' demanding workloads (Cuban, 1984; Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985), yet, the students in this study managed to find and to establish relationships with adults at the school who cared for them, who knew them personally and who could intervene on their behalf. The adults served as advocates and allies for the students, willing to listen to their complaints, form treaties, offer their trust, and bestow kindness in various ways.

Finding allies entailed various strategies and a bit of luck. Kevin and Eve both worked hard to get "in" with their teachers and administrators, acting polite, offering to help, and taking on highly visible duties that won them favors in the form of preferential treatment. Teresa and Michelle gained visibility and the close friendship of caring adults through their active participation in dance and drama courses -- places where the extra time demands of rehearsals and the nature of the performances often encourage strong relationships between teachers and students (McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994). And Berto found the support of the Seminar

on Studying (S.O.S.) teacher who designed the course specifically to offer the kind of individual attention and tutoring she knew her students would need in order to survive the rigorous demands of the college preparatory track. Had he not been convinced by Ms. Evans and others early on to enroll in S.O.S., he might not have had an opportunity at the school to find such an ally. While most of these caring adults still only knew certain aspects about the students' school and home lives (for instance, I believe none of the teachers or administrators knew about Eve's health problems, nor did Teresa's dance teacher realize that she was in danger of failing Spanish), the little information they did know seemed to serve the students well. At the very least, these five students understood that someone at the school was willing to listen to them and would try to act on behalf of their best interests.

Many of the students, too, relied on the support of their families to help them negotiate the school system. They enlisted parental help to dismiss "unexcused" absences, to achieve access to special resources or classes, and to vouch for the students during meetings with teachers and administrators. Parents were also conspicuously present at extracurricular activities such as dance and drama performances, sporting events, and award ceremonies, all places where the students gained visibility beyond the classroom and where parents and students intermingled with school staff with whom they otherwise would have had little contact. Though all of the parents in this study worked full-time and seemed as busy as their offspring, they found ways to attend events to show their support for their children's education. By doing so, they sent a message to their children and the school staff that they were interested in what was happening behind the classroom doors. Steinberg (1996) writes that parental involvement of this nature is rare, and that when parents show an active interest in their children's education and make themselves known at the school, the children tend to be more academically successful. It seems parents, too, learn to do school successfully, and

though a close look at parental "doing" is beyond the scope of this study, I mention it here to emphasize the important role the students' parents played in supporting their children's success. (In a later section, I also mention the significant pressure many of these parents placed on their children and the less than beneficial consequences that result from their attempts to encourage high grades and college attendance.)

Without the understanding and support of these adult advocates, the students might not have fared as well as they did. Eve credits most of her success to her reputation and relations with people in power, ". . . it's all about connections -- who you know." Many researchers have noted a "mutual dependency" between students, teachers, and school staff, where an adult's commitment to a student heightens possibilities for student achievement, and vice versa, where teachers and students collude to produce student failure.³ The treaties (Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985) described in Michelle and Teresa's portraits serve as good examples of the dual nature of this student-staff dependency:

Michelle's treaty with her math teacher enabled her to skip certain homework assignments and miss class in order to gain extra time for her drama work. The teacher believed Michelle was a "good kid" who would use the time wisely and not let her grades fall. The teacher's trust and kindness motivated Michelle further; she did not want to let the teacher down and worked hard to do well on the tests in order to continue to reap the benefits of her deal. Kevin, who was in the same math class, did not benefit from any treaty with the teacher even though the teacher liked him and believed he too was a "good kid." Because he did not have the high grades that Michelle did, he was not in a position to set up any kind of special arrangement. In this class, to benefit from a treaty, one first had to

³See LeCompte and Dworkin (1991) for the phrase "mutual dependency" (p. 179). See also McDermott (1993), Erickson (1984), Sizer (1984), and Sedlack et al. (1986).

prove the capability of consistently getting good grades *without* the help of a treaty. Though Michelle could not say exactly how she arranged the deal with the teacher, she told me that only after she had proven herself to be a "good student" did the teacher bestow certain favors upon her.

In Teresa's Spanish course, the tacit agreement formed with the teacher allowing her to work on other assignments during class actually discouraged her from doing well. Though she admitted that she benefited from the time in class to catch up on other homework, she took the teacher's neglect as a sign of racism, or at least lack of interest in her as a student, and thus, the teacher and she "colluded" to allow Teresa not to be as successful as she might have been without such a treaty. In this case, Teresa had shown herself early on to be what the teacher considered a disengaged student, consistently tardy or absent from class and missing several homework assignments. (The teacher did not know that this was due initially to Teresa's family obligations and not necessarily to her lack of interest in the class.) When Teresa began to do other work during the period, the teacher allowed the behavior to continue. Perhaps she thought she was doing Teresa a favor, perhaps she was too busy with the other students to stop Teresa's actions. Either way, the teacher's tacit approval and Teresa's continued behavior ultimately helped to produce Teresa's lowest grade for the semester.

We can infer from these examples that different teachers have different conditions under which they form alliances and treaties, and, as Powell, Farrar, and Cohen (1985) note, students get treated differently and inconsistently for a variety of reasons. The system, as designed at Faircrest and many other high schools, tends to perpetuate certain student-teacher behavior that ultimately affects students' success. The hurried pace of the school schedule, the large number of students compared to number of teachers, the lack of space and time for teachers and students to converse and get to know one another, the diversity of teachers' attitudes toward teaching

and students' attitudes toward learning, and the impersonal nature of the material being taught all contribute to an environment where many students feel neglected and misunderstood (e.g., Noddings, 1992; Sizer, 1984). Savvy students, to some extent, realize this and seek help to negotiate favorable treatment. As McDermott (1993) notes, students cannot be successful or unsuccessful alone -- everyone is part of the choreography that produces moments for degradation or praise. The students in this study, either by deliberate "kissing up" or by the nature of their courses, relationships, and activities at the school, were fortunate to discover people who were able to act as co-conspirators in their pursuit of success and who could take the time to attend to the students as individuals with distinct needs and desires. What Teresa did not find in her Spanish or science courses, she managed to locate in Dance and History, and the Spanish treaty, though detrimental to her performance in that particular course, played a large part in helping her to succeed in others.

Being system savvy, then, or conspiring with others to work the system, does not ensure favorable results, but it certainly can help. Such is the case when students learn specific ways to use time in school more effectively. Just as teachers practice classroom management, learning when to cast a disapproving look at a disruptive student, when to pat a shoulder, and when to lower their voices to attract attention, "good" students learn to manage their classes, adapting various techniques to control their workload and to facilitate desired results. For instance, all but Berto practiced a form of multi-tasking, a term borrowed from the business world which means to work on a variety of tasks simultaneously. Efficiency experts advise busy executives to maximize their time by doing routine tasks such as going through their mail or signing purchase orders while speaking on the phone or attending meetings. Students I observed throughout the school applied this technique in the classroom, though not all managed to do it successfully. Effective multi-taskers surreptitiously worked on French homework during math class,

memorized lines for drama while watching a movie in history, and studied for a physics test while pretending to pay attention in English class. They understood the need to appear well-prepared and on-task, even if they were not, sometimes going as far as to photocopy textbook pages to minimize the chances of being caught with the wrong book open on the desk. They knew when to pay attention and ask a question, and when it was safe to "tune-out." Some, like Teresa and Michelle, established treaties which allowed them to multi-task freely and without guilt; others, like Eve and Kevin, devised ways to divert the teachers' attention, such as raising their hands every ten minutes to give the illusion of participating in the class discussions.

