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CULTURE IN A HIGH SCHOOL HISTORY CLASS

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STEVEN KARL WOJCIKIEWICZ

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THE GOOD STUDENTS: A STUDY OF HIGH-ACHIEVER CULTURE
IN A HIGH SCHOOL HISTORY CLASS

By

Steven Karl Wojcikiewicz

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
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Department of Counseling, Educational Psychology, and Special Education

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ABSTRACT

THE GOOD STUDENTS: A STUDY OF HIGH-ACHIEVER CULTURE IN A HIGH SCHOOL HISTORY CLASS

By

Steven Karl Wojcikiewicz

This piece describes a critical ethnographic study of the culture of high-achievement. The study was set in an Advanced Placement US History class at a suburban American high school. Based in Dewey's concept of collateral learning, this study is situated among work on school culture and hidden curricula.

This study was undertaken for several reasons. High-achieving students are positioned to take influential roles in society, yet the culture of achievement has not received much attention. Further, it is possible that high-achievers may be learning lessons that we would not wish them to learn. Questioning the "best" in schools also makes it possible to examine the nature and priorities of our educational system. Finally, a study of high-achievers may tell us, as academics and educators, a bit about ourselves and our field.

Observation of the classroom was combined with interviews with the students and faculty and collection of documents. This data was analyzed and interpreted from three different perspectives, focusing on the students, on the classroom, and on the school, using a framework that combined Deweyian and postmodern philosophical concepts as well as ideas from previous work on school culture and the hidden curricula of schooling.

The results of this study paint a picture in which achievement is never achieved, in which endless striving for an elusive goal leaves students little time for reflection or

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stepping-back from the experience of learning. Additionally, achievement is portrayed as a goal which becomes its own justification, an idea reinforced by the moral overtones which accompany narratives of achievement. When achievement becomes a goal-in-itself, high-achievers may be seen as unprepared to act critically and with considered purpose, or to ask “why” questions.

This work raises questions about an educational system that aims to support a democratic society. Uncritical pursuit of achievement, with little room for reflection or consideration, may leave our “best” students trained to strive to make use of their skills and talents in the service of any goal which comes along, so long as they are achieving. Further work on this subject and examination of its implications, at all levels, is called for.

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the memory of John Dewey, and to all those educators who strive, amidst many obstacles, to keep things interesting.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A project like this can never be done by oneself, and I owe a great deal to all those who supported me, and put up with me, as I worked my way through it.

First thanks go to my family - my fiancé Abby, Mom and Ray, Dad, and my brother Ben - who were with me all the way. Lots of folks from MSU deserve thanks too, but especially Zach, Stef, Shane, and Adam, who helped me out and gave me some faith in the future of educational research. Nor can I leave out Jake, Brian, Matt, Amy, Robin, Anisa, Tasha, Jeremy, Andrea F. and Andrea C., who proved that some people still want to hang out with you even when you are crazed from working on a dissertation. A special mention, or “shout out,” is due the ER Gang, especially Dustin, Jay, Laura, and Leslie, who provided much needed perspective and humor. The Espresso Royale Coffee Shop in East Lansing is the site where the majority of this work was written, and while one cannot thank a coffee shop, it at least deserves a mention of its own.

I also thank my committee, Avner, Dick, Ralph, and Dorinda, for all their work. Dorinda shared her own research experiences and helped me much in setting up my study. Dick and Ralph have known me from the beginning of my graduate career, and have supported and pushed me since then, even when I left and then returned. Ralph, as my advisor, has guided me through the perils of graduate school requirements. Dick has given me endless opportunities for work and thought as well as constant encouragement, and I’ll miss our regular philosophical conversations. Without these guys, I could not have gotten this far. Special thanks go to my dissertation director, Avner Segall, who has been supportive, challenging, conscientious, and is a fine example of a scholar, a mentor, and a teacher.

In addition, I wish to thank Sharon, JaNice, Joni, and Sue, as well as the other folks on the College of Education staff, for their patient and endless help and support throughout my career. They are good people, and they make the College of Education work.

I will end by expressing my gratitude to Mr. Eric Elliot, the students of his AP US History class, and the faculty and staff of Fairlawn High School. From the beginning, they were open, friendly, and generous with their time. There would be no study without them, and I enjoyed getting to know them as I carried out my work. I wish them all the best.

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CHAPTER 1: FRAMING THE STUDY

"While saints are engaged in introspection, burly sinners run the world."

John Dewey

Introduction

As educators, teachers and professors, deans and principals, staff and faculty, we have come up with a great many ways of talking about our students. There are students who are quick, who get it, and there are those who are a bit slow, a little lower down on the normal curve. Some of our students are strong in a subject; others may be weak, perhaps underprepared, perhaps unmotivated, perhaps out of their depth, yet their work in other subjects could earn them identification as articulate, intelligent, mature. Some kids are trouble, or troubled, or trouble-makers; others are motivated, interested, and here to learn. There are the gifted and there are those of low-ability, and of course there are the underachievers, the overachievers, the low-achievers, and the high-achievers.

These are the labels that we create for our students, the ways we refer to them in everyday conversation, the ways that teachers describe them to parents and to each other, the ways they are categorized in research and in policy. And these are the labels, too, which create our students. These are far more than words. They describe the structure and the activity of schooling, the shaping of students and of their lives, the boundaries of the world of educators. They are part of the culture of schooling. A portrayal of this culture is a picture which includes more than words, describing a way of living, of getting along in the world. And this whole way of living, the experience that comes from years of immersion in the culture of schooling, this is much of what we, as educators, are teaching when we conduct our lessons every day.

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There is, of course, no one culture of schooling. There are many schools, in many places, and they are immersed in larger social and cultural contexts. Even within schools there are cultures and sub-cultures. Culture is no simple phenomenon, certainly not one amenable to certain findings and finalized statements. In a way, culture is a very democratic sort of idea; because no description of it is complete, there is no one to tell us the full story of our own cultural environment, and so we must ask our own questions. Nor does the complexity of culture exempt us from asking these questions. Indeed, as educators, teaching all of the lessons we teach in school, we are called upon to learn more about school culture if we are to know who and what we are teaching. Furthermore, we must ask questions not only of those things which are not-working, but also of those which are, those parts of schooling which are held up as ideals and as good examples.

It is in this spirit, the responsibility of educators to attempt greater understanding of school culture, and the need to question the “best” in schooling, that I undertake this study. It is a study of the culture of high-achievement in an Advanced Placement US History class in an American public high-school. High-achievers are the “good” students, the best and the brightest, the cream of the crop. In studies in education, high-achievers are the ones who get good grades, who take advanced classes, who participate in extracurricular activities, and who receive recognition from their teachers. The school in which this study takes place was also chosen for its own high-achieving position as a suburban, middle class high school recognized by U.S. News and World Report as one of the best public high schools in America. The teacher, too, is experienced, successful, and well-regarded - a good teacher. In this work, I aim to critically examine good students, in

a good class, at a good school, to see what can be learned about the culture of high-achievement and these students' experiences within it.

