Racing in Place
Middle Class Work in Success/Failure

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One of the most powerful and controversial of American metaphors characterizes education as a race on a level field. As the metaphor is extended in discourse, much effort is spent discussing whether the field is level or how it might be made level. As the metaphor is extended in action, it produces programs designed to improve the chances of the children beginning school, "behind." It also leads to a wide range of competitive activities, some of which are fun—and some of which have fateful consequences.

Many educators as well as parents and politicians assert that education should not be a race. In discussions reaffirming fundamental truths, the people of the United States tell each other that education is about individuals and that educational practice is legitimate only to the extent it fosters individual development. In sacred documents, education is always about growing, finding one's own way, developing one's own potential. Education is a metaphorical journey, a pilgrim's progress. This discourse of individual growth and development is everywhere evident in the everyday political life of schools as institutions. From Horace Mann to John Dewey, prophets have passionately argued that it is proper to develop special institutions to nurture children as they journey and grow into contributing citizens in a liberal democracy. By the same logic, it is proper to evaluate whether schools are achieving their goals, to investigate why certain schools appear to do better than others, and to help and reform the less successful ones.¹

All this makes perfect sense to citizens interested in education. The sticking point is that the success of a school may only be evaluated in terms of the success of the individual children who journey through the school. The metaphorical journey that started with the child as a seedling takes a detour through a thicket of institutions filled with people, technologies, and conflicting interests. The result is the constant evaluation of schools by the relative ordering of children along a continuum of success and failure.²

In this chapter, we focus on the range of test-taking and decision-making situations in which students and teachers engage at Allwin Junior High School. Allwin is part of the commonsensically "excellent" school system of Hamden Heights, a suburban town which can be fairly (and again commonsensically) described as "an upper middle-class community of successful businesspeople and professionals."³ What do the children of the advantaged do in their schools? They take tests and engage in many competitions, they fail at many of them—and they continue to be identified as successful students. Social science has reported for many years that success for these children is highly probable (although parents and teachers continue to worry). In this process, the participants make a world not only for themselves but for those across the Hudson in New York City who will be seen as never having matched the accomplishments of their peers in Hamden Heights.⁴

When we say that the children of Hamden Heights fail many tests and are still known as "successful," we are not being ironic or merely controversial. We are emphasizing that the processes shaping the educational world in which all Americans live are fundamentally cultural, not psychological. Analytically, success in the United States must be approached as (1) a matter of identification in (2) a complex social scene where (3) agents work hard with what they find around them. Success—or, better, "success/failure"—is a structured cultural category within a system of identification. A category, however, cannot activate itself. Its continued relevance to the life of a population depends on the activity of many people doing particular things at particular times. Success/failure does not simply happen. It is an achievement, a collective achievement with major consequences, both for those deemed successful and for the rest. Two major points should be recognized. First, the categories "success" and "failure" are historical constructions (rather than a reflection of attributes of a person). Second, identification is not simply a process of recognizing individual attributes. Taking into account constructed categories and the officials enforcing them is not enough. One must deal with the activities of all persons involved—the officials, parents and children (those identified as successful as well as those identified as failures). One must also deal with the consequences


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of these activities (remembering always the categories and officials). Everyone must work within the same parameters.

Most importantly, everyone's work impacts everyone else's. The children of the upper-middle classes are not simply fated to occupy the place their parents occupied. They must "work" at it, in both the commonsensical and ethnomethodological sense of the verb. It is not simply that their "hard work" gets properly rewarded but rather that their interactional work within the overall categorical system makes someone else's failure at the same time as it makes its own success. For a child to be "the best," others must be "second best," "the rest," or beyond consideration.

In interactional studies and ethnomethodology, "work" is used to focus attention on social life as a continual process. A greeting between two friends is work, telling a joke is work, and so of course is managing a child's career in school. "Work" can also point to the commonsensical understanding that we might find in a phrase like "working" (rather than "leisure") class. The people of Hamden Heights, adults and children, get up in the morning, and then they go to work. Work is not play—even if the people enjoy the work and are highly rewarded for it. It may be tiring or painful but, always, there is work to be done—on the job, at home, in school, at play.