In this sense, the widespread cheating I observed can be seen to represent a classroom management strategy as well. Some students cheated to maximize their time while meeting the constant expectations to achieve high grades. The more traditional forms of cheating, copying tests, plagiarizing, and relying upon forbidden aids such as cheat sheets, were used to help the student obtain high grades without spending as much time actually studying the material. For Kevin and Teresa, cheating became a habitual crutch, enabling them to "do the minimum to get by," even if the results were less than satisfactory. They were not sure they could do better if they truly studied or applied themselves, so cheating offered a quick fix where the possibilities for doing well outweighed the risks of getting caught.

The more creative forms of what might be called cheating, "winging it" in class discussions and oral presentations, ditching class on test days to find extra time to study, relying on friends to work "cooperatively" on assignments that should have been done independently, all represented further time-saving, grade-enhancing devices. Most of the students learned how to cheat wisely; they knew how to hide their deception and in which classrooms these practices were tacitly allowed. Kevin and Eve, especially, learned to predict their teachers' behaviors, explicitly adapting writing and speaking styles to ones that the teachers preferred --

even changing these styles for different teachers in different classrooms. The point was always to do what was necessary to get the grades, not necessarily to learn the material.

At times, this required rather aggressive behavior on the part of the students which I classify as the "squeaky wheel" strategy. All but Berto chose to contest a teacher's grading decision during the semester. Eve regularly questioned her teachers' judgments, freely voicing her dissent over each marked error, and Kevin prided himself on being a smooth talker who had the knack for coaxing a B+ into an A-. Teresa angrily accused her history teacher of being unfair when he allowed other students to take extra days to prepare their reports, and she made sure to inform him of her groupmates' poor behavior when final grades were assigned. She, Eve, and Michelle also approached the school principal on separate occasions to complain about teaching styles or administrative decisions when they could find no one to listen to them at the classroom level. With so many students and so many bureaucratic hurdles in the school institution, only the students who made themselves known, who spoke up and questioned authority, got heard. Even if the student's performance did not necessarily warrant an extra point or a higher grade, complaining loudly, strongly, and regularly was thought to yield slightly better results, especially since teachers were so strapped for time and the assessments they conducted were usually influenced by a variety of factors, including how much the student appeared to care about the work being done.

Over and over I saw evidence that these students learned to manage their classrooms, teachers, and even administrators, in the pursuit of high grades. They all worked hard, some more than others, each completing at least two hours of homework nightly and spending much time devising strategies to cope with the overwhelming workload and hectic school schedule. Some, like Eve, Berto, and Michelle, consciously strove to "do the max" -- to devote extra time to assignments,

more than that which was required, in an effort to either impress teachers (in Eve's case), keep up with other A students (as when Berto read his English books twice), or, in a rare situation, pursue an assignment more thoroughly for personal edification (see Michelle in drama and history classes). By using these various strategies, relying upon allies, cheating, multi-tasking, doing the maximum, and becoming squeaky wheels, each adolescent earned a reputation with many of the teachers for being a "good student" and, ironically, for following the rules. In turn, their behavior was rewarded and they were afforded special privileges.

All five, however, also experienced the downside of adhering to such a schedule, the traps of school success.

The Grade Trap

Because of the many messages of success sent by the school, the community, the colleges, parents, and even peers, the students in this study feel trapped. On the one hand, they believe that they must achieve high grades, high test scores, and various honors in order to secure future success (usually in the form of an advanced degree and a high-paying job). As Eve says, "That's all I can think about . . . to get in [to an Ivy League School] and become a successful \$500,000 dollar a year doctor or engineer or whatever it is I want to be." Though she remains uncertain about the exact profession she hopes to enter, she is sure of her ultimate goal. She wants to be wealthy and to be able to live in the manner to which she has grown accustomed. Kevin, Teresa, and Roberto also specifically mention the financial benefits they believe will result from a college degree. And, in one sense, they are correct in their assumptions. Job prospects are better for college graduates as compared to high school graduates, and wages tend to go up with increased schooling. Furthermore, since more students are pursuing higher education these days, a high-status credential, that is, one from a more prestigious university, may lead to higher

income and job security than a degree from a college considered to have lower standards for admission or fewer academic resources available to students.⁴ As long as the employment market continues to value certain credentials over others, these students see the utility of pursuing admission to a "good" university and of devoting their high school careers toward achieving this goal.

The students also believe that in order to achieve these ends, they must resort to the actions described above. The students recognize (some more consciously than others) that in order to be successful in school, they have to compete with their peers, act deceptively at times toward friends and adults, compromise their values, and, in their words, "sacrifice individuality" in order to please their teachers, "play the game," "work the system," rely on "who you know -- not necessarily what you know," and "do whatever it takes to get the A's."

On the other hand, the students also want to feel good about themselves and their achievements. They want to believe that they deserve their high grades and status, and that they have earned their success. For instance, Kevin wished he could call himself "a good student." For him, a good student worked hard, obeyed the rules, and did not have to rely, as he did, on cheating, cramming, getting "lucky breaks," "kissing up," or grade grubbing. Roberto, too, held strong beliefs about the way students ought to behave. He tried hard to act honestly, diligently, and respectfully, but ultimately grew frustrated when these values appeared to stand in the way of attaining a 4.0 grade point average. He did not want to resort to cheating or competing with his peers, but felt he did so in order to reach his goal of getting into college.

Teresa and Michelle also felt trapped. Though they were not sure that they wanted to go to college and were frustrated by the lack of challenging and

⁴See for example Christopher Jencks (1991) on employment rates for college educated males as compared to those with high school degrees. See also Labaree (1997a) on the projected "underutilization" of college graduates and the consequences of credential inflation.

stimulating courses offered at the high school, the lure of future success (or the fear of not acquiring it) compelled them to attempt to manipulate the system. Teresa cheated in science and Spanish classes because she did not want to jeopardize her future, and only decided to transfer into The Community Project when she was convinced it would look as impressive on her transcript as her business courses. Michelle reluctantly stayed in school and enrolled in easy classes "in case" she wanted to go to college. She acknowledged the meaninglessness of tests such as the SAT, but resolved to study for them anyway to "keep her options open." Both students were frustrated by the unsatisfactory choices they had to make, and neither believed that she was working hard or fulfilling her intellectual aspirations -- to gain a deep understanding of the material and to understand concepts and themes that seemed applicable to life outside of school.

To make themselves feel better about the unpleasant actions they felt compelled to take, the students tried to rationalize their behavior. Eve tried to convince herself that she had worked her way to the top, "the right way, the honest way." She boasted that she would never cheat on an exam or cut class to take extra time to study. She insisted that comparing homework answers and problem sets with her peers was not technically a form of cheating. Neither did she feel bad about using her connections and "pull" with teachers and administrators to win favors not extended to other students. In this sense, Eve and her peers created their own school rules and value systems. They devised certain strategies to get ahead, lying to each other about grades and activities, for instance, or fibbing to a teacher about a missing homework assignment. They convinced themselves that these tactics were worth taking for future gains. But there were certain "immoral" actions Eve would never take, such as copying test answers or altering documents. She set up boundaries (based on her own interpretation of school rules) which she promised

herself she would not cross, and this allowed her to feel better about herself as a student.

Kevin's rationalizations took different forms. He wanted to believe that "everybody" did school the way that he did, cutting corners and doing the minimum required to get by. He said, "I'm obviously not working to my fullest potential, . . . but students have a way of coping by only doing the minimum required. Nobody does more than what they have to." He tried to convince himself that he was just like every other student and therefore could feel better about his poor study habits. He was resigned to the fact that school was about the pursuit of grades, not education, and though he knew some of his strategies were "wrong," even immoral, he felt he must "do whatever it takes" to get ahead.