It is my contention that the experiences of these students deserve critical attention; yet, there is always a tendency to leave "the best" unquestioned. In the modern era of educational accountability, it goes against the grain to ask questions of the students that actually can pass the tests and the schooling experiences that facilitate this process. High-achieving students are not the ones being "left behind," but rather are those who forge ahead, and who, it is presumed, are role models for the less fortunate and less motivated. They are not the poor, the disadvantaged, the disengaged, or the primarily minority populations of failing schools, not Willis' (1977) "lads" or Lareau's (2003) "working class" kids, not Eckhart's (1989) "burnouts" or the children left, as Kozol (1967) describes, to "death at an early age." The students in this study are going to college, and will have opportunities for professional jobs, leadership roles, and influential positions in business, academia, and government.

Still, such questioning is necessary. Being the "best" does not necessarily say anything about what one is the best at or the ways in which achievement is lived out; questions of purpose and practice must also be asked. Pope (2001), portrays the lives of high-achievers negatively, full of stress and compromise, and she suggests that high-achievement, as a goal, may produce outcomes for students which work against and even contradict the values that we may wish schools to instill. If more reasons are needed to study high-achievers, we should consider the possibility that if the students who do well in school go on to positions of responsibility in business, academia, and government – and they are certainly positioned to do so – then their educational experience may have

some influence in the workings of our society. The education of citizens, too, is at stake, and as Parker (2003), argues “those who *most* need democratic enlightenment, especially a highly developed sense of justice, are those who occupy the board rooms, legislatures, court chambers, and faculty positions at prestigious universities” (p. 155).

Additionally, a critical examination of the experiences of high-achieving students, of the culture of high-achievement, may supply some insights which go beyond those that bear on the students themselves. If these students can be called the “best” – and in the eyes of many, they are – then their experiences can also tell us something about the nature and priorities of the educational system which produced them. This idea goes further when it is seen that a study of high-achievers as a middle-class high school is, in a sense, a study of those who “fit in” with the structures of schooling. In work on reproduction and injustice in schools, schooling is portrayed as favoring “middle class” values and ideals, as opposed to those of the “working class,” (Eckhart, 1989; Hemmings, 1996; Lareau, 2003; Mehan, Hubbard, Lintz, & Villanueva, 1994; Vallance, 1983). Building off of these portrayals, this study is a look, not only of those successful in schooling, but also of those values and ideals embodied in schooling.

The focus of this study on the culture of high-achievement, and on the relationship between that culture and the development of students as persons and as citizens, is rooted in a concern for the lessons students learn in school, especially those which lay outside of the formal curriculum. I thus adopt a frame derived from Dewey’s notion of “collateral learning,” (1916), similar to that which has been described in other literature as the “hidden,” “implicit,” or “null” curriculum of schooling (e.g. Apple, 1979; Eisner, 1985; Jackson, 1966/1990). The Deweyian frame not only places emphasis on the

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educative effects of schooling that go beyond formal lessons, but also includes the guiding notion that educators must attend to this wider view of the education that they are providing, and, further, that they must do so because the development of their students both as persons *and* as citizens is at stake.

This is, then, a critical study in its questioning tone and a Deweyian study in its collateral-learning theme and emphasis. Further, through its specific focus on issues of collateral learning, meaning, and culture in one particular AP US History class, it is by necessity an ethnographic study. In studying the good students in a good class at a good school, I am aiming to get at the culture of high-achievement, the meanings and ideas that contextualize and shape the lives of the students who do well in school. I hope to connect this to issues of citizenship, based on these students' positions as successful, college-bound, potentially-influential members of society. It is also my intention, in studying the "best and the brightest" at a model school under an excellent teacher, to shed some light on the priorities and structures of this school and, by extension, the broader American educational system of which this school is a part.

Theoretical Framework

"In ethnography, the office of theory is to provide a vocabulary in which what symbolic action has to say about itself – that is, about the role of culture in human life – can be expressed."

Clifford Geertz

This is a study of high-achievement in an American high-school. Specifically, it is a study of one class at that high-school, an Advanced Placement US History class. The aim of the study is to learn more about the "culture of high-achievement," a phenomenon which is seen through the lens of one class at one school but which, I presume, will have

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enough themes, ideas, and activities in common with other settings to make the work broadly useful in examining the experiences of high-achievers in other schools. The research question with which I began this study is:

How do high-achieving students interact with one another and their educational environment to form a culture of high-achievement, and what are they learning from this culture?

This question worked to guide my inquiry and writing, focusing my efforts on the students' activities as well as their environment and making use of a broad-based idea of culture in defining this study's boundaries and areas of emphasis. This question finds its roots in the work of John Dewey and his notions on the educative nature of environment and the responsibilities of educators to take this nature into account. This being so, the Deweyian framework provides both theoretical and normative guidance for this study (much more will be said of Dewey's ideas in Chapter 2).

Yet this study does not live on Dewey alone, and indeed Dewey's pragmatic viewpoint is enhanced, modified, and questioned by reference to other theoretical ideas and traditions, particularly those views of school culture which take a variety of related stances on schooling and cultural reproduction. In addition, I bring in some postmodern ideas and concepts which apply to education and to knowledge. This study is intentionally broadly-based and draws upon ideas from very different sources. What brings all these ideas together is their mutual bearing upon, and contribution to, the understanding of the culture of high-achievement as I am studying it.

I am framing this study as a critical work. It must be added that, though I add the term "critical" to my framework because it is not one employed by John Dewey, a critical approach is also consistent with the Deweyian frame. Dewey clearly saw the link

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between the theoretical and the political (1920/1967), noting that philosophical and even psychological theories were political views expressed. He also examined schooling and its meaning in the light of larger social and economic systems, calling for education and social reform that would re-direct our nation's efforts away from industrial modes of living and market-dominated thinking and toward individual fulfillment and the just society (Cohen, 1995, Dewey, 1916, 1934/1980, 1935/1946). Criticality, as employed in educational research, has multiple meanings, from a questioning of the status quo (Madison, 2005) to an opening up of interpretations of and conversations about the forms, practices, and narratives of education (Britzman, 2003; Segall, 2002), to an approach which points out the influences of societal, and especially economic, structures as they are played out, reproduced, produced, and resisted in schools, classrooms, and workplaces (Apple, 1982; Margolis, 2001; Giroux & Penna, 1983; McLaren et. al. 2004). My critical approach touches upon all of these, aiming to open up the culture of the accepted and the celebrated – the “good” students – to discussion, to question what high-achievement is, what it means, how it plays out, and to look at its educative effects on students.