Social reproduction does not happen automatically, and it does not happen through enculturation or socialization. Rather, it happens through the continued work that the "favorites" (and all their social supports) in the race perform as they monitor the "laggards" in the distance. Success/failure is a continued achievement with no fixed ending. From schoolroom to boardroom, the identification of success/failure is always to be made: former valedictorians, now CEOs of large firms, remain forever hanging on the next meeting of their evaluators.

The Performance of Success in Everyday Life

Successful children in good schools have always been the reference point in studies of failure, whether personal or institutional. Success is the ground against which failure stands out as "the problem." In the process, success hides itself, and the mutual dependency of success and failure becomes difficult to discuss. Even in the anthropology of education (for example in the powerful works of Oscar Lewis, William Labov, Shirley Brice Heath, John Ogbu, and many others), the emphasis has been on finding the best explanations of failure. Neglected have been investigations into the constitution of failure as an object of practical social concern (McDermott, chapter 7). In the search for explanations, bad schools and failing children are separated and singled out as if evaluation was absolute rather than relative. Children who consistently fail when compared with others are analytically isolated, as if their fates were not systematically related to the children consistently identified as having succeeded.

There is another possibility: schools and all their children are part of one differentiated system, one society, the product of a complex cultural construction. Success and failure proceed from the same principles; they are facets of the same historical facts. All individuals in the United States struggle with the same aspects of culture as they race each other across educational fields. From the first day at school to graduation years later, one can follow each child's career as a "smart" kid, a "learning disabled" kid, an "underachiever," a "behavior problem," or any number of labels. In other words, the system of identifications is in place before any individual child enters school. Year in and year out, new children are acquired by this system. They, in turn, can accept or resist but have no choice about the system itself.

In this chapter we will follow kids of prosperous parents, using the same cultural tools given to all children. We see them taking tests; we hear teachers talking about the kids and their tests. We see the students competing, struggling with the consequences of taking competition seriously, and resisting the consequences. We do not do this to identify characteristics that might explain the long-term success of either the students or teachers. Rather, our concern is with the mutualities that exist between the children of the suburbs and the children of the inner city. It is easy to see how the people of Hamden Heights construct a pleasant world at a suburban distance from New York City. It is less easy to see, but always important to remember, that the same people also construct, however much not on purpose, another much less pleasant world for the children of Inner-city Manhattan and Brooklyn.

William Labov (1972) showed how "successful" children could be on neighborhood streets—despite attending schools where they were known as "failing." Many others have also traced inconsequential success in the midst of generalized failure. In Allwin, we trace the reverse operation: inconsequential failure in the midst of generalized success. One teacher, for example, having decided that "the majority of the kids in this class shouldn't have failed" on a test she had given, gave them another one on the same material. As per the worst nightmare of the literature on self-fulfilling prophecies, because they "should" not fail, they could not fail. Meanwhile, across the river in Manhattan, children in the worst schools were taking classroom tests, and some of them were doing well. But their success would inevitably be erased in a later comparison with Allwin students. At Allwin, the teacher looked for a "reason" for the failure (the test was given the day before a three-day camping trip), and then she planned a new review period and a second test. While the camping scenario was rare, it was not uncommon for a
teacher to dismiss a student's failure on a particular test as an insignificant indicator of the student's eventual success. The failed test would not be averaged, or the student would be given make-up work, etc. A student who was caught cheating on an exam was given a warning with the understanding that "now she will understand that I am watching her." Given an overall identification of "success," any single instance of failure was reconstructed as an aberration—in the same manner as a single instance of success at an inner-city school can be ignored or treated as an aberration within an overall identification of "failure."

Most of the tests the children of Allwin were continually taking were not used to do what the testing technologies are supposedly designed to do—that is, to sort children ever so painstakingly in the most objective and fair ways. The sorting that did take place proceeded through less formal mechanisms, such as by teacher recommendation and committee reviews. If tests are not directly used for sorting at Allwin, what are they used for? How do they fit within the overall life of the school and the school's place relative to all U.S. schools?