In each case, the extent to which the students attempted to rationalize their actions reveals their ultimate distress. They wanted to justify their behaviors in some way, convince themselves that they were doing "the right thing." They loosely interpreted rules and guidelines or blatantly disobeyed them to attain their goals, but they could not escape the fact that they were unhappy with their school decisions and were not content with what they believed were very limited options available to them. Most said that they wanted to "concentrate on learning," not worry about grades, act in ways that were authentic and did not compromise their beliefs, but they also wanted to achieve high marks and receive strong recommendations and honors in order to get accepted to good colleges. They did not like manipulating the system or playing the game, but they also did not like what they saw as the alternative, getting lower grades and possibly jeopardizing their futures. In short, the students were victims of what I call "the grade trap." None of them, not even Roberto, could figure out a way both to be "successful" as sanctioned by the school and society, and to follow rules and abide by personal values. Ultimate satisfaction was not attainable; as I describe in more detail later,

the school system, with its emphasis on competition and grades, was simply not set up to allow this.

Robo-students

Just as the students struggled with their decisions to compromise values and desires in the name of grades and college, they struggled with another persistent condition as well: the "robot" syndrome. As Eve says, "This school turns students into robots . . . just going page by page, doing the work, doing the routine." She and the others lamented the fact that school was "lifeless," that passion and engagement were rare, that the daily grind of the school day (Jackson, 1983) took its toll on their "health and happiness," and that they could not seem to find a way to succeed in school and still, in their words, "have a life." They longed to find a balance between work and play, between school and what they called the "real world." They wanted to feel more alive and to resist the pull of the system turning them into robo-students, "high school machines," drudgingly pursuing high marks without learning the material or feeling excited about the curriculum.

For some, the frantic pace of the school day, where students were required to get up and move every fifty minutes and race across crowded hallways to class after class; to be alert and prepared and obedient at all times; to attend certain courses, clubs, or teacher conferences during lunch and break periods; and to be confined to their seats on hot days with no air conditioning, interfered with what they believed were "basic human needs." The students wanted to be able to eat when they were hungry or drink when they were thirsty, have access to clean bathroom facilities in good working order, study and learn under comfortable and productive conditions, and be able to sleep at night for eight hours or more, as is often required during the teenage years. They resented being treated so poorly and complained often about the inadequate conditions they were expected to endure.

Though adolescents have been typically characterized as having too much free time on their hands and of being overly concerned with leisure activities, social lives, and personal gratification (see Griffin, 1993; Fine, Mortimer, & Roberts, 1990), the students in this study defied the stereotypes. Their school days started early, a full hour or two before most adults began their work days, and often ended late at night, after soccer practice, dance rehearsals, student council meetings, paid job responsibilities, and homework time. There were few "free" hours to pursue leisure or social activities. Some of the students, like Teresa and Michelle, suffered frequent colds and illnesses due to such a harried pace, a lack of sleep, and poor eating habits. Others, like Eve and Berto, who studied "every minute" including early morning hours and on weekends, experienced great stress which led to stomach problems, anxiety, and a possible ulcer (for Eve). These students wished they could get more hours of sleep and improve their health, but their busy schedules, including school, family, and work obligations, did not allow this. Similarly, they wished they could spend more time with friends, play some recreational games, watch a little television, read books for pleasure, or take a few days off, but most believed they could not do these things and still maintain their high grades.

Of the five, only Kevin was convinced that he had found some sort of balance that allowed him to "have a life." He went to parties, hung out with his peers, participated in informal sports activities, and listened to music or played computer games at night. Even he conceded, though, that such "living" might be a trade-off; fun time often conflicted with study time, and he believed his active social life might have prevented him from achieving a higher GPA. Eve echoed this predicament when she said that she "wanted to have fun, just not at the expense of school." Most of the students recognized that they needed to make a choice, and that for them, future success was more important than present happiness. They

were resigned to give up sleep, social lives, good health, and some sense of "fun," to become robo-students in this sense and reap the possible rewards that accompanied high grades and honors, but they remained frustrated that they could not succeed in school and also lead fulfilling lives outside of school.⁵

The students also complained about a system which appeared to show little support for intellectual engagement and passion. They studied the material, read the textbooks, and completed the assignments, for the most part, because they had to, not because they wanted to or because the subjects genuinely interested them. Students often memorized facts and figures without stopping to ask what they meant, how they fit with larger concepts and theories, or why they were asked to learn the facts in the first place. They selected courses based on college requirements and grade transcripts and reluctantly accepted the curricula in these courses as beyond their control. Michelle, for example, was frustrated that individual subjects were taught in "bits and pieces," where teachers made virtually no efforts to connect U.S. history and American literature, for instance, with topics she was studying in drama or psychology. The way the system was designed, academic content had to be confined to tight "boxes" known as English, history, biology, chemistry, algebra, etc., regardless of the obvious connections and overlap between the fields that might have made more sense and been more interesting to students like Michelle. But she accepted this frustration as par for the course, saying it was "better to be a little bored" in these classes in order to continue to pursue her love for acting.

Eve, too, admitted that any content area knowledge she gained along the way was largely incidental. She said that once she took an exam, most of the facts she

⁵Ironically, Berliner (1992) calls the emphasis on leisure and non-school pursuits an American phenomenon and compares it to the intense focus on schoolwork and little time for play evident in other cultures. He praises this "American childhood experience" for producing creative and spontaneous youth, yet for many of these students, the focus on grades and the busy home and work lives occurred as early as elementary school; few had time for spontaneity or creativity and were experiencing the "robot syndrome" long before their high school years.

had memorized, "emptied out of her brain," and she was required to move on to the next assignment to keep up with the pace of the class. Taking time to reflect or to engage with the material would only slow her down and adversely affect her grades. Thus, students generally went from class to class, routinely performing assignments and having little time to debrief or think about what they had just "learned."⁶ For the most part, they were asked to accumulate facts that seemed to have little relevance to their lives and to complete tasks accurately and efficiently without delving deeply into subjects or understanding the relationships between the concepts they were studying.⁷ An A grade, therefore, did not necessarily mean that the students learned and retained content area knowledge and skills or that they understood important concepts or theories; rather, the grades proved that the students were adept at providing the teachers with information requested on tests and quizzes, and that they had memorized these facts and figures (or copied them from peers) just long enough to "ace" the exams and then move on to the next set of tasks. Robo-students knew not to spend too much time on one particular subject or to pursue individual academic interests; they had to do well in as many classes as possible and had to follow the teachers' agendas, regardless of their own interests, in order to keep up with their peers and get the grades they desired.

The students understood (some better than others) that to get ahead in school they needed to supplant present desires and happiness for future goals, to remain focused and driven, and to cope with the tolls that accompanied this path. As Eve

⁶On a particularly frustrating day, Michelle watched a disturbing excerpt from the movie *Cybil* in her psychology class and a violent montage from the movie *Born On The Fourth of July* in history class. Neither teacher had enough time to help students reflect on the jarring events depicted in the films, and Michelle (and I) left the classes quite shaken. Five minutes later, she was expected to smile and sing cheerfully in music class as if nothing powerful had just occurred.