A critical view looks not only at what happens in the classroom, but also why, especially in regards to the reasons that students and teachers claim in legitimizing their actions and ideas. In looking at issues of legitimation and purpose, I also borrow from Segall's (2006) notion of critical history, as well as Lyotard's (1984) idea of legitimation through narratives (also in Blake, Smeyers, Smith, & Standish, 1998), in his case “grand narratives,” though I look not only to the ways that grand narratives play into classroom life but also the ways in which smaller, local narratives create and justify practices and

ways of thinking that surround high-achievers (Oakes, Wells, Jones, & Datnow, 1997). The centrality of narrative in the organization of human experience (Bruner, 1991; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Randal & Furlong, 2005) makes the stories told about high-achievement, the way that students and teachers make sense of the work they do, an important consideration in a study of culture. Going further in the postmodern direction, criticality, drawing from Foucaultian perspectives (Foucault, 1975, 1982; Prado, 1995) represents an attempt to open up spaces in discourses of knowledge and truth, an act of questioning that reveals the ways that the taken-as-given is constructed and accepted.

In all this, the study remains rooted in Dewey, and thus the point here is to learn more about the culture of high-achievement because, as Dewey maintains and as I also believe, it is the whole culture which educates, not merely the lessons we teach (Dewey, 1916, 1938/1997). Dewey refers to the learning that goes on outside of formal lessons as “collateral learning” (1916), but even when he does not use this term he treats the educational experience as a wholistic one which involves the student, the environment, and social interactions within it. Taking this as a starting point, this study is rooted in the idea that, as educators, we must attend not only to our lessons and our curricula, but to the cultural environment in which we work. Additionally, Dewey’s emphasis on fulfilling activity means an emphasis on the purpose of what is done in schools, not only the “why” of what is done, but on who or what determines the “why.”

Defining “Culture”

I have elected to use the term “culture” to designate the focus of this study because it encompasses a wider range of issues than “collateral learning” and brings in a number of useful perspectives that extend beyond Dewey’s notions. Having elected to

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use the term culture, I am bound to define it, and so I shall try, though I believe that any such definition is bound to be incomplete or impossibly broad. It is difficult to begin because Dewey didn't spend a lot of time writing about culture per se, nor has Dewey's work been employed as a frame for ethnographic work. Where Deweyian accounts of culture are to be found, there is some question as to just what culture is, either an existent entity with which human nature interacts to produce certain ways of living (1939), or a mediating factor in the transaction of person and environment (Biesta & Burbules, 2003). My own answer to the question of whether culture is something which people interact *with* or something they interact *through* is that it is both. Culture shapes what people do and see and who they are, but they can also step back from culture, examine it, change it, gaze upon it.

This definition is intended to be consistent with the general transactive nature of Dewey's pragmatic frame. Dewey's descriptions of the ways that organisms (including humans) interact with the world follow the lines of his perceptual argument about the "reflex arc" (Bredo, 1998; Dewey, 1897) in which he posited a mutually-defining and co-modifying relationship between stimulus and response. Separations between stimulus and response, like separations between person and world, are taken as analytical divisions but not as divisions in reality. This line of thinking is consistent with the way that Dewey defines "experience" (Dewey, 1934/1980) and "intelligence" (Bernstein, 1966; Dewey, 1916). The distinction between person and world is an analytical distinction only or, a functional one, and the same can be said of how one views culture. The definition of culture can thus be taken as dependent on how one is viewing it at the time, whether one is seeing through it or looking at it, viewing it, to use Polanyi's (Polanyi & Prosch, 1976)

perceptual terminology, tacitly or focally. One can then be immersed in culture or can step back from it, even critique it. Such a view is also consistent with the active and not-fully-determined part, in Dewey's descriptions, that individuals play in the creation of social and institutional environment.

Positing an active role for individuals in culture means that one of the priorities in looking at high-achiever culture will be to observe the ways in which the students themselves create and maintain it. Thus, in defining "culture," this study thus also draws on a conception of culture borrowed from a post-Marxist conception of cultural production, specifically from Willis (1977), though Apple (1982) and Eckhart (1989) have contributed to my thinking on it as well. Willis' account of the active nature of cultural activity gives a role to students in the formation of culture. Culture creates the students, in a sense, yet it is also at the same time created by them. This notion of culture is useful because it provides an account that explains how cultural reproduction occurs without relying on a frame of cultural determinism (Apple, 1982; Eisenhart, 2001). For these researchers, and for my own purposes, such a definition gives the students a part in the creation of their own culture, and thus some hope for change. While the idea that students play such a role does not necessarily lead to any change in the culture or action on their part to move outside of their places in it – as Eckhart's and Willis' students certainly show – the potential for such action or change does exist.

Culture and Meaning

When speaking of culture, as Geertz (1973) makes clear, it is necessary to talk about meaning, and it is to this issue that I turn next. Biesta and Burbules (2003), in their

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definition of Dewey's mediational view of culture, connect the active definition of culture to meaning in a pragmatic sense:

Dewey had an *anthropological* understanding of culture. For him culture is everything that is the product of human action and interaction. The most important cultural product is language, which Dewey defined as everything that has meaning. What is included in this broad definition of language is not only spoken and written language, but also, for example, rituals, ceremonies, monuments, and the products of art and technology. These things and events get their *meaning* from the role they play in coordinated human action... (p. 29)

Meaning, according to Dewey (1925/1965), comes through use; that is, to use something, or to conceive in the ways one might use something, is to endow it with meaning (Dewey, 1931/1968). Putting meaning into the context of use brings the implication that meaning cannot be fully predetermined, thus lending additional support to the notion that culture is neither fixed nor deterministic. This also means, however, that culture is not just a matter of forms and structures, but also of how they are used and interpreted, and this use, and interpretation, is, furthermore, a social matter. In terms of the workings of this study in particular, the importance of meaning in culture indicates an approach which attends to the "why" of the activities of the students and teacher. Meaning, as a matter of culture, is thus also related back to the idea of purpose that plays a role in the Deweyian definition of learning and intelligence.

Geertz gives a pervasive role to meaning in his definition of culture and in the work of the ethnographic researcher. As Geertz (1973) puts it in an oft-used description:

Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. (p. 5)

In studying culture, then, meaning is clearly a vital piece, not just what is done but why and how, and to what ends, and in whose eyes. The idea of “webs of significance” adds a certain feel of immersion in culture while maintaining the active idea that has already been put forth, since “man” does after all spin those webs – as Eisenhart (2001) says of Geertz, “meanings” are “partially shared and manipulated by those who knew them” (p. 209). The idea of shared meanings, of “significance,” gets at explanation, not even just of telling-why, but of making-sense, of giving an account of actions and ideas such that they have a grounding and a coherence:

...what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people’s constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to... (1973, p. 9)

As the above examples show, meaning is a complex thing. Studies of school culture (e.g. Eckhart, 1989; Willis, 1977) focus on a wide variety of features of such cultures, including strategies, attitudes, practices, positions, ideals, goals, actions, explanations, ideologies, and stories, as well as a process of what might be called “meaning-making” in which daily life comes to assume a coherence and a direction, akin to a narrative. This may be due to the foundational role that narrative plays in thought and experience, as Bruner (1991) emphasizes when he suggests that “narrative organizes the structure of human experience” (p. 21) and that “we organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative” (p.4). This narrative organization finds a parallel in the way that culture itself is studied. Part of the ethnographer’s job, as Geertz sees it, is to construct a picture of the meanings in a cultural setting:

...anthropological writings are themselves interpretations... They are, thus, fictions; fictions, in the sense that they are ‘something made,’ ‘something

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fashioned’ – the original meaning of *fictio*. (Geertz, 1973, p. 15, italics in original)

In doing so, the ethnographer must attend to the ways that the people under study do their own constructing, that this, the ways in which they explain, talk about, justify, deny, make sense of, or “commonly” understand their experiences. At the same time, the ethnographer is also engaged in the same process, and thus an ethnographic study is a construction of constructions. Therefore, the narrative mode will play an important role in this study, not only in analyzing the way that high-achievement and experience are “narrated” within school culture, but also in the ways in which the “results” of this study are portrayed and presented – more will be said of this later on.