The Competitions of Everyday Life in Allwin Junior High

The first thing to realize is the ubiquity of tests, measurements, and miscellaneous competitions in the everyday life of the students and teachers of Allwin. There may not have been a day when the students were not taking a test, preparing for a forthcoming test, or worrying about the results of an earlier one. On every one of these days, the parents participated in one way or another. They helped the children prepare. They coached and supported them and worried about the outcomes (even though their confidence in their own identifications as "successful" professionals, managers, entrepreneurs, etc., was assured—at least for the moment). Although parents had moved to Hamden Heights to a large extent because of the reputation of its schools in producing collegebound students, they did not treat success as a state of being with fixed results. Every child's trajectory was continually put on the line in new competitions and tests of ever increasing difficulty.

Everyone paid attention to the tests, but not for the obvious reason. Failure was rarely consequential. Most children, on most days, failed most tests in the sense that they did not get top rankings. More consequential was not taking tests or being caught not performing on effort indicators (through cheating, for example, or not preparing). A test performed wrongly (which is different from a failure on a test) might lead to escalating interventions, from the obligation to take the test again, detention, or referral to the school psychologist. It might make sense to think of tests and competitions as a form of what Geertz called "deep play" in his interpretation of the Balinese cockfight:

"Poetry makes nothing happen," Auden says in his elegy of Yeats, "it survives in the valley of its saying... a way of happening, a mouth." The cockfight too, in this colloquial sense, makes nothing happen. Men go on allegorically humiliating one another and being allegorically humiliated by one another, day after day, glorying quietly in the experience if they have triumphed, crushed only slightly more openly by it if they have not. But no one's status really changes. You cannot ascend the status ladder by winning cockfights; you cannot, as an individual, really ascend it at all... All you can do is enjoy and savor, or suffer and withstand, the concocted sensation of drastic and momentary movements along an aesthetic semblance of that ladder, a kind of behind-the-mirror status jump which has the look of mobility without its actuality. (1973:443)

The people of Allwin would likely find this way of talking about their life rather too effete. In their vocabulary, the competitions of everyday life are "fun" or "motivating." Competition transforms the boring into the interesting. Like spices on bland food, they make school routine palatable.

There are three kinds of tests at Allwin: classroom-level tests, school- or grade-level competitions, and standardized tests. This delineation appears usual for upper-middle class, suburban public schools (Page, 1991). The first two are routine while the last is strongly marked as special and out of the ordinary.

Classroom Tests and Competitions

Classroom tests are designed by individual teachers as part of their lesson plans. They take the form of question-answer sequences, games, quizzes, and pen-and-pencil exams. Quizzes and tests punctuate the beginning and ending of work on most units of academic study. All students are required to participate in class tests and quizzes. No one volunteers. Students are usually competing against their own records or the records of their classmates, and the resulting evaluations usually, but not necessarily, contribute to the student's report card grade. Classroom testing is a frequent activity in almost all classes. A classroom test grade is often averaged in with other test grades. It is not unusual for a student to have two or more classroom tests in a day, especially toward the end of a marking period. When teachers do change their opinion about the relative position of a student, an altogether rare occurrence, they rarely cite a particular test score. They refer rather to patterns in grades over long periods.

Classroom games are usually presented as alternate means of drilling content. They are explained by teachers and students alike as
having to do with “learning” (rather than “testing”). As such, they are less constrained by ideological strictures and may take other forms than the classical competitions between individuals. It is permissible in this context to make groups within a class, set them up to work cooperatively as a team, and then pit them against each other. Winners and losers temporarily emerge, possibly confirming a teacher's underlying opinion of individual children. The results of such competitions are rarely applied to consequential sorting.

One eighth-grade class periodically played a question-and-answer game called “Screw Thy Neighbor.” The official purpose was to review content materials for a later and officially consequential test. The class was split into two teams. Every student prepared several content questions from their readings and notes on a prior humanities unit. The goal of the game was to stump the students on the opposing team by asking them content questions they could not answer. With questions in hand, the students played the game for the entire class period. The teacher moderated and kept score. The students laughed, raised hands, and even begged to ask or answer questions during the game. They played as if the stakes were high: when they answered correctly, they let out sighs of relief, wiped their brows, and shook each other's hands; and when they answered incorrectly, they pouted, cursed under their breath, and stomped their feet on the floor. When the game was over, the students on the winning team cheered, clapped, whistled, and “gave each other five.” Students on the losing teams smiled, clapped, booed, and asked the teacher when they could have a rematch. From the name of the game to the over-stylized displays, the message “this is play” was consistently performed (Bateson 1955). “Real” competitions are not officially called “Screw Thy Neighbor.” Still, the structure of this game is not an imaginative happenstance but a symbolic evocation of the times when such performances move out of the play frame. “Screw Thy Neighbor,” like the Balinese cockfight, does not do anything. Functionally, it is a non-event. It is “just” deep play, and, culturally, it is the stuff of life.