⁷Bruner (1960) calls this idea "grasping the structure of a subject . . . in a way that permits many other things to be related to it meaningfully" (p. 7). He argues that teachers should teach structure rather than simply the mastery of facts and techniques, and that this will allow students to transfer what they learn to other situations and applications. He also argues that mastery of the fundamental ideas of a field involves the development of an attitude toward learning that includes a sense of excitement about discovery -- something largely missing in these students' curricular experiences.

described it, "high school is a way of building up a tolerance for stress" and only the most "fit" survive; if the students wanted to be successful in school, they had to realize that it was impossible to "have it all" -- a fulfilling and healthy life outside of school, an engaging life inside of school, and a top GPA and transcript which would allow access to a high status college or university. Again, the students did not like the options presented to them but felt they had no choice but to suffer the consequences. Had their school experiences been different, had they been characterized by widespread engagement and satisfaction, for instance, the students might not have complained about a lack of "life" inside and out of school and might not have succumbed to the arduous robot-like existence that consumed them.

The Chameleon Condition

Eve's reference above to a Darwinian survival system seems apt. Students who want to be successful in school devise various strategies to stay ahead of their peers and to please those in power positions; unsuccessful students are not as adept at playing the survival game and ultimately receive low grades and are weeded out of the competition for higher credentials. As a result, these students experience what I call "the chameleon condition." Like chameleons who use dramatic color changes to camouflage themselves in order to stay alive, many of these students exhibit vastly different behaviors from class to class in order to meet the diverse expectations of their various teachers. For example, Kevin acted like a clown in French class, joking with the teacher and acting as a cheerleader for his peers, while he behaved as a serious and fierce competitor in PE class, screaming at the other students and cursing aloud when he missed an important shot. The competitive behavior was rewarded in PE (though Kevin was chastised for his foul language), whereas the jovial cheering was viewed as appropriate and favorable in the language course. Michelle, too, behaved one way in her drama class, often acting

more like a teacher's assistant than a student, but preferred to keep to herself and work at her own pace in her math and history courses, establishing "treaties" in order to spend class time working on other assignments. In each case, she was rewarded for her various actions, though her successful behavior in one course looked very different from the behaviors she exhibited in the others.

This quality of adaptability, to change one's "colors" to please various teachers, served most of the students well. For instance, Eve said that she spent a large part of the first semester learning the different preferences of her six teachers. She knew that her English teacher liked students to use multiple examples and citations from literature when defending their points in class or in writing, and that essays which incorporated personal anecdotes were preferred. Her physics and history teachers, on the other hand, liked brief, concise explanations of concepts and theories, and were not impressed by "flowery" language. She knew her math and Spanish teachers did not tolerate any "fooling around" in class, but that her science teacher was always open to a good joke or digression at the beginning of the period. Throughout the semester Eve noticed more clues from teachers as to their individual expectations and preferences, and this knowledge, as well as her ability to adapt her actions to fulfill such expectations, helped Eve to achieve the status she desired. Not only did she and the others learn to provide general "depictions" of success described in the previous chapter, such as raising their hands even when they didn't know the answers or asking a question every now and then to show they were paying attention, many learned to read and provide particular depictions for each of their particular teachers.

Figuring out how to "play the game" effectively in high school is difficult in and of itself, but figuring out six or seven different games, and then adapting classroom behaviors to play them all well, is extremely challenging. Shirley Heath and Milbrey McLaughlin (1993) call this ability to "negotiate different roles in

different places" a part of achieving multiple and embedded identities which are "anchored in a secure sense of self" (p. 38). They argue that youth need to learn how to behave successfully in a variety of contexts in order to survive the transitions from adolescence to adulthood and from school to work. The authors also assert that inner city youth often lack some of the necessary resources to play different roles successfully as they are exposed to very limited models in their isolated communities.⁸ Others call such resources "cultural capital"(add note) and note that the inequities that exist in our communities today prevent certain youth from achieving school success.

It is clear that the adolescents in this study benefited from resources not available to all youth. Most had supportive and caring parents who saw that basic needs of food, shelter, clothing, and safety were met. They had access to adults who encouraged the value of education and who could provide information about colleges and admissions requirements. Most had strong literacy skills (Teresa is a possible exception here) to comprehend and portray "depictions" of success, and had positive early education experiences in which they could practice these techniques. In addition, all of the students in this study believed they had a likely promise of a future to aspire toward, one which they had the power to help shape. This is not always the case, as some urban youth face realistic possibilities of early death or continued poverty and see little reason to strive for long-term goals in a system over which they have no control.⁹ Though the five students described here differ in their understanding of teacher and classroom expectations, and in how they adapt to

⁸The youth organizations the authors describe in their research offer "safe havens" for urban teens to experience new situations and risks and to tackle challenges vastly different from those they experience daily in the inner cities. Some of the qualities viewed as most positive for identity development are similar to qualities of engagement I describe in a separate paper related to this study (Pope, 1999). The youth organizations encourage teens to practice adult roles with real responsibilities, to feel intrinsic motivation to succeed, and to work as part of a team – mentoring new members and helping one another complete tasks satisfactorily.

⁹For more on attitudes of urban youth toward future goals see MacLeod (1987), Brantlinger (1993), and Nightingale and Wolverton (1993).

contextual clues, all rely on economic and cultural capital to help them "fit in" to the school environment and experience success. This chameleon-like ability to read one's environment and change behavior in order to survive seems critical in a system where students face multiple expectations and seven or eight different "habitats" or classrooms each year. The students here were fortunate (to varying degrees) both to have access to resources that helped them adapt and to be savvy enough to understand how to use these benefits to their advantage.

Along with the benefits of adaptability, however, come some costs. The students who change their behavior to fit certain situations also face anonymity and the problems associated with it. No one knows the "true" colors of the chameleon, and no single teacher or administrator may know the "whole" student or the complexities of his or her school life. Teresa, for example, exhibited some of the most varied behaviors of all the students in the study. In her business courses her actions led to the "Outstanding Business Student" award; she was quiet and well-behaved, and she turned in work on time and completed the "easy" assignments with very little mistakes. In science and Spanish classes, however, Teresa was frequently absent, regularly failed to complete assignments, came to class unprepared, and appeared to lack an interest in the subjects. (She was actually interested in the topics taught in Biology, but her home obligations and language problems caused her to fall behind and do poorly.) Because of this disparity in the way she performed in her courses, some teachers considered her a model student while others regarded her as "unsuccessful." Her Spanish teacher said to me early on, "[Teresa] will probably fail this course. Why don't you write about some of my successful students?"

The Spanish teacher here had no way of knowing that Teresa was considered one of the most successful students in the business program. She assumed that Teresa's behavior in language class was consistent with her behavior in other

classes. Nor did she comprehend the reasons behind Teresa's actions. She did not ask about Teresa's home life or her job responsibilities (and even if she had, it is not clear whether Teresa would have answered her sufficiently), she did not ask about her workload in other courses, or her anxiety and frustration about having "a future." The school structure was not set up for this teacher to get to know these aspects of Teresa's life. She had fifty minutes a day to teach an intensive Spanish curriculum, and because of her limited access to the students and her large classes, because she worked mostly in isolation from the other teachers in the school due to the departmental structure, and because she had no reason to ask to see Teresa's transcripts or grades in other courses (this was considered to be the business of counselors, those responsible for the "whole" student), she could not possibly get to know Teresa in a way which might have benefited her as a student. Without understanding the complexity of Teresa's life, the Spanish teacher based her assessment of Teresa on the behaviors she witnessed each day in her first period class.