Culture, Discourse, and Discipline

As a study of culture, this work is not intended to be a study only of narratives, but also of actions, of justifications, various influences, and definitions of achievement and knowledge and learning. The justificatory function of narrative, the “legitimizing” function, can be examined by borrowing Lyotard’s (1984) conception of the way “grand narratives” secure and support realms of knowledge. With the promise of modernist universal knowledge unfulfilled, grand narratives give purpose and legitimacy to our ways of viewing and acting upon the world, as the narratives surrounding the culture of high-achievement may function to prop-up, explain, justify, and account for it. It will also be useful, this study of high-achiever culture, to go beyond narrative in other ways and to enter the realm of “discourse,” coming from a postmodern, and particularly a Foucaultian, perspective (Blake et. al., 1998; Foucault, 1975, 1982; Prado, 1995). Discourse ties in with the idea of a “narrative,” as mentioned above, since discourses, in creating ways of talking and acting, act to make possible some cultural forms and to rule

out, or not mention, others. Yet discourse, which includes practices, verbal and non-verbal acts of communication, and the boundaries of what is or is not accepted and even what is known (Prado, 1995), is a broader and more widely applicable concept than narrative. Also, the language of discourse and legitimation goes beyond interpretive meaning-making in the sense that it reveals purposes that lay behind constructions of culture. Cultural constructions have consequences, one might say they are interested, and thus can be used to justify, to devalue, to include and to exclude.

In addition to the ways that culture is acted out, talked about, told, and justified, there is also a concern in this study, drawing from its Deweyian base, with the effects that “collateral learning,” which I am taking as a cultural phenomenon, has on students. Thus, not only are the aspects of culture embodied in discourse important, but also the ways in which the participation in discourses shapes the students as they live out their high-achiever roles. Thus, the notion of “discipline,” the shaping of the self through the possibilities, knowledge, and actions created through the adoption of a discourse, or the manifestation of a discourse in institutional forms, adds richness to this view of culture (Blake et. al., 1998; Foucault, 1975; Prado, 1995; Usher & Edwards, 1994). Use of “discipline” as an analytical and observational frame makes it possible to talk about the creation of high-achievers, the ways that the idea and position of a “high-achiever” is made by the ways that school, knowledge, talent, individuality, and opportunity position high-achievers in their class, the school, and even society at large.

There is also the dualistic nature of discourses, and their disciplinary functions, as at once liberating and coercive. Discourses simultaneously make possible certain ways of being, acting, and speaking, yet in doing so open up subjects to new ways of regulation

and control, making it possible in a sense to look at what high-achievers both gain and lose as they participate in high-achievement as a practice and as a position. This, in turn, re-connects to Dewey's idea that an awareness of the influences of environment, institution, and culture is necessary in order to see how students are being shaped by schools. This point may require some clarification. The empowering and disempowering nature of discourses, since they are ways in which the self is shaped and controlled (Prado, 1995), can be viewed from a perspective of "technologies of the self," which make certain operations possible on subjects yet, at the same time, open up selves to regulation (Usher & Edwards, 1994; Rose, 1996a). In postmodern thought, this is a part of the process of subjectification, and indeed it can be seen as such in the cultural environment of the school by examining the ways that students are subjectified and defined. At the same time, however, the idea that students are at once gaining and losing through subjectification can be seen in a sense that goes beyond a postmodern concern with the subject and works on what might be called a macro level to influence the criticality of this study. In examining the culture of high-achieving students and the collateral learning in school, it is important to attend to the possibilities opened up by their position as high-achievers, the opportunities and freedoms and access to privileges that represent the empowering side of their disciplining as high-achieving students (Prado, 1995).

Dewey's perspective is further enhanced by attention to the differential positioning that plays a part in creating the culture of high-achievement in schools. The Foucaultian notion that knowledge is always tied in with power, and that power acts through knowledge to create "disciplines" which give shape and definition to actions and

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ideas (Blake, 1998; Usher & Edwards, 1994), is quite helpful in a look at high-achiever culture. High-achievers are, by definition, set apart from, and above, other students in schools. This positioning is a part of their culture, and a part of the culture of schooling, yet such positioning is not much seen in Deweyan accounts of education. Dewey for the most part treats schooling as a unitary activity, and while he does recognize influences of what amounts to cultural reproduction when he calls for equal educational opportunities for students of varied socio-economic backgrounds (1916), there is little in Dewey that helps in talking about the ways in which students are distinguished from one another, placed into categories such as “high-achiever,” and shaped, not only by schooling, but by their specific positions within schools.

Culture at Several Levels

What we have so far is a critical focus on the culture of high-achievement based on Dewey’s ideas about the way learning works in schools and the role educators should play in shaping that environment and the learning that occurs within it, a role which I have taken to demand concern for the culture of schooling and, in this particular case, of high-achievement. Culture itself has been explained as seen and seen-through, as created and creating, as working in the realm of meaning, and as accessible through narrative, discursive, and disciplinary frames. This is fine as far as it goes, but more can be said about the sorts of things that come into this view of culture, the levels at which culture is viewed, so as to give the reader additional insight into my priorities of observation and analysis. These levels include the classroom itself, the school and schooling, connections to the society in which all this takes place, and, going in the opposite direction in terms of scale, the workings of knowledge and learning.

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Dewey's concern about the cultural features of schooling extends to what he calls the "environment" (Dewey, 1916, 1938/1997; Hansen, 2000), the ways that the students, as a group, interact with their surroundings, their teacher, and that which they are learning. A look at culture thus includes a look at the physical environment, desks and rooms and buildings, the social environment, meaning the ways that students interact with one another and the teacher, and the work of school itself, how the students of AP US History approach and are directed by their lessons. This means that culture, in this study, is at one level a classroom phenomenon, one which takes place in, and is defined by, what does and does not happen in the particular AP US History classroom that I spent several months sitting in.