“Screw Thy Neighbor” was least like a consequential test because it was constructed around teams and not individual students. It was more like the team sports central to the symbolic life of U.S. schools, and it is perhaps more like the experience the children will have, if they are lucky, competing in the private bureaucracies that will later employ them (on the former, see Foley 1990; on the latter, see Jackall 1988).

Classroom tests, like standardized tests, like most evaluations of job performance, are structured around individuals confronting questions that will sort those who can from those who cannot. The fundamental principle is that social rewards should only be granted based on the merit of the performer. Most tests do not have to do with learning but with “evaluation.” While, as observers, we can see that most tests at Allwin were not radically consequential, they were still constructed by all participants as something “more serious” than games. Tests were less fun than games, and it was proper for some of the students taking tests to display, and probably to experience, various amounts of anxiety. The parents paid attention to the tests and responded with rewards, punishment, or attempts at remediation.

### Voluntary Sorting Activities

Besides classroom-level tests, there were also tests and competitions that involved the whole school. This was true of more than sporting events, where the pattern is most elaborately expanded. Interestingly, these competitions were not directly related to the sorting of individual merit. Students were organized into teams and their individuality subsumed by the team. The “Brain Bowl,” for example, was a schoolwide contest modeled after a 1960s television show called “The College Bowl” (the label cross-references an academic activity to sports, particularly football, with its end-of-the-season “bowls”). The Brain Bowl consisted of teams of students competing against each other in tournament fashion on general knowledge and trivia questions. Each year, teachers were asked to construct questions. The questions were made into a test given to any student volunteering to participate in the tournament. Students were placed on teams based on their scores on the trivia tests. Next, the play-offs began. Teams were verbally asked questions, and members would try to answer before any members of the opposing team. Points were given for correct answers and deducted for incorrect ones: at the end of a set time period, the team with the most points advanced to the next round. The testing and tournament play took place over several weeks, culminating in a play-off between the final two teams at a special school assembly.

In such a system, many students do not volunteer, and all but the winning team experience a version of failure. This does not bother most people. The Brain Bowl is mostly a spectator event, an enjoyable activity for all. No record is kept of who loses, at what point or by how much. Once the cathartic final assembly is conducted, the sequence can vanish into a vague memory. Winning and losing are both directly consequent and tacitly a confirmation of competitive realities. The identity of the winning team held few surprises, as the team with the “top students” generally won. In the process, the emerging organization of the student body as relatively more or less successful was displayed and justified. The success of students in inconsequential competitions demonstrates the “rightness” of the consequential evaluations. If the students who do well on the “real” tests also do well on the “play” tests, then all must be right. This is what Geertz saw in the Balinese cock-
fight—an occasion to reaffirm the evolving social organization of the local group.

There were also schoolwide events that were not officially organized as competitions. They were presented as pure displays designed to be enjoyed rather than evaluated, for example: an arts festival, fashion shows, woodworking exhibitions, a gallery of student art projects, and a music festival with performances by the band and chorus. Students again participated by choice, but the competitive frame re-emerged in student performances. Among the participants, some worried aloud that their display was not "good enough." Many class periods went into the design and construction of the displays. Some class groups even kept their ideas secret from other classes. An award was given to the "best display."

In every competition, students and their families drove the process. Competing was stimulating. The teachers had no problem giving an analysis of the situation couched in the critical language of much social science writing about tests. Like sociologists or anthropologists, they rhetorically distanced themselves from what was happening. Here are a few quotes from a group discussion about competition:

**In the classroom:** Give them an activity to get them to practice word skills, and they moan and groan at you. You make it into a contest, and suddenly everyone wants to be an expert at defining vocabulary words.