The same could be said for most of the other teachers in this study. Like the blind men who argue over the description of the elephant because they each have access to only one component of the animal, high school teachers at Faircrest and schools like it, are blind to many aspects of their students' lives. Most see only one side of the student, often a camouflage designed to conceal an identity in order to blend in with the teacher's expectations. The students may use the disguises to hide weaknesses or to heighten their strengths, but in either case, the teacher is privy to only a partial view, often resulting in a lack of useful knowledge about the students, or worse, misconstructions about the youth. This may explain in part why Roberto was falsely accused of cheating by his drawing teacher, or why his Spanish teacher incorrectly believed that he was lazy. It may also explain why his math teacher did not know about his severe test anxiety. Had the teacher known about Berto's fear of

exams, he might have offered a different entrance requirement for the honors course. The teachers only saw a glimpse of Berto in their classrooms, and, consequently, many were not aware of his strong convictions or of his overwhelming concerns about grades and tests.

Because students sit in several different classrooms each day and because they are asked to adapt to the multiple expectations of their teachers without forming individual relationships with the adults, most youth remain largely anonymous in school. This allows some students to slip through the cracks, to be hidden and remain undisturbed for most of the year. As long as they don't stand out in any way or call attention to themselves, they will safely escape their teachers' concerns. This is one form of survival in school, similar to how Michelle and Teresa arrange treaties in their classes to be, for the most part, left alone. Another kind of survival relies on the ability of the chameleon to change colors in order to act in accordance with environmental demands. If the students learn individual teacher expectations, for example, and are savvy enough to fulfill these, they, too, will survive and eventually thrive in school. In either case, students must forego their own learning preferences to meet the desires (or escape the notice) of others, and they often must sacrifice individuality and authenticity for pretense and conformity -- sacrifices, as I note in the earlier sections, with which the students struggle.

Others in the school community who might be in a position to help these students also struggle. They, too, feel trapped and are similarly dissatisfied with the compromises they must make as they attempt to balance competing desires. In particular, parents, peers, and teachers must perform challenging balancing acts as they try to help students negotiate the school system.

Balancing Acts of Parents, Peers, and Teachers

Like their children, the parents in this study faced several dilemmas. On the one hand, they appeared to want to encourage their children to do well in school and to strive for admission to good colleges. Many seemed to believe, as the students did, that going to a prestigious university would eventually lead to future success. On the other hand, the parents did not like the consequences that sometimes accompanied this "encouragement." According to Eve, her parents worried that they had pushed her too hard. They wanted her to slow down and regain her health, but their concerns came too late and were seen as disingenuous. Eve was already convinced that they and she would not be happy with anything less than an acceptance to an Ivy League institution. Kevin and Berto tell similar stories. They experienced great frustration as they attempted to meet their parents' expectations for success. Steinberg (1996) and Dornbusch (1989) write about the benefits to students when parents maintain high expectations with firm enforcement of standards, but they do not discuss the possible negative ramifications of this "authoritative" style, the great pressures students feel as they try not to let their parents down. Only Michelle believed that her parents would support her in any decision she made, even if this meant dropping out of school and taking the high school equivalency exam. She believed her parents understood the importance of engaging with the curriculum and that they valued this above the pursuit of grades and credentials.

The other parents were as concerned about their children and wanted what seemed best for them, but could not offer the same kind of support given by Michelle's parents. One can imagine¹⁰ that these adults wanted their children to feel fulfilled in school, to enjoy themselves, and to be excited about what they were learning. But these parents also might have realized the risks involved when a

¹⁰I did not interview parents in this study and must make assumptions about their beliefs based on the students' reports.

student chooses, for example, to spend all her time on drama at the expense of other subjects. Or when she refuses to conform to teacher expectations on written assignments, opting instead to follow personal preferences. Or when, perhaps, she decides that it is more valuable to stay home and trace the voyage of Ulysses -- as Nel Noddings' daughter did, with her mother's support (Noddings, 1992) -- than to attend classes for the week. The students risk falling behind in their courses. They might receive low grades or poor recommendations from teachers, or they may determine, like Michelle's sister, that high school was not worth attending at all. Could the parents live with such consequences? They did not want their children to be unhappy in school, but they also did not want their children to miss out on future opportunities. They did not want to put too much pressure on them to succeed, but they did not want to be too lax with their expectations either. The parents in this study, similar to parents in other communities like Faircrest, were subject to the same grade traps their children faced. They were forced to take actions that left them unsatisfied and worried that they had made the wrong decisions.

The system often caused the students' peers to feel conflicted as well. In this study, friends served as both advocates and fierce competitors. Peers gave advice on managing workloads, provided encouragement for coping with stress, and served as study buddies, helping prepare for exams. They acted as comrades, brought together through mutual "suffering," entrusted with tasks such as helping each other cheat and "covering" for a friend who was ditching class. In some cases, they also felt compelled to act as foes, competing for grades and college acceptances, and threatening students who would not let them copy answers or who appeared to be teachers' pets. Eve describes this kind of love-hate relationship between peers as necessary. When students are graded on curves where only some can achieve A grades, when the top five percent of students in certain classrooms is allowed to skip the final exam, when there is a limited supply of departmental awards and honors

to be won, when competition to get admitted to top universities is so intense that students feel they must hide extracurricular activities from one another, Eve and some of the others believe they have little choice but to plot against their friends. Even so-called "cooperative learning" opportunities become sources of competition and frustration, as students realize that they will each get a grade and that a friend's failure to do his part of the work may hurt his groupmates' chances for high marks. Thus, the students felt torn: they needed the support of friends to help cope with the stress they faced and to be co-conspirators in their attempts at success, yet they felt obliged to compete with these peers and to undermine their friends in order to promote their own achievement.

Finally, the teachers experienced great frustration as they faced the constraints of the school system. Though a close examination of teacher dilemmas is beyond the scope of this study, several of the teachers I observed struggled to balance their own desires and pedagogical philosophies with the realities of an overcrowded, impersonal, bureaucratic, and competitive school system. On the one hand, they seemed to want to help students reach individual goals, stimulating the students and helping them to feel excited about the subjects they were learning; on the other hand, they realized that such a mission was impossible given the nature of the school structure. There were too many students to get to know, too many individual needs to be met, and too little time, money, or support from administrators to accomplish these goals.¹¹ For many of the teachers, like the students they taught, it was difficult enough to make it through the hectic pace of the school day -- to keep order in their classrooms; to "cover" the lessons, texts, and materials required of them; to fulfill a myriad of clerical responsibilities; to negotiate the hassles associated with department and school policies and politics; and to

¹¹Ted Sizer (1984) writes of similar concerns in the first chapter of his book *Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School*. See also Powell, Farrar, and Cohen (1985), Sizer (1996), Eisner (1986), and McLaughlin and Talbert (1993).

attempt to engage at least some of their students in the learning process, let alone strive to help each student reach his or her individual goals.

In this sense, the teachers, too, suffered many of the same traps as their pupils. Some were forced in certain ways to be "robo-teachers," going through the motions of planning lessons, giving lectures, and grading papers in order to keep up with the overwhelming responsibilities associated with their jobs. Too much time on any one task or with any particular student could throw off one's schedule for an entire week. Each moment in the school day was critical, and I noticed that teachers tended to multi-task like their students to save valuable time; for instance, they would grade homework and tests while showing films or while students participated in small group work, and would hold student conferences during the first few minutes of class time. They would also "cut corners" by assigning less homework, relying upon standardized tests from the textbooks, or eliminating short answers or essays on exams which invariably were more difficult and time-consuming to grade. Like their students, the faculty suffered from poor working conditions, stress, and "burnout." They, too, faced pressures to produce high test scores and to help students get admitted to top colleges. Though one can imagine that many of these teachers entered the profession to enlighten students, to spark an excitement for inquiry and a passion for certain subject areas, most faced the reality of the grade trap where fostering student engagement was subsumed by a need to "cover" certain material, to get students to pass exams, and to find efficient ways to compensate for overbearing workloads. There was very little time for individual student attention or for encouraging intellectual curiosity.