Of course, this classroom does not stand alone, but is itself a part of a school and of the particular institutional environment of "school" in a wider sense. A study of high-achiever culture takes place not just within one classroom but within the school. The school is identified as a separate level here because "school" is itself recognized as a unique and complex setting, a place with its own particular rules and ways of doing things, though schools may share some commonalities to other institutional environments (Cusick, 1973; Goodlad, 1984; Jackson, 1966/1990). In the "particular cultural environment...of the school" (Lutkehaus & Greenfield, 2003), learning and development take on certain characteristics, and occur in ways which may not look like learning outside of a schooling (Dewey, 1916; Lave and Wenger, 1991). Pope (2001), in naming her study of high-achievers "Doing School," gets at part of what I mean here. The high-achievers of AP US History are not positioned and defined, and acting, solely as members of a particular class, but as students living out their lives in school.

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The inclusion of the Marx-influenced work in the definition of culture (e.g. Apple, 1982; Willis, 1977) also has the effect of bringing in concerns related to society as a whole with a particular emphasis on the ways that economic, industrial, and bureaucratic forms are manifest in schools. Again, this bringing in of economics and industry is consistent with the links school and society found in Dewey – in fact, Dewey’s ideas can be seen as a response to the growth of industrial organization and urbanization in American life (Feffer, 1993). Thus culture expands beyond the walls of the school, and my study of high-achieving student culture must also take into account ideas, ideologies, narratives, structures, and influences from “big” culture, American culture, consumer culture, the culture of capitalism, and the like. Here, the critical stance once again becomes important, as the discourses of these various cultural settings may make their way into the school, or into the local discourses of the teachers and students as they make sense of their cultural environment. Beyond the school and the classroom, then, culture is a societal-level idea.

As a study of classroom culture, this work is also a study of learning, and thus this framework must go beyond culture in a societal and an immediate physical and social sense and touch also upon structures of knowledge and meanings attached to learning itself. Dewey’s concern with the quality of activity is a piece of this. What is important about learning, for Dewey, is that it leads to the ability to act with intelligence, that is, with an appreciation of the means and ends involved in activity, the ability to act with purpose, and the sensitivity to adjust means, ends, and even purposes to fit the ongoing demands of the activity (Dewey, 1916, 1938/1997; Bernstein, 1966). Learning thus becomes a question, not just of knowledge, but of the purposes of that knowledge, and

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the uses to which it is put. In a way, the position of schooling as a unique cultural environment also plays into this, as Dewey's purpose in contrasting schooling to informal learning environments was to argue that one of the dangers of schooling is that it can separate knowledge from purpose and activity (1916). This emphasis, then, adds a twist to the notion of meaning in looking at culture, since a part of meaning, in looking at learning from a Deweyan perspective, lies in the realm of purpose. The inclusion of structures of knowledge and ways of learning is also enhanced by the inclusion of some ideas and viewpoints that come from postmodern perspectives. Postmodernism, though not a single coherent stance, does embody a critique of the modernist project and its accompanying hierarchical, progressive, and exclusive view of knowledge (Gergen, 1992; Kvale, 1992; Prado, 1995; Polkinghorne, 1992; Usher & Edwards, 1994), and thus makes an ideal viewpoint for a critical view of learning, how it is defined, how it is used, and what purposes it serves. As with the above point on the culture of school, hierarchies and dualistic thinking become a matter of attention using the postmodern lens (Usher & Edwards, 1994), but at this micro-level these can be looked for in the very structures of knowledge and learning as propagated in the classroom.

Theoretical Framework: Summary

This study, then, is intended as an ethnographic description of the culture of high-achievement, as manifest in a high-school AP Social Studies class. The ethnographic frame gets at questions of meaning and culture, a focus made necessary by the study's roots in Dewey's conception of "collateral learning," the idea that the entire educational environment does the teaching in school, and that educators should take responsibility for what students are learning beyond the formal lessons of the classroom. The study is

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framed as a critical study in several senses of the term, as a questioning of that which is taken as accepted and good, as an opening up of conversations around different interpretations of high-achiever culture, as a questioning of the role of ideologies and structures as they play out in the classroom, and as an examination of the ways that high-achievement is defined and legitimated.

The term “culture” was chosen, over collateral learning and other similar terms (such as “hidden curriculum”) because it is a more flexible and all-encompassing notion and allows a wider investigation than Dewey’s original emphasis on student dispositions. Culture, as used here, is a lens and a process, something which the students act through and upon, create and are created by. Students’ role in the cultural process is not a passive one, and culture is not intended here as a deterministic concept. As the realm of meaning, culture, as a subject of study, demands attention not only to what is done and how, but also why, and to what ends. Postmodern and narrative concepts are drawn upon to allow an examination of the stories, discourses, and disciplines that create and give support to high-achievement, high-achievers, and other notions and practices surrounding and imbuing the culture under study. Finally, culture is seen as a multi-leveled phenomenon, created and sustained within the classroom, the school, and society-at-large, but also present at the level of knowledge and learning.

The overall intention is to examine, from a variety of directions and perspectives, the culture of high-achievement as manifest in AP US History. The broadness of the frame, and the use of multiple perspectives, comes in some ways from the subject of study itself. High-achiever culture is no simple matter, and indeed the picture drawn in this study is only a partial one, and only one of many possible portrayals, as necessitated

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by the complexity of the topic and the particular bent of the researcher. This complexity comes from the existence of high-achiever culture at the nexus of ideas, practices, ideologies, structures, discourses, and stories that is schooling in America. The school itself, its educational mission, this educational ideal in the light of American culture, the particular position of high-achievers as students who “buy-in” to education, the place of the school in a suburban neighborhood, values surrounding hard work and intelligence, economic concerns, and even theories of knowledge and learning are just some of the pieces that come together to push and pull upon the culture of high-achievement. The broadness of my framing of culture reflects the many pieces of the culture. In addition, this broadness reflects my desire to remain open, in the spirit of qualitative ethnography and out of a general curiosity, to as many of these influences as possible in carrying out my work.

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CHAPTER 2: POSITIONING THIS STUDY

"It is unfortunate, but almost everything we are interested in turns out to be complex."

S. Jay Samuels and Michael L. Kamil

The Influence of Dewey's Philosophy on the Purposes of the Present Work

While there is not a tradition of cultural research from a Deweyian perspective, Dewey did leave us with a set of ideas which, because of their coherence and their broad applicability, form a firm base for this work. Because Dewey's presence looms large in this work, it is necessary to spend some time, before turning to the literature of school culture and hidden curricula, delving into Dewey's ideas as they apply to, and guide, my study. Dewey's ideas on learning, the self, the relationship between person, school, and society, have been alluded to in the above definition of culture and the theoretical framework for this study, but have been left without much conceptual support or explanation. Thus part of the positioning of this study in the field is to re-visit the Deweyian ideas mentioned above and lay them out with greater specificity, so that their influence on my thinking, and the purposes of this study, are clarified. I will thus begin with a more complete description of collateral learning, its basis in Dewey's philosophy, and its connections to education, society, economics, and government. I will also spend a little time showing how collateral learning connects to culture, and describing how the active nature of culture in this study is related to Dewey's conceptions of learning and democratic life and the ways that these conceptions might also influence the purpose and direction of this work.