**In the community:** Did you ever see the way these kids do sports? . . . Competition drives them, so why shouldn't we capitalize on it?

**In general:** These kids respond real well to competition. They're geared to it . . . They're used to seeing their fathers respond to it at work . . . They've got to learn how to win and lose. They get chances to do both at some point.

Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn (1953:357) made the mous distinction that there are two ways in which culture impacts the es of human beings—as a model "of" behavior and as a model "for" havior. The teachers at Allwin invoke both. First, the culture of competition offers a model "of" behavior: it is an observational fact, there be seen, that students enjoy competition. Second, in the United ates, competition offers a model "for" behavior: the students must get ed to winning and losing, and it is the responsibility of teachers to sure that this happens. From our point of view, what is lacking in ult discourse is an awareness of the processes through which the servation "students like competing" was made. How did competition come a model of and for behavior? How has it become a "fact" of life Allwin? Who was involved historically? Who is involved now?

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**The Ritual Organization of Sorting: Standardized Times**

Educational games can be fun. Routine tests can be viewed as different levels of deep play peculiarly appropriate to demonstrate the validity of the underlying cultural structure. But fun can give way to anxiety when the time comes to take the extra-ordinary tests that stand at the opposite extreme from games like "Screw Thy Neighbor." These tests can be officially used for decisions to sort one student from another or to confirm earlier sorting decisions, even if the eventual outcome is anything but mechanical. These tests are strongly marked performatively. They are not designed by the school or local school boards. They are state, or more often national, tests designed by educational experts from prestigious universities and corporations. They are presented as based on the most up-to-date understanding of testing—from knowledge of a content area to an expertise at test standardization. The local school has no authority to change anything about them. They are "standardized," "on-demand," tests to be treated with proper behavioral respect.

At Allwin, all students take these tests (no choice allowed) several times during their school careers. When they enter the sixth grade, they are given a battery of diagnostic tests for assessing their reading and math levels. Later in the school year, they take nationally normed achievement tests and statewide competency exams, the most formally scheduled and recognized occasions for evaluating student competencies. When the Iowa Test of Basic Skills was administered, the school schedule was changed so that students would not miss more than one period of each subject. Letters were sent to parents during the week prior to the exams to announce the schedule, to state the importance of the tests for determining student placement, and to ask parents to make sure their children ate good breakfasts. Absences were discouraged. The actual test time was handled formally. The students were seated in rows arranged by the teachers: they used paper and pencil supplied by the test company; and they followed instructions read from the testing manuals. Every attempt was made to ensure every student had exactly the same working conditions. Every attempt was made to break any social network and to force the individual to stand alone against the prescribed task. In all these ways, "fairness" was displayed. The field, that day, was as level as educational science could make it: all that mattered was individual talent and preparation.

By this model, the school and its agents abstract themselves from the performance of the children. The fact that the tests are not designed by the school makes the point. The school may be responsible for preparation of the children, but it withdraws at the moment the race is actu-
ally run. Like the coach in a sporting event, the school and the parents can only watch from the sidelines, giving last-minute advice and admonitions, before giving the floor to the appointed official arbiters and, through them, to the institutions that design the fields on which the race is to be run.

The Social Organization of Sorting: Meetings in Uncertainty

When the "race" has been run, the official "time" of the child (the score as reported by the testing agency) is entered into permanent record. It becomes an event in the child's history. One cannot escape the reality that has been constructed, but this reality, like any other cultural fact, works in concert with other constructions. The score is consequential, but the consequences are now open to interpretation by, and negotiation among, all involved. As when political results interact with the media that report them, what now becomes important is the "spin" that is given to the "story" that was the actual score. The score does not prescribe what the school, parents, or child must do with it. In fact, test makers send various warnings that scores must not be used "mechanically." They are only items to be used in a process that may eventually lead to a transformation in the career of the child.

This process is a complex of conversations among a large number of people: teachers, counselors, administrators, parents, etc. They meet in corridors and lunchrooms, and eventually in formal meeting rooms. This is a ubiquitous, although somewhat hidden, aspect of life in Allwin. People talk in general about their opinions, or they examine in detail the permanent record of the students. They affirm what they have always known about a student, or they make a call for more information. Sometimes they come to a decision that redirects the life of the child. Occasionally, enough time is spent talking that the problem has become moot. Mostly, the talk produces little change and the children stay where they were previously placed.

Still, there is much of this talk, and it is worth focusing on it. Let us look, for example, at a meeting at the end of the school year. Teachers were sorting students entering from elementary school. In principle, they were engaged in something with the potential of making a major difference in the children's lives. They had never met the students, but the "facts"—that is, scores on standardized tests—were before them. The committee was given the task of grouping children into five different classes without giving the impression the classes were tracked. If this had been the goal, then the solution would seem to be simple: group by using a random table. This did not happen. The teachers' first act was to sort the students according to the five traditional ability groups (gifted, high, average, low-average, remedial). The rationale for this sorting was to ensure that the students from each group would be distributed proportionally. The ability sorting was not itself performed mechanically: some students with the same grades and test scores were placed in different ability groups. Stories pieced together from their "whole" file were different enough to justify differential placement. Once the ability groupings had been made, the randomization of the students into the five classes could proceed.

It would be easy to criticize the teachers for making a mockery of the requirements for fairness in assigning classroom groupings without tracking. But this was not easy for them. They had had long experiences with ability grouping, and they had lived through many difficult moments with "errors." They reminded each other that moving a student from a lower to a higher group is never a problem, but moving a student down is never simple and involves much work by teachers and parents. The teachers argued that the solution was a soon-to-be-tried curriculum design that would eliminate the need for sorting. We quote the conversation at length, for it illustrates the paradox in which the teachers were caught: the more information they had about the students, the more accurate their decisions, the more legitimate "leveling" (as they called it) there could be. And yet, at the very moment when things would appear settled, complaints were made about the danger of formal grouping.

S: We have to think about how to do the leveling. For the first time they've provided me with each student's name, I.Q. score, local percentile ranks on the I.T.B.S., third marking period grades and teacher comments . . . We want our teachers to use this information to set up the groups.

R: I want to throw it up for suggestions. I was thinking of taking two sixth-grade blocks and have them meet at the same time . . . then we could basically come up with two heterogeneously grouped blocks.

T: What do you mean?

R: I'm asking how we should group the kids, how you think it should be done.

S: We have to think about how to do the leveling. For the first time we actually got good recommendations and information from the teachers so we should try to do it carefully.

W: I thought the whole idea of the block was going to be that we would take care of students' needs without singling them out . . . We should make a commitment to either leveling or total integration . . . just, at least for the sixth grade.
in the seventh grade, why postpone it? There is also the unanswered question about Fred, the expert on special children. If everybody is treated the same, then he and his expertise in making legitimate distinctions among children and all the institutions behind him become unnecessary. The whole point of the exercise is "to take care of students' needs," but the problem is in taking care of individual students "without singling them out."

This is the major problem American educators have never solved: how is it possible to treat all children the same while treating them all differently? Separation (because children are different) is not compatible with equality. But equality (because all must be treated alike) does not allow proper respect for difference. This is more than a logical or philosophical problem. It is an experiential problem for any good teacher, sensitive student, or concerned parent. When children do not do as well as expected, as often happens, people worry. This presents opportunities for any callous teacher, scheming student, or aggressive parent. If a child "fails" on an objective test, one may be able to call a friend of a friend and explain the "special" conditions that led to the failure and to offer arguments legitimizing an exceptional administrative decision.

Allwin Junior High, like all U.S. schools, had several formal settings for the discussion of special treatment. "Team meetings" were called irregularly (but quite often) when teachers (separately at first, then together in a corridor or teachers' lounge) came to the conclusion that "there was a problem" with a student. A meeting was then formally scheduled as an occasion for "talking about the student" in the light of the facts. Let us look at how this was done in the case of "Brian Jones":

**S:** He's absent so much, how can you pass him? He read an eighth grade novel and got a 48 on the test ... and he's content with a D.

**B:** His mother doesn't make him make up the work he misses.

**P:** Do you think it would help to hold him back?

**C:** Can we recommend retention?

**P:** I don't know.

**J:** He's a sweet child; it just might help him.

**R:** He's got schoolitis . . . he's out when the going gets rough.

**P:** Maybe we should talk to [the principal] . . . he may need another year, O.K.? I'll talk to him and let you know.

**R:** Ya know, he told me in confidence that the biggest mistake he ever made in his life was allowing his father to remarry.

**S:** He lives with his mother, and he even pays some of the bills in the house.

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*Much about American education can be found in this discussion. The teachers are dissatisfied with ranking. Lack of knowledge about individual children was momentarily remedied. Although it would have been easy to see the added information as an aid to legitimate ranking, the new information is presented as making it less necessary to rank. There is the problem of parents who may protest "because they like status." In addition, it is probable that integration would be instituted...*
Paul Willis opened his book about working-class “resistance” to schooling with two rhetorical questions: “The difficult thing to explain about how middle-class kids get middle-class jobs is why others let them. The difficult thing to explain about how working-class kids get working-class jobs is why they let themselves” (1977: 1). Willis then gave a version of how social reproduction is actively performed by those involved. In his analytic practice, he seems to have been interested only in the activity of the working-class kids who “let” other kids get the middle-class jobs. This can be misleading unless the related question is also asked: “Given that working-class kids let middle-class kids get middle-class jobs, why is it that middle-class kids work so hard at getting them?”

We understand that this question requires a complex answer. Working-class kids do not simply “let” middle-class kids succeed. They are, eventually, defeated in a generalized, altogether impersonal, and still quite real struggle. Middle-class kids and their parents are not passive combatants. They are intimately engaged in a multilayered struggle they cannot be sure of winning. Only one person can win the race. Everyone else will have to play second, third, or no fiddle at all. Failure to ensure social reproduction is always possible. All prosperous parents know that some of their friends’ or peers’ children have drifted “down” and will never achieve what their parents had. A 95 on a test is not an 85 is not a 75, and only a few students receive the first grade. All the others know they did not quite measure up, even if some would agree with what one student once told his mother: “B is cool, mom!” Well, a B is not enough to get one into Columbia College, and parents are sensitive to the difference a B makes. Both students and parents are correct. Getting a B from a successful school like Allwin is to do well, but not quite well enough if the goal is admission to an elite university where high school Bs won’t earn a student a first-place ranking.

Work, Mutualities and Resistance In and Through the Culture of Success/Failure

We have used the word “work” to refer to the activity of everyone at Allwin, because, as mentioned earlier, the word indexes various traditions of analyses. There are many ironies emphasized by the use of the word, particularly when we place together, as must be done, the people of Hamden Heights and the people of inner-city New York whose children attend West Side High School. The former are all employed, many of the latter are not. The children of the former spend most of their childhoods working at school, both during school time and at home, filling in endless workbook pages. The people of Hamden
defeated in this struggle. They are active, pushing the limits of the conditions they are given. The members of the upper-middle-class community of Hamden Heights do not maintain their position by relying on the cultural predestination that theorists of culture call early socialization. Instead, they must race hard to stay in place. Success is not the inevitable product of a purported fit between family and school environments. Those who win in the United States do not win because they impose their culture on people with "different" cultures. We might better say that "America" is imposed on all people in the United States, and all resist it with varying consequences for themselves and for the many, in the social distance, whom they may never notice.

Notes

1. In this sentence, and in many others, we use the word "success" to index the commonsensical, clichéd, and ultimately dangerous discourse about the fate of people in the United States. We offer no definition of success precisely because we think of it as a cultural category.

2. For a more detailed account of the historical interplay between high progressivism (as Dewey attempted to inscribe it) and practical progressivism (as inscribed in the institutional evolution of the American school, its curriculum, tests, and attendants), see CREMIN (1961, 1988). LAGEMANN (1989) gives further details about the process that transformed a subtle concern with the shaping of an individual into a citizen into a set of practices intended to measure the extent of the shaping.


4. West Side High, an alternative public high school for students who have been failed from other high schools in New York City was studied by Rizzo-Tolk and Varenne (1992). The present paper is best read in tandem with this publication and those listed in note 3.

5. We emphasize that "work" says something that the social reproduction theories (Bourdieu and PASSERON 1977; GROUX 1983) on which we have relied do not say clearly enough. Social reproduction was designed to focus our attention on the practices of agents, but it is threatened by its reliance on theories of enculturation, socialization or internalization. Social facts, we believe, do not have to be internalized to be effective; they only have to be inscribed on the social landscape so they cannot be missed. This is a complex position, which we sketch in detail elsewhere (Varenne and McDermott, in press).

6. The famous Pymallon studies (Rosenthal and Jacobson 1968) focused only on the attitudes of individuals in arranging the self-fulfilling prophecies of success and failure. Cultural accounts instead focus on the symbolic order in terms of which certain attitudes are made available to individuals in particular settings (Spindler 1959; McDermott and Aron 1978). The suburbs and the inner city not only draw from the same resources, they make each other possible.
This is not a "new" phenomenon of the 1980s. The same attention to tests was reported by Henry (1963) for the 1950s and by the Lynds ([1929] 1956:218) for the 1920s. Our analysis is an extension of Henry's, although we talk less of the "absurdity" of tests and competitions and more about their fundamental efficacy as reconstructions of, commentaries on, and resistance to a cultural pattern.

Teams may be one of the ways the historical processes in America have transformed the fundamental structures of democratic ideology. In contrast, France gives few occasions for students to organize themselves into teams. The importance of teams perhaps has to do with the strength of the "community" ideology in American culture (Varenne 1977).

Some consider these wins and losses dangerous only to the extent that a winner, or loser, may misinterpret the success. John Updike's famous "Rabbit" series is the story of a man who overinterpreted his success as a high school basketball "star." By definition, being a star is a rare occurrence. More common are the students who interpret their failure as more than what it is culturally constructed to be. For the same problems handled differently in another culture, see Moore (1975) on African marriages and Plath (1980) and Rohlen (1983, 1992) for Japanese schooling and career lines.

As is well known, an interesting aspect of American education is the absence of the national exams that control educational results in an absolute fashion. as in Europe or Asia (Amano 1990; Eckstein and Noah 1993; Miyazaki 1976). In France, as in most other countries, individual results on the baccalauréat are not open to educational negotiation: a failure is an absolute event.

This is a process that has been observed in other studies. See Cicourel and Kitsuse (1963), Erickson and Shultz (1982), and Mehan, Hertwerk and Meihil (1986) for a discussion of the role of guidance counselors and other school personnel in the ranking of students.

A variation on this process is well documented in Lacey (1970). In the English context of an elite school drawing only the very best students from other schools, he traces the reproduction of academic stratification.

In our forthcoming volume, we use Robert Frost's poem about repairing walls that make good neighbors to illustrate this point: cultural processes construct facts for all to take into account. Some people (hunters in the poem) break down the walls. Others (the neighbor) insist that they be rebuilt. Others (the narrator) question the need for the wall but acquiesce. This is a range of reactions to cultural facts that is well-illustrated in our observations at Allwin.

In the same vein, Ortner (1995) has reported difficulties getting adult middle-class informants to talk about anything other than fear for their own children when she wanted them to talk about their own educational experiences.

In the aforementioned paper on West Side High (Rizzo-Tolk and Varenne 1992) we showed what this can mean in the everyday life of an alternative school and in some of its special programs. One example was the completion of a class project. In a fifteen-minute discussion, a half-dozen students both demonstrated considerable interactional and academic skills related to the project and performed the one thing that allowed some teachers (in a later discussion) to say "they have not learned anything." The students' discussion was videotaped. For a few seconds, the students laughed at a joke. They were, for all analytic purposes, working at completing a complex collective task which they brought to its appointed closing. Like the students of Allwin playing at "Screw Thy Neighbor" tests, they were also enjoying themselves—laughing and playing with possibilities. They were "at cultural work," making a world for themselves and others. Some of the teachers, when they watched the tape of the students laughing, were also at cultural work when they identified the laughter as proof that the students had not learned. It is easy for us to show that this identification is wrong. But the identification was made, and this is what must concern us.

References


This chapter offers a reinterpretation of Goldman (1982) and Goldman and McDermott (1987). It shares a main title and some content with chapter 5 of Varenne and McDermott (in press).