Even the counselors who are supposed to act on behalf of each student's best interests feel compelled to advise students to "go for the grades" rather than learn the material in depth. Kevin's counselor, for instance, tells him to switch language courses from French to Latin during his junior year in order to get his grades up,

regardless of Kevin's interests in the language or his several years of studying French. Though the counselors are often the only adults at the school who have some knowledge of the students' home and work lives and have access to all course grades and transcripts, and may therefore be in a position to care for each individual and help meet specific needs, they, too, must balance competing demands. Most meet with students only twice a year for twenty minutes due to heavy pupil loads. Usually the counselor tells students about college admission requirements and gives advice as to the courses and activities that will look most impressive to university officials. None of the students in this study discussed any personal matters with their counselors, nor did they have an opportunity to reflect on their lives as students or talk about the frustrations they felt as a result of the curriculum. Though the counselors may have wanted to help students in this way, their tight schedules and orientation toward college admissions prevented them from doing so.

These school factors that wield direct influence over students seem especially powerful when one considers how long they have been around. Though school policies fluctuate over time,¹² historians such as Tyack and Cuban (1995) note a persistent consistency in school classrooms and explain this "grammar of schooling" as due to a lack of effective reform efforts to impact fundamental educational change. Hence, many of the school factors discussed in this chapter, particularly the school structure, curriculum, and forms of assessment used in most high schools, remain largely the same today as they did years ago. Specific characteristics of the school structure which continue to influence the way students do school include: the fragmented school day, divided into six or seven classes which take place in fifty minute chunks with few breaks or free periods; the large class sizes and teacher and

¹²Recently, for instance, policy makers have been striving to find ways to produce students who are "first in the world" in certain subject areas and who can meet certain requirements based on national standards (see U. S. Department of Education, 1991; New Standards, 1997).

counselor overload which lead to treaties, compromises, and student anonymity; the tracking system with its focus on preparation for college, where basic track students have fewer course options and limited ability to switch tracks, and where honors/AP courses are reserved for students in the top 15 percent of their class; the departmental organization by subject area which may contribute to a fragmented curriculum, limited interdisciplinary studies, and eventual teacher and student isolation; and school fiscal policies and structures, which in some cases lead to poor working conditions and inadequate facilities.

The high school curriculum has also remained virtually unchanged over the past few decades and leads students and teachers alike to adapt their behavior in the particular ways described above. When a course curriculum is divided into discrete units and tasks with little cohesion between units; when the emphasis is on learning facts and techniques as opposed to problem-solving skills, critical thinking, subject area structures, or deep understanding of fundamental themes and theories; when most of the honors and advanced placement curricula are based on college models where certain material must be covered to prepare for year-end exams; and when there is little time built-in to the curriculum for reflection or debriefing, it is no wonder that students pursue tasks with a robot-like mentality and show little interest in or engagement with the material. The students believe that the curriculum is not relevant to their lives or useful in the "real world." They complain that teachers fail to solicit their input and do not design curricula to meet pupils' desires, interests, needs, or passions.

Finally, for decades now, high schools have relied upon grades, test scores, and class rankings to assess student achievement. These measures lead to outcome-oriented teaching and learning, memorization and regurgitation of material, and a lack of deep understanding of the concepts being taught. The focus on grades and scores encourages extrinsic motivation and a culture of competition. It also tends to

privilege certain student competencies over others, as the frequent use of tests or quizzes emphasizes verbal or mathematical abilities, and fails to hold students accountable for developing other vital skills and techniques. Individual student achievement is promoted over the value of cooperation or group success, especially through the use of class curves and other strategies that limit the number of students who can achieve high grades. Monthly departmental awards, honors bulletin boards, AP score banners, the posting of student grades, and other forms of public recognition at schools, along with brochures and course guides that emphasize honors courses, college attendance, and high test scores, further promote individual achievement and competition among peers.

Given the nature of these school factors, one might be tempted to blame the university and college system for the flaws of the secondary schools. After all, if the students, parents, peers, teachers, principals, counselors, and others did not feel obligated to play the game to help students achieve the grades and test scores needed to get admitted to college programs, perhaps many of the deceptive practices and pressures to succeed would be greatly reduced. However, the colleges and universities are similarly trapped. They must find effective and efficient ways to compare vastly diverse students from all over the country in order to decide which are most qualified to attend their schools. Since it is far too time-consuming and expensive to get to know each applicant from each individual high school, colleges feel compelled to rely on grade point averages and standardized test scores to make what they believe are equitable and fair decisions. Many use teacher recommendations and student essays to try to augment the quantitative measures of grades and scores, though it is not necessarily clear (at least to students and teachers with whom I discussed this point) to what extent the colleges rely upon these other measures of success. The students also believe that colleges value diversity in the forms of extracurricular participation, special skills or talents, ethnicity, and/or

regional affiliation. Consequently, students modify their beliefs about the possibilities for gaining admission to top colleges and attempt to adapt their behaviors based on perceptions of university expectations. In emphasizing certain measures above others; certain courses, subjects, and activities as more important for college admissions; and certain student qualities as more useful for future success, the universities help shape teacher and student behaviors. As Kevin reminds us, the focus seems clear. High school is not about learning the material, but getting the grades. Grades and scores are the ticket to college and future success, and they must be attained by all possible means.

These balancing acts and frustrating dilemmas that the students, parents, and others experience in the name of "getting the grades" seem to go well beyond the schools. The students who compete with each other for top grades in high school, and later, top grades in college, will eventually compete for top jobs and salaries outside of school. Thus, the behaviors I describe here do not occur in a vacuum. As I illustrate in the sections above, many of the forces which contribute to the adaptations I call "doing school" take place within the schools themselves and are reactions to or consequences of existing school structure, curriculum, and/or assessment practices; however, these school factors are also influenced by (and help to shape) a complex medley of forces from the larger community and from the national culture.

The most pervasive force seems to be the American culture of competition that contributes to a credentials race where candidates strive to succeed in high status schools in order to achieve the most desirable employment positions. Just as the students in this study have adapted to the culture and have learned to "do school" in particular ways to achieve their goals, others in our society learn successful "ways of doing" in order to obtain the benefits accorded the "privileged few." And just as the students here experience the frustrations of grade traps and

the problems of balancing competing desires, successful Americans struggle with similar traps and balancing acts as they attempt to adapt to the conditions around them.

We Get What We Bargain For

As a result of the capitalist system and the factors summarized above, the evidence presented here suggests that schools impede that which they claim to embrace. Instead of helping students learn the material, engage with important concepts, and stimulate their intellectual curiosity, the schools teach the need to cut corners, cheat, and regurgitate information in order to portray depictions of school-sanctioned success. Instead of cultivating an environment where students and teachers treat each other with care and respect, where cooperation, honesty, and integrity are valued, the schools breed deception, hostility, and frustration. Students learn that in order to reach their goals of school success and ultimate success in life, they must conform to act in ways which lead to high grades, high test scores, and the praise and recommendations of teachers and administrators. If they don't "do school" in this way, they believe they will not achieve future goals of wealth and happiness.

In this sense, the students appear to be behaving much like many successful people in other American social institutions. They recognize the need for compromises and develop strategies to help them get ahead, strategies which seem to be as useful in the classroom as they are in the board room. In both arenas, people have been known to "kiss up," "pass the buck," "cover" themselves, and "appear to be in control" even if they are not. As Philip Jackson (1968/1990) wrote years ago, "Learning how to make it in school involves, in part, learning how to falsify our behavior" (p. 27), and the same might be said for learning how to make it as a business executive, a lawyer, or an American president, for that matter, all of

whom set examples for young people to emulate. Like the schools, then, our society does not embrace all that it claims to value, and though we may pride ourselves on having strong work ethics and on fostering democratic values of civic responsibility, equality, and integrity, it seems clear that these values do not necessarily lead to success, and, in fact, in some cases, they may even impede it.