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As a study of school culture, this work finds its roots in the Deweyian idea that, in schools, it is the entire environment which is educative, not merely the lessons and curricula themselves. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey begins by examining the phenomenon of societal transmission of knowledge outside of formal schooling. In this process, "...the particular medium in which an individual exists...gradually produces in him a certain system of behavior, a certain disposition of action" (Dewey, 1916, p. 14). Dewey states that this process of learning societal knowledge through direct participation is not feasible in a society with a written record and a vast store of accumulated knowledge, making formal schooling necessary. He does not, however, make a great distinction between the process of informal education and the process of formal schooling, at least in terms of the basic educative process: in both, it is the whole environment that educates.

Starting from this idea, Dewey claims that the most important and influential lessons of school are not those which are defined by lesson plans and curriculum guides, but rather are the set of student dispositions that Dewey calls "collateral learning" (1938). The idea of "collateral learning" places a responsibility on educators to be aware of, and to intentionally make use of, the school as institution and environment. If school produces certain dispositions, then educators must deliberately act to design an educative environment that will produce the dispositions that we would wish our students to have. Dewey wrote on this responsibility:

The only way in which adults consciously control the kind of education in which the immature get is by controlling the environment in which they act, and hence think and feel. We never educate directly, but indirectly by means of the environment. Whether we permit chance environments to do the work, or whether we design environments for the purpose makes a great difference. (1916, p. 23)

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The end of this quote emphasizes the responsibilities of educators that I mentioned above. The environment is going to educate – there is no escaping this – and thus educators must take that environment into account. If they do not, they leave this education to “chance,” with the danger that they may get outcomes counter to their goals and desires for schooling. Dewey claims that the only proper approach to education is an “intentional” one, “a specially selected environment, the selection being made on the basis of materials and method specifically promoting growth in the desired direction” (1916, p. 43). Thus the educator has a “duty” to attempt to regulate the “objective conditions” in which the experience of learning takes place (Dewey, 1938/1997, p. 45).

The idea of “collateral learning” is based on Dewey’s ideas about the relationship between the “individual” and the “social,” ideas which lay at the foundation of his point that it is the entire environment which is educative. Dewey maintained that this distinction between individual and social was a false one, since the two are intertwined, and preferred a distinction between “culture” and “human nature” that emphasized the idea that there is no individual which exists outside of his or her social environment (1920/1967, 1939). Dewey derided the idea of the individual self, derived from “the individualistic school of England and France in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,” (1920/1967, p. 193), and was no fan of the educational and societal influences that accompanied the idea of the “individual.” Bernstein calls this view Dewey’s “dissatisfaction with classic liberalism,” and says of it:

The trouble with classic liberalism is that it understood man as having a relatively fixed endowment of rights and powers that would be actualized once external constraints were removed. The main problem for classic liberalism is ensuring a minimum of external influence upon the individual by social and political institutions. (Bernstein, 1966, p. 139)

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Rather than positing a preexisting individual, and a society where individuals associate as separate pre-existing units, Dewey painted a picture of individuality as societally formed. "Individual," he notes,

...is a blanket term for the immense variety of specific reactions, habits, dispositions and powers of human nature that are evoked, and confirmed under the influences of associated life. (1920/1967, p. 199)

Since it is in association that individuality is found, then one cannot look at individuals out of context. Put simply, Dewey is claiming that what people do has a great deal of influence on who they are or, as Hansen (2000) put it, "Human beings become what they do, think, worry about, attend to, feel, and so forth" (p. 2). In Dewey's words:

...the human being whom we fasten upon as an individual *par excellence* is moved and related by his associations with others; what he does and what the consequences of his behavior are, what his experience consists of, cannot even be described, much less accounted for, in isolation. (1927, p. 188)

Here the individual/society dichotomy is put into a new light: individuals are not opposed to society, but are born of it, social at the very root of their being. This social nature, in turn, gives definition and direction to who people are and what they do.

...while singular beings in their singularity think, want and decide, *what* they think and strive for, the content of their beliefs and intentions is a subject matter provided by associations. Thus man is not merely *de facto* associated, but he *becomes* a social animal in the make-up of his ideas, sentiments and deliberate behavior. *What* he believes, hopes for and aims at is the outcome of association and intercourse. (1927, p. 25)

Taking all this into account, Dewey's idea that educators must shape the environment of schooling, the "objective conditions" in which the experience of learning occurs, makes sense. It is through association in activity in environment that individuals, who are social in their makeup, are formed. Thus, the educator, but shaping the

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conditions in which such associations take place – one might say by shaping the “culture” of schooling – acts to see that students come out of school having learned the “collateral” lessons that are desired. It must also be noted that Dewey’s call for the deliberate shaping of “objective conditions” went beyond schooling, and thus that his educational priorities were connected to his larger democratic vision. Dewey wanted to see everyone leading fulfilling lives according to their potential, and this could only happen in a democratic system (1916, 1935/1946, 1937/1946). With individuality defined in association, the only way to realize this democratic dream, which was also a matter of freedom for persons, was to shape the real-goings on of society (1916, 1920/1967, 1938/1997, 1946). Dewey’s theory of individuality makes his theory of social change necessary:

...when self hood is perceived to be an active process it is also seen that social modifications are the only means of the creation of changed personalities. Institutions are viewed in their educative effect: with reference to the types of individuals they foster. The interest in individual moral improvement and the social interest in objective reform of economic and political conditions are identified. And inquiry into the meaning of social arrangements gets definite point and direction. We are led to ask what the specific stimulating, fostering and nurturing power of each specific social arrangement may be. The old-time separation between politics and morals is abolished at its roots. (1920/1967, p. 196-197)

For Dewey, “social arrangements, laws, and institutions...are not means for obtaining something for individuals, not even happiness. They are means of creating individuals” (1920/1967, p. 194). Once we have gotten to the idea that the individual is of the social, and that the social is embodied, in part, in the institutions, we can then begin to speculate on how some institutions in particular may influence the individuals which participate in them. As you might imagine here, I am thinking specifically of educational institutions, and Dewey, too, thought of them as particularly influential. While Dewey did state that, “In the broad and final sense all institutions are educational in the sense that

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they operate to form the attitudes, dispositions and disabilities that constitute a concrete personality,” he reserved a special place for institutions that are specifically pedagogical in nature, noting that:

This principle applies with special force to the school. For it is the main business of the family and the school to influence directly the formation and growth of attitudes and dispositions, emotional, intellectual, and moral. (1937/1946, p. 62)

This idea can, in turn, be seen as related to Dewey’s larger point, which he made frequently, about the uses of philosophy. Philosophy should, Dewey believed, speak directly to the affairs of the world, the “problems of men,” as he called them (1946). Dewey wished to take down the barriers between morality, empirical methods, and social organization, making for intentional efforts, based on philosophical principles and observation of the actual effects of social structures as related to our intentions, to shape society (1920/1967, 1935/1946). Dewey scorned the idea that moral concerns should remain separate from politics and government, and pointed to the idea that morality as an individual affair actually acted to keep society as it is:

Let us perfect ourselves from within, and in due season changes in society will come of themselves is the teaching. And while saints are engaged in introspection, burly sinners run the world. (1920/1967, p. 196)

In Dewey’s account, moral change becomes a matter of societal structure:

We may desire the abolition of war, industrial justice, greater equality of opportunity for all. But no amount of preaching good will or the golden rule or cultivation of sentiments of love and equity will accomplish the results. There must be change in objective arrangements and institutions. We must work on the environment not merely on the hearts of men. (1946, 21-22)

There are several important implications here for a study of the culture of high-achievement. First, this culture is seen not just as the way that school works, but as a

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piece of “collateral learning,” the educative nature of the whole environment of schooling. Thus, a study of high-achiever culture is set up to be a study of part of what these high-achieving students are learning in school. Furthermore, this look at the cultural aspects of school learning, as opposed to the strictly curricular aspects, finds purpose in Dewey’s insistence that, if the whole environment of school is educative, it is the responsibility of educators to attempt to shape that environment to produce desired ends. A look at the culture of high-achievement is thus an attempt to increase understanding of the educative effects of schools in a broad way, with an eye toward widening the scope of educators’ concerns regarding what and how their students are learning, and why they do the things they do.

This sort of work can also be seen as fitting into the wider Deweyian project of using philosophy as a way of questioning, commenting upon, and addressing problems of schooling and society, and not only problems of philosophy itself. The examination of cultural issues in schooling, by virtue of education’s influence on the lives of individuals and on the place of education as a piece of the larger society, is by necessity an examination that touches upon issues of politics, government, and democracy. The ways that high-achievers learn to work, to act, and to be, and the ways that they come to see themselves in the school and in society are connected the construction and maintenance of our democracy and a striving toward more just forms of social organization. Since morality and social organization are not separate, Dewey demands that we strive to figure out what sort of society we want and then act to intentionally shape it as such. Deweyian work, thus, shares with critical work a desire to work for change, with certain ends in

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A Few Words on Determinism, Culture, and Purpose

Dewey’s philosophy was not a purely speculative one, nor did he make any claim to neutrality in terms of his aims, either for philosophy, education, or society. He wished to see schools, and society, come together along some certain lines, and he wished that this process would occur through a combination of philosophical examination and empirical observation. The general gist is that Dewey wished to question things which were taken as “natural” or outside of the control of humans, natural law, or the operations of economic forces, or even science and technology (1935/1946; 1944/1946), and to bring these under the control of people working to shape society for definite, in his case democratic, ends. As the products of human thought and activity, the ways in which we organize society, and the decisions we make in doing so could, Dewey believed, be shaped and made according to chosen purposes rather than left to chance or to some supposedly natural and thus uncontrollable forces.

For all the faith in humanity that Dewey expressed in putting forth such goals and ideals, he does present a vision which can, at first glance, sound rather too controlling, akin to the failed vision of the communist planned society. And in schools, too, all this talk of shaping students, and Dewey’s mention of concerns that touch upon the moral, make this account of the influence of the environment sound quite overbearing. Aside from the larger concerns that such a vision might produce, for the purposes of this study a controlling version of environment might translate into a view of culture that is deterministic, one in which the high-achieving students under observation are mere

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products of the environment, with no role of their own in cultural creation. But Dewey did not want to take charge of everyone in society or in school, and a Dewey-derived cultural study does have room for students' creation of culture, but in claiming all this the issue of determinism must be addressed. Thus, here I briefly examine three of Dewey's ideas related to the nature of the influence of "objective conditions" of school and society on the lives of individuals: the formation of individuals in an active and social process, the presence of social control already in society, and the appropriation of social control in the name of individuality and freedom.

The first two points already show up in the Deweyian account above. Individuals, as social, being formed through association with others in society and institutions, are thus formed in activity, in pursuing their goals and purposes, in working and learning and playing. Thus, even within the framework of the educative nature of environment and the influence of societal structures, individuality is not determined. Dewey's transactive view of the individual precludes this. The second point, that of the already existing presence of social control, Dewey makes when he claims that school environments are already exercising an educative function, and that the point is to be aware of it and shape it deliberately. This is not a matter of being controlling as much as it is working to be responsible for the wider picture of what schooling does, akin to calls in educational research to be aware of "hidden," "implicit," or "null" curricula of schooling (e.g. Eisner, 1985; Jackson, 1966/1990). Dewey makes this same point in regards to society, one which sounds rather like complaints that the hidden curriculum of schooling forms students along economic lines (e.g. Apple, 1982; Giroux & Penna, 1983). As Dewey says it:

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It is nonsense to suppose that we do not have social control *now*. The trouble is that it is exercised by the few who have economic power at the expense of the liberties of the many and at the cost of increasing disorder, culminating in that chaos of war which the representatives of liberty for the possessive class identify with true discipline. (1935/1946, p. 114)

This brings us to the third point, which is that Dewey's calls for control are constructed as calls for institutional, educational, and social environments that lead to greater freedom for individuals. Believing that social control was thus already being exercised, though it was being exercised in the name of market principles (1935/1944), or scientific and technological ones (1944/1946), Dewey believed that it should be exercised deliberately and in the name of chosen ends. The purpose of this intentional approach is to foster individual freedom:

Dewey firmly believed that if complexes of social, economic, and political institutions are not deliberately controlled, they will result in an increase in human alienation and dehumanization... When we appreciate the extent to which the quality of human individuality is affected by the social transactions in which man finds himself, then we are in a position to see what must be done for the creative realization of human individuality. (Bernstein, 1966, p. 139-140)

Individual freedom, for Dewey, is closely related to his ideas about learning and activity in general. Without going into great detail about Dewey's educational and aesthetic theories at this point, it is enough to say that learning, and fulfilling activity in general, are dependent upon a purpose and perception. Coming at school subjects in this way, Dewey is aiming to develop in students a certain open, perceptive, informed way of looking at the world. In his words, he wants schools to prepare students to act with what he calls "intelligence." Of intelligence, Dewey claims that:

When I act intelligently, my behavior has a mental quality. When things have a meaning for us, we *mean* (intend, propose) what we do: when they do not, we act blindly, unconsciously unintelligently. (1916, p. 34)

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If a person cannot foresee the consequences of his act, and is not capable of understanding what is told about its outcome by those with more experience, it is impossible for him to guide his acts intelligently. (1916, p. 32)

Intelligence, then, is a matter of perceptive action characterized by both knowledge and openness. As Bernstein (1966) states:

Intelligence consists of a set of flexible and growing habits that involve sensitivity; the ability to discern the complexities of situations; imagination that is exercised in seeing new possibilities and hypotheses; willingness to learn from experience; fairness and objectivity in judging and evaluating conflicting values and opinions; and the courage to change one's views when it is demanded by the consequences of our actions. (p. 143-144)

This idea of intelligence is central in both education and in civic life. Returning to freedom, and connecting it to intelligence, we can see that Dewey links them directly:

...the only freedom that is of enduring importance is freedom of intelligence, that is to say, freedom of observation and of judgment exercised in behalf of purposes that are intrinsically worthwhile. (1938/1997, pg. 61)

The failings of society, and of education, can for Dewey be put into terms of intelligence:

The authoritarian separation of means and ends in education reflected, Dewey thought, the absence throughout society of productive activity done for its own or self-expression's sake...Factory work and classroom recitations were, for Dewey, instances of the same psychological and ethical failure: in each someone works for a goal not of her own choosing, with which she cannot identify, in which she has no stake. For Dewey, this was no better than slavery, at least on a psychological level... (Feffer, 1993, p. 128)

This also connects to Dewey's insistence that, as far as society goes, only democracy will do as a way of organizing things:

The ideal society, for Dewey, is an association that allows for maximum growth of each person, through his own activity and self-development...the justification of democracy is not to be sought in some

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mythical infallibility of democratic procedures. Rather it is to be sought in the *quality* of human action promoted by institutions that acknowledge each person's dignity and judgment in forms of public exchange and participation in public life. (Schleffler, 1974, p. 242)

Getting back to this study of high-achiever culture in high-school which, as the reader may have forgotten, is actually the point of all this philosophical speculation, several important ideas have been brought to light here. First, the nondeterministic nature of the idea of collateral learning and the shaping influences of environments and institutions means that, for the purposes of this study, school "culture" must be defined actively, not just as something which is imposed upon students, but something in which they play a role in creating. Second, that the connection of this study to the purpose of understanding and better designing school environments is not intended to support more controlling school environments, but rather a more aware approach to the ways that school environments work now. Finally, there is the Deweyian conception of intelligent activity, which is to say, activity in which purpose and perception are seen as important, particularly in regard to the individual's active role in determining and working with each. While this idea is important in defending a Deweyian paradigm from charges of determinism, it also comes out in another way for a study of culture in schools. When looking at high-achiever culture, it is important to attend to the purposes involved in what is done, the "why" questions which define and legitimize the actions of the teacher and the students and the structures of the school and the class. Looking to purpose, to the "why" of education, is also a way of assessing, from a Deweyian standpoint, whether an educational experience is a democratic one.

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Having gone into the philosophical basis of this study in greater depth, it is time to turn to the ways that this study can be positioned within the field of educational research. This ethnographic study of high-achiever culture can be seen as a Deweyian study of schooling, a study of high-achievers, a study of school culture, and especially, from the Deweyian perspective of “collateral learning,” as a study of issues of the “hidden curriculum” in schools. Of course, it would be a fine thing to situate this study within a tradition of Deweyian research on collateral learning, except that Dewey did not inspire a particular paradigm of research from his ideas (Cohen, 1995), and my work falls outside of the realm of the philosophical works and attempts to employ Dewey in classrooms that form the bulk of Dewey scholarship. I have not found other ethnographic cultural work coming from Deweyian roots. Thus, I turned to literature on high-achiever culture, high-achievement, school culture, and especially ideas related to the hidden curriculum – indeed, there is much crossover between hidden curriculum ideas and work on school culture, indicating that my notion of linking collateral learning with high-achiever culture is not unusual.

High-achiever culture, in and of itself, has not been the subject of much study, though there are exceptions such as Pope (2001) and to a lesser extent Canaan (2004) and Rizza (1999). Pope (2001) focuses on high-achieving high-school students, as I do, and gives different accounts of the ways that high-achievers’ lives play out in school. Her study, *Doing School*, looks in particular on the outcomes of high-achievement in terms of how the students live and how they approach school and life. She employs an

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ethnographic approach and describes in detail the lives of six high-school students, and the portrait she paints of high-achievement is largely negative:

They seem to be diligent, talented, and focused. They get good grades, win awards and commendations, pursue extracurricular interests, do community service, and help teachers and administrators at the school. But in pursuit of this success, the students participate in behavior of which they are not proud. They learn to cheat, kiss up, form treaties, contest school decisions, and act in ways that run counter to explicit or implicit rules and guidelines. Often their behavior contradicts the very traits and values many parents, students, and community members expect schools to instill. (p. 149)

Thus does Pope add to her negative portrayal an additional concern, that of the effects of game-playing on the students who participate in it, and the various struggles these students face as they attempt to negotiate the contradictory requirements of being high-achievers, learning, family life, goals and ideals, and their own priorities and extra-curricular activities. High-achievers are stressed out, overworked, and stuck doing work they don't much care about, hoping that someday they will get to work that is interesting and worthwhile.

Rizza (1999) looked in particular at the work and study strategies of high-achieving high school girls. Coming from the opposite direction from Pope, Rizza (1999) gives a largely positive interpretation of the high-achiever lifestyle, focusing heavily on study habits and homework and these students, as well as their aware, strategic approach to their studies, which she calls "metacognitive," in which they consciously used a variety of study methods, and were aware of what worked best for them. Pope (2001) includes such methods but emphasizes a definition of the game that is something more akin to scheming, short-cuts and little tricks that take away from learning and life and give the game a decidedly negative image. Also unlike Pope's work, and unlike my own,

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Rizza focused mainly on strategic issues and left aside the many other pieces which I include in my definition of culture. Yet, the work is informative for its view of the “work” of high-achievers in school, and their attitudes toward it, including “playing the game,” akin to Pope’s “doing school.” The “game,” as referred to here, is the “school game,” that is, learning to act in ways that will bring success in school. While there are certainly other games to be played, indeed games for any culture or discourse in which students participate, it is the “school game” which is of primary concern here with my emphasis on the culture of high-achievement.

Coming from yet another frame, and another country, Caanan (2004) examines the political discourses present in the way high-achieving British college students describe their college experiences. Using a limited Foucaultian notion of discourse, Canaan examined the ways two students talked about achievement and themselves as achievers. She was particularly interested in looking for evidence of New Right, neo-conservative, and neo-liberal ways of talking about achievement, and students responses were analyzed in the context of each of these. Three discourses, those of the “good student,” of “education as investment,” and “marking” (p. 763) were identified, and within these students conceptions of ability, hard work, dedication, motivation, and worth of self and work were explored, and students views of ability and hard work were identified with the meritocracy, mostly in a “social-democratic” sense, though their “New Right” side comes out in their disappointment with students who don’t work, in their opinion, hard enough. Though this is not a study of American high-school high-achievers or culture, it did get at some of the discourses of high-achievement, and what goes into it

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Aside from these works, studies which focus on high-achievers, and high-achiever culture in particular, are not in abundance. Achievement itself has been the topic of quite a bit of speculation, especially from the perspectives which employ frames related to motivation, goals, self-regulation, efficacy, and metacognition (e.g. Ames, 1984; Dweck, 1986; Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990; Schunk, 1995; Stipek, 1988; Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1990) but these do not focus on high-achievement specifically, with the exception of Ablard and Lipschