"Doing School"

How We Are Creating a Generation of Stressed Out, Materialistic, and Miseducated Students

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To Kevin, Eve, Teresa, Michelle, and Roberto
and
To Buddy Peshkin,
who will always hold a special place in my memory

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Preface

Ignorance about adolescents leads us to trivialize their experience
—*Penelope Eckert,* Jocks and Burnouts

In tenth grade I fell in love with Walt Whitman. I went home and declared my adoration for the man and his work, adding that I had most certainly found my calling in life. Never before had I met someone whose words were so invigorating and whose poetry inspired me to try to write my own. I remember reading and rereading *Leaves of Grass* on the front lawn of my high school, attempting to crack the hidden code of the language, to discover meaning behind the words. I remember the excitement of coming to understand a difficult term or phrase, and of being in awe of a talent that could invoke such passionate feelings within me.

My memories of high school in the early 1980s abound with such moments of passion and engagement. Though I experienced my

strongest feelings in English class, marveling at the artistry of Shakespeare, Faulkner, Emerson, and Dickinson, I also remember enjoying subjects in my science and history courses. I spent hours with friends pondering existential issues that emerged from our studies, such as the limits of free will and the origins of life. I remember how earnest we were in these conversations, and though we called ourselves "geeks" (a label we were given by other students in the school) for being engrossed by such ideas, it seemed clear that our high school experiences played a significant role in helping to shape us as thinking, feeling, human beings. We had learned to love learning and the excitement that accompanied it.

Years later, as a high school English teacher, I often reflected on these school experiences and attempted to foster this same kind of excitement in my own students. I wanted to spark a love for literature, a commitment to writing and speaking with passion and verve, and a desire to read and write as a way of understanding humanity and of exploring the world. During the brief 50 minutes I saw my students each day, I couldn't help but wonder if any felt the way that I had in high school. Some appeared well-prepared and eager to learn; some reluctantly participated in the lessons; and others refused to take part at all, seeming to ignore me and neglect the daily assignments. Though I believed I had concrete evidence of student learning (or lack thereof), in the form of essays, quizzes, homework assignments, and class participation, I felt that I still did not know the level of student engagement with the material. I reasoned that I could not determine this unless I spoke with the students themselves. I wanted to find out what was going on inside their heads as they sat in my classroom each day. What did they make of their school experiences? Which educational endeavors, if any, were meaningful and valuable to them? Since they spent seven hours, five days a week, confined within the walls of the public high

school, 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 rates.[1] However, I did not find many studies that addressed the educational experience in school from the adolescents' points of view. The few studies I found that relied on the youth's perspectives examined mostly the social aspects of schooling, such as life in the hallways and parking lots, instead of the students' classroom experiences and the character of their intellectual engagement—topics that lie at the very heart of the mission of the school.[2] It seems ironic that we require young people to attend high school, and yet we know relatively little about what they think of the place.

One reason we do not hear much about students' curricular experiences may be that we have not asked them specifically to reflect on these experiences.[3] Attempting to hear the youths' perspectives seems vital if we are to achieve a sense of community in our schools and if we aspire to create conditions conducive to student growth. John Dewey (1938) urged educators to have a "sympathetic understanding of individuals as individuals [in order to have an] idea of what is actually going on in the minds of those who are learning" (p. 39). He encouraged taking the time to get to know students, to seek their opinions and interests, and to listen to their stories in order to foster educational experiences that aroused curiosity and strengthened initiative. When an average high school teacher might have more than 160 students, arriving at this kind of understanding is no easy task. By focusing on a few adolescents for more than eight months, I attempt in this research to get to know students as

individuals, to help convey their experiences and their perspectives in order to help achieve the kind of understanding Dewey advocated.

About the study: I chose to do this research in a high school with a reputation for caring teachers, innovative programs, and strong leadership. It is a comprehensive school with a diverse population where approximately 95 percent of the school's graduates attend college.[4] I asked for a range of students, diverse in gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, and academic interests 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.[5] In order to achieve a sense of trust and rapport with the students, I limited my data collection to focus on the adolescents. I did not interview teachers, parents, or administrators. Hence, the experiences captured here are rooted in the words and actions of the students themselves. In each case, the youth played critical roles in helping to shape the nature and form of the portraits that follow.

Acknowledgments

Throughout the process of researching and writing this book, I have had the invaluable support of several individuals. I am especially grateful to Stanford professors Elliot Eisner, Buddy Peshkin, and Ray McDermott, who offered sage advice and guidance. Elliot encouraged me to pursue the topic of educational experience and helped me to think critically about the high school curriculum and its effect on students. He challenged me throughout the process to examine the larger consequences of my research and to write for a broad audience. I thank him for all his help on this project and for serving as my advisor and mentor.