One might argue that given the similarities between achieving school success and doing well in other social institutions, Faircrest and high schools like it are preparing students well for the workforce. The "best and brightest" learn to acquire skills they will use in the future, and which may indeed lead them to the lucrative careers they desire. These may not be the skills the teachers, parents, or students want to transmit, but, as Goldman and McDermott (1987) write in "The Culture of Competition in American Schools," we get the schools we bargain for, no matter how unconsciously. In the American capitalist system, students learn to compete; the goal is to win, to beat the others, even if this means acting in ways which are personally frustrating and dissatisfying.

One may ask, is it worth it? Are we resigned to teaching only these kinds of lessons in schools? What are the costs to our children and our communities? In places like Faircrest, the drive to succeed has led some parents to employ expensive agencies to tutor their children to get top scores on the SAT's. Kevin's father insisted that Kevin go through the tutoring program a second time when he missed his goal of a combined score of 1200 by 50 points. Kevin did not believe 50 points would significantly hurt his chances for admission to the University of California, but his father was adamant. Other families turned to Internet web sites which sold high-priced college application essays "guaranteed" to get students into Ivy League universities. Town papers advertised special prenatal classes for expectant mothers which supposedly could improve the intelligence quotients of the unborn children. Competition even continues on the roads, as car bumper stickers boast, "My child is

an honors student at [local school]." People in Faircrest and places like it seem to have become obsessed with "being the best" and helping their children acquire the credentials that will supposedly "ensure" wealth and happiness.

Recent policies and rhetoric on improving schools, such as those found in America 2000 and national calls for standards and testing, only seem to spur competition. Students hear that they are being compared to their peers in the school, in the state, and around the world, and that the goal is to beat the opposition, regardless of the many factors which make the race unfair and the comparisons rather useless. Standards tend to sort students by ability just as grades do, where some youth will excel and others will be held back until they prove they can meet the requirements, or grow frustrated and give up. Furthermore, as Levin (1998) and Wolf (1998) assert, most of these national tests and standards show little evidence for meeting policy makers' claims of increased student achievement and economic productivity. Given the individual nature of student experiences and desires shown in the five portraits, is it even possible to imagine national standards which could simultaneously meet the needs of and effectively measure the variety of skills and talents in students as diverse as Eve and Teresa, for example?¹³

Even when students do well on the tests, meet the requirements for success set by schools and communities, and allegedly beat the opposition, the traps and balancing acts described in the section above reveal that these high achievers are not necessarily pleased with the results. Promises of future wealth and status are exciting (and often, as Levin notes, deceptive), but ultimately, when the students and others in this study reflect on their behavior in and around school, they feel torn. They want to feel pride in their accomplishments and would like to convince themselves that they have earned their rewards fairly and honestly. Such

¹³For more on some of the problems and complexities of implementing national standards, see Eisner (1995), as well as Levin (1998) and Wolf (1998) cited above.

rationalizations help to promote the "illusion" of an American meritocracy (see Bellah, et. al, 1985; Spindler & Spindler, 1990), that hard work and good behavior will allow the most talented and deserving to succeed. Yet the students and adults alike acknowledge that "merit" alone -- knowledge of the material, good study habits, and sharp critical thinking abilities, for instance -- do not necessarily lead to high grades and admissions to top colleges. Diligence and honesty, as Berto eventually realizes, will only get a student so far, and thus, many feel compelled to turn to less honorable tactics and strategies to achieve success.

After hearing about some of the traps the students in this study experienced and the tolls of success they faced -- their lack of fulfillment, their sleep and health problems, their constant anxiety and frustration -- a colleague of mine shook her head and said, "*I wish* my students had some of those problems!" She explained that many of her students regularly failed their classes, rarely came to school, and showed little motivation to graduate high school or pursue further learning. This was, in effect, their way of "doing school." She said she would rather her students get ulcers from working too hard than face unemployment and poverty from not working in school at all. If at one end of a continuum, the choice is to face future poverty, and at the other end is to achieve school-sanctioned success but pay the tolls associated with it, I, too, would probably opt for the latter. Instead, however, I want to question a system which leaves us with such limited choices, where students either fail in school and suffer the consequences of life without a high school diploma or college degree, or they learn to "play the game" with various levels of success and miss opportunities which challenge and excite them and foster in them a love of learning.

Why must the school system be constructed to divide students into winners and losers? Why must students feel the need to manipulate the system and devise crafty strategies to get ahead? Why must they compromise integrity for future

success? Why must they "sacrifice" health and happiness to get high grades? Why must they feel the need to betray friends and to deceive teachers? And why must they forsake their desires to be challenged and stimulated in school? When we consider the pervasive factors listed above, the university expectations, national policies, community and parental desires, and the school factors which seem so difficult to reform, we may shrug our shoulders in defeat. The system is too entrenched, too complex, and too vast to make significant changes. Yet, when we think about the individual students and the costs associated with the system, we must ask ourselves if we are resigned to the kinds of educational experiences described here. What are the alternatives? Given the constraints of a school system embedded in an American achievement ideology, what can educators do to encourage more time for real engagement with the curriculum? Is it possible to reinvision what we mean by school success and, perhaps, success outside of school? How can we work to include the students' voices and perspectives in our conversations on school change and improvement? And what are the consequences to our students and our society if we don't?

REFERENCES

- Berliner, D. C. (1992, February). *Educational reform in an era of disinformation*. Paper presented at the meeting of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, San Antonio, TX.
- Brantlinger, E. A. (1993). *The politics of social class in secondary school: Views of affluent and impoverished youth*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Bruner, J. (1960). *The process of education*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Cuban, L. (1984). *How teachers taught: Constancy and change in American classrooms, 1890-1980*. New York: Longman.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York: Collier Macmillan.
- Dornbusch, S. M. (1989). The sociology of adolescence. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 15: 233-59.
- Eckert, P. (1989). *Jocks and burnouts: Social categories and identity in the high school*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Eisner, E. W. (1986). *What high schools are like: Views from the inside*. A report to the Stanford School of Education, Stanford-in-the-Schools Project: Curriculum Panel Report. Stanford, CA: Center for Educational Research at Stanford.
- Eisner, E. W. (June, 1995). Standards for American schools: Help or hindrance? *Phi Delta Kappan*, 758-764.
- Erickson, F. (1984). School literacy, reasoning and civility: An anthropologist's perspective. *Review of Educational Research*, 54, 525-546.
- Erickson, F., & Shultz, J. (1992). Students' experience of the curriculum. In P. Jackson (Ed.), *Handbook of research on curriculum* (pp. 465-485). New York: Macmillan.
- Feldman, S. S., & Elliot, S. (Eds.). (1990). *At the threshold: The developing adolescent*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Fine, G. A., Mortimer, J. T., & Roberts, D. F. (1990). Leisure, work, and the mass media. In S. S. Feldman & S. Elliot (Eds.), *At the threshold: The*

- developing adolescent* (pp. 225-252). Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Goldman, S. V., & McDermott, R. (1987). The culture of competition in American schools. In G. D. Spindler (Ed.), *Education and cultural process: Anthropological approaches* (pp. 282-299). (2nd. ed.). Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.
- Griffin, C. (1993). *Representations of youth: The study of youth and adolescence in Britain and America*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Heath, S. B., & McLaughlin, M. W. (Eds.). (1993). *Identity and inner-city youth*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Jackson, P. W. (1968/1990). *Life in classrooms*. (Revised ed.) New York: Teachers College Press.
- Jackson, P. W. (1983). The daily grind. In H. Giroux & D. Purpel (Eds.), *The hidden curriculum and moral education* (pp. 28-60). Berkeley: McCutchan.
- Jencks, C. (1991). Is the American underclass growing? In C. Jencks & P. Peterson (Eds.), *The urban underclass* (pp. 28-100). Washington D. C.: The Brookings Institution.
- Labaree, D. (1997). *How to succeed in school without really learning: The credentials race in American education*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- LeCompte, M. D., & Dworkin, A. G. (1991). *Giving up on school: Student dropouts and teacher burnouts*. Newbury Park: Corwin Press.
- Levin, H. M. (1998). Educational performance standards and the economy. *Educational Researcher*, 27(4), 4-10.
- MacLeod, J. (1987). *Ain't no makin' it: Leveled aspirations in a low-income neighborhood*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- McDermott, R. P. (1993). The acquisition of a child by a learning disability. In S. Chaiklin & J. Lave (Eds.), *Understanding practice* (pp. 269-305). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McLaughlin, M. W., Irby, M. A., & Langman, J. (1994). *Urban sanctuaries*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

- McLaughlin, M. W., & Talbert, J. E. (1993). *Contexts that matter for teaching and learning: Strategic opportunities for meeting the nation's education goals*. Stanford, CA: Center for Research on the Context of Secondary School Teaching.
- "New standards." (1997). *Performance standards: English language arts, mathematics, science, and applied learning: Consultation draft, Vol. 3. High school*. Washington D. C.: National Center on Education and the Economy.
- Nightingale, E. O., & Wolverton, L. (1993). Adolescent rolelessness in modern society. In R. Takanishi (Ed.), *Adolescence in the 1990's* (pp. 14-28). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Noddings, N. (1992). *The challenge to care in schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Phelan, P., Yu, H. C., & Davidson, A. L. (1994). Navigating the psychosocial pressures of adolescence: The voices and experiences of high school youth. *American Educational Research Journal*, 31(2), 415-447.
- Pope, D. (1999). *Doing school: "Successful" students' experiences of the high school curriculum*. Doctoral dissertation, Stanford University, Stanford, CA.
- Powell, A. G., Farrar, E., & Cohen, D. K. (1985). *The shopping mall high school. Winners and losers in the educational marketplace*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Sedlack, M. W., Wheeler, C. W., Pullin, D. C., & Cusick, P. A. (1986). *Selling students short: Classroom bargains and academic reform in the American high school*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Simmons, R. G., & Blythe, D. A. (1987). *Moving into adolescence*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Sizer, T. R. (1984). *Horace's compromise: The dilemma of the American high school*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Sizer, T. R. (1992). *Horace's school: Redesigning the American high school*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Steinberg, L. (with Brown, B., & Dornbusch, S.). (1996). *Beyond the classroom: Why school reform has failed and what parents need to do*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Tyack, D., & Cuban, L. (1995). *Tinkering toward utopia: A century of school reform*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

U. S. Department of Education. (1991). *America 2000*. Washington D. C.

Wexler, P. (1992). *Becoming somebody: Toward a social psychology of school*. London: Falmer Press.

Wolf, R. M. (1998). National standards: Do we need them? *Educational Researcher*, 27(4), 22-25.



U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
National Library of Education (NLE)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)



TM031551

REPRODUCTION RELEASE

(Specific Document)

I. DOCUMENT IDENTIFICATION:

Title: CAUGHT IN THE GRADE TRAP: WHAT STUDENTS SAY ABOUT DOING SCHOOL	
Author(s): Denise Clark Pope	
Corporate Source:	Publication Date: APRIL 2000

II. REPRODUCTION RELEASE:

In order to disseminate as widely as possible timely and significant materials of interest to the educational community, documents announced in the monthly abstract journal of the ERIC system, *Resources in Education* (RIE), are usually made available to users in microfiche, reproduced paper copy, and electronic media, and sold through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). Credit is given to the source of each document, and, if reproduction release is granted, one of the following notices is affixed to the document.

If permission is granted to reproduce and disseminate the identified document, please CHECK ONE of the following three options and sign at the bottom of the page.

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 1 documents

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

_____ Sample _____

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

Level 1



Check here for Level 1 release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche or other ERIC archival media (e.g., electronic) and paper copy.

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 2A documents

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE, AND IN ELECTRONIC MEDIA FOR ERIC COLLECTION SUBSCRIBERS ONLY, HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

_____ Sample _____

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

2A

Level 2A



Check here for Level 2A release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche and in electronic media for ERIC archival collection subscribers only

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 2B documents

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

_____ Sample _____

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

2B

Level 2B



Check here for Level 2B release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche only

Documents will be processed as indicated provided reproduction quality permits. If permission to reproduce is granted, but no box is checked, documents will be processed at Level 1.

I hereby grant to the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) nonexclusive permission to reproduce and disseminate this document as indicated above. Reproduction from the ERIC microfiche or electronic media by persons other than ERIC employees and its system contractors requires permission from the copyright holder. Exception is made for non-profit reproduction by libraries and other service agencies to satisfy information needs of educators in response to discrete inquiries.

Sign here, → please

Signature: Denise Pope	Printed Name/Position/Title: Denise Pope, Lecturer	
Organization/Address: Stanford University School of Ed Stanford CA 94305-3096	Telephone: 650-725-7321	FAX:
	E-Mail Address: dclark@stanford.edu	Date: 6/12/00

stanford.edu

(over)



Clearinghouse on Assessment and Evaluation

University of Maryland
1129 Shriver Laboratory
College Park, MD 20742-5701

Tel: (800) 464-3742
(301) 405-7449
FAX: (301) 405-8134
ericae@ericae.net
<http://ericae.net>

May 8, 2000

Dear AERA Presenter,

Hopefully, the convention was a productive and rewarding event. As stated in the AERA program, presenters have a responsibility to make their papers readily available. If you haven't done so already, please submit copies of your papers for consideration for inclusion in the ERIC database. We are interested in papers from this year's AERA conference and last year's conference. If you have submitted your paper, you can track its progress at <http://ericae.net>.

Abstracts of papers accepted by ERIC appear in *Resources in Education (RIE)* and are announced to over 5,000 organizations. The inclusion of your work makes it readily available to other researchers, provides a permanent archive, and enhances the quality of *RIE*. Abstracts of your contribution will be accessible through the printed and electronic versions of *RIE*. The paper will be available through the microfiche collections that are housed at libraries around the world and through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service.

We are gathering all the papers from the **2000 and 1999 AERA Conference**. We will route your paper to the appropriate clearinghouse. You will be notified if your paper meets ERIC's criteria for inclusion in *RIE*: contribution to education, timeliness, relevance, methodology, effectiveness of presentation, and reproduction quality.

Please sign the Reproduction Release Form enclosed with this letter and send **two** copies of your paper. The Release Form gives ERIC permission to make and distribute copies of your paper. It does not preclude you from publishing your work. You can mail your paper to our attention at the address below. Please feel free to copy the form for future or additional submissions.

Mail to: AERA 2000/ERIC Acquisitions
 University of Maryland
 1129 Shriver Laboratory
 College Park, MD 20742

Sincerely,

Lawrence M. Rudner, Ph.D.
Director, ERIC/AE

ERIC is a project of the Department of Measurement, Statistics & Evaluation