Buddy, too, served as a valuable advisor and friend. During our frequent phone calls and meetings, he graciously shared his knowledge of qualitative methodology and helped guide me through the day-to-day process of data collection, analysis, and writing. I was fortunate to know and work closely with Buddy on this book and

other projects until his death in December 2000. I am grateful for his wisdom and understanding and know that I am a better researcher because of him.

I thank Ray for his help in shaping the study and for his vast knowledge of relevant literature. He reminded me of the importance of educational context and of the researcher's limitations in capturing students' experiences. In addition, Mike Atkin kindly served as an "outside reader" for an early draft and offered useful suggestions and encouragement.

I am also grateful to Sam Intrator, Lissa Soep, Susan Verducci, Liz Lazaroff, and Nicole Holthius for offering constructive criticism and practical advice. In addition to being supportive friends and colleagues, they served as role models who helped me to believe it was possible to conduct a study of this nature while balancing work and family life. Nel Noddings, Mark Batenburg, Don Hill, and Michael Newman as well as my editors, Susan Arellano and Margaret Otzel, each read full drafts of the manuscript and offered valuable critiques. And I am particularly indebted to Simone Schweber and Kathy Simon, my writing group members, who read early chapters with care, edited rough drafts, and provided keen insights and analysis. Their friendship, intellect, generosity, and enthusiasm were indispensable in helping me to complete this project.

I also wish to thank my family members for their ongoing support and encouragement. My parents provided assistance in a variety of ways, serving as cheerleaders, critics, and "emergency" babysitters. They fostered in me a love of learning and a desire to study the field of education. In addition, I want to thank my daughters, Megan and Allison, both of whom were born in the midst of the research process, for their patience and understanding when "mommy went off to work." And I am eternally grateful for the love and support of my husband, Mike, who patiently listened to my questions

and concerns day after day, read multiple versions of all of my chapters, and offered invaluable help.

Finally, I could not have done this work without five special high school students who let me in to their lives and told me the stories of their school experiences. As busy as they were, they welcomed me each morning and made the research experience an enjoyable one as I shadowed them from class to class. I dedicate this book to them and hope that their portraits inspire other students and educators to make significant changes to improve the quality of secondary education.

CHAPTER 1

Welcome to Faircrest High

Faircrest High School's values: Be punctual, prepared, tolerant, honest, respectful, responsible.
—posted on a sign in a FHS classroom

"I wish I could have a class full of students like Eve,"[1] says the chair of the history department, describing one of his "ideal" pupils. Eve has a 3.97 grade point average. She is ranked in the top 10 percent of her class and is enrolled in every honors and advanced placement level course available to her. Her résumé lists more than 25 school activities in which she has participated since her freshman year, ranging from field hockey and symphonic band to student council, Spanish club, and Junior Statesmen of America.

Another teacher recommends Kevin. He is well known at the school because of his friendly personality, his high grades, and his star performance on the school soccer team. For the past two years

he has led a student-run community service project that delivers school supplies and clothing to less privileged children in neighboring towns. He takes classes from both the college preparatory track as well as the honors track, and he is in the highest possible courses for his grade level in three subject areas: English, history, and French. "He is so smart and such a nice boy," says the PE teacher, "if I had a son, I would want one like him."

Other names come up multiple times. Michelle, an exceptional drama and music student, is recommended for her acting performances, her top grades, and her enrollment in a special program called The Community Project. Teresa is an outstanding student in the new business theme house, excelling in business computing skills. She impresses teachers by her desire to "challenge" herself and her commitment to the Mexican Student Association. Finally, there is Roberto, who hopes to be the first in his immediate family to attend college. He is recommended for his diligence and dedication to this goal, as well as his successful record in a seminar course in which he was awarded the Coordinator's Commendation for Excellence.

"These students represent some of our best and brightest," a guidance counselor notes with pride. "They are good kids who work hard and do well. Actually, I could name many others just like them, but you only need five." Such was my introduction to Faircrest High.

I chose to study students at Faircrest because of its excellent reputation. The school, located in a wealthy California suburb, has one of the lowest dropout rates in the state, small class sizes, and a "long-standing tradition of hiring the best teachers to provide the highest quality instruction."[2] The school's annual report lists college acceptance rates, scholastic aptitude test results, and the number of students commended for National Merit distinction, all of

which rank Faircrest well above the state average. More than one-third of the student body is enrolled in honors and advanced placement (AP) courses, and many of these students "get accepted to universities such as Stanford, Harvard, [and] Yale."

Evidence of student success is everywhere. Teachers announce awards over the loudspeaker each morning: "Congratulations to Mr. Parker's class and the three winners of the state math competition . . . [names are read aloud]. Overall, Faircrest came in second, just behind Alpine School this year. Let's come in first next time!" The school sends dozens of letters home congratulating students who maintain 4.0 averages each semester. Teachers post the best essays and test results on classroom walls, hanging banners with the names of students who earned perfect scores on advanced placement exams from the past ten years. And each month, every department honors an outstanding student, posting his or her photo on a central bulletin board and listing the names in the yearbook. In publications, on the walls, and over the loudspeakers, Faircrest's top students are impressive. They are articulate, focused, multitalented, and industrious. They are the pride of the public education system and the hope for the future.

Listen to the students, though, and you'll hear a different side of success. To keep up her grades, Eve sleeps just two to three hours each night and lives in a constant state of stress. Kevin faces anxiety and frustration as he attempts to balance the high expectations of his father with his own desire to "have a life" outside of school. Michelle struggles to find a way to pursue her love for drama without compromising her college prospects. And both Teresa and Roberto resort to drastic actions when they worry that they will not maintain the grades they need for future careers. All of them admit to doing things that they're not proud of in order to succeed in school.

These students explain that they are busy at what they call "doing school." They realize that they are caught in a system where achievement depends more on "doing"—going through the correct motions—than on learning and engaging with the curriculum. Instead of thinking deeply about the content of their courses and delving into projects and assignments, the students focus on managing the work load and honing strategies that will help them to achieve high grades. They learn to raise their hands even when they don't know the answers to the teachers' questions in order to appear interested. They understand the importance of forming alliances and classroom treaties to win favors from teachers and administrators. Some feel compelled to cheat and to contest certain grades and decisions in order to get the scores they believe they need for the future. As Kevin asserts:

> 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.

Values normally espoused in schools, such as honesty, diligence, and teamwork, necessarily come into question when the students must choose between these ideals and getting top grades. It is hard to be a team player when you are competing with peers for an A grade on the class curve. It is difficult to remain honest when so much in school depends on appearing alert and prepared, and when there is too much work to do and too little time in which to do it. The workload is so great and the expectations so high that these students feel obligated to give up recreation and sleep time as well as many aspects of a social life in order to succeed. Eve explains: "All year I sat and stared at the names on the banner in my history class, and it became my entire goal; . . . I swore I would get my name

up there if it killed me." Her devotion to success eventually earns her a spot on the history advanced placement banner. And though the pressure to succeed does not "kill" her, it does make her physically ill. She, like the others, has learned to do "whatever it takes" to get ahead, even if this means sacrificing "individuality, health, and happiness"—not to mention compromising ethical principles.

These students regret the frenetic pace of their school days and the undue stress they endure. They do not like manipulating the system or compromising their beliefs and values by kissing up, lying, and cheating. But they also do not like what they see as the alternative. They believe job prospects and income are better for college graduates, especially for those who earn credentials from prestigious universities.[3] Lower grades and test scores might jeopardize future wealth and well-being. Hence, the students are victims of what I call the "grade trap." They feel bound by a narrow definition of success and resigned to a system in which ultimate satisfaction may not be attainable.

To their teachers, administrators, parents, and community, these students represent the "ideal." They are motivated to get ahead and work hard to achieve high grades. They participate in extracurricular activities, serve their communities, earn numerous awards and honors, and appear to uphold the values posted on the walls of the Faircrest classrooms. This book examines the behavior behind the success. The chapters, written as individual portraits, offer an inside view of the complexity of student life as well as the persistent dilemmas faced by everyone in the school system.

Although Faircrest High, along with most schools, claims to value certain character traits such as honesty and respect, the student experiences in the competitive academic environment reflect the conflicting goals inherent in the educational system today.[4] As you

read about the students—whose stories may resonate with "successful" high school students throughout this country—ask yourself the following questions: What kind of behavior is fostered by the expectations of the school community and by those outside of the school? Can students meet these expectations without sacrificing personal and academic goals and beliefs? Can parents encourage their children to strive for future success without pushing too hard or advocating questionable behavior? What can school teachers and administrators do in light of the constraints of college admission requirements and national education policies that spur competition for high grades and test scores? Are we fostering an environment that promotes intellectual curiosity, cooperation, and integrity, or are our schools breeding anxiety, deception, and frustration? Are they impeding the very values they claim to embrace? Are we preparing students well for the future? Are they ready for the world of work? Are they ready to be valuable members of our society? And is this the kind of education to which we as a nation should aspire?

Listen to the voices of these five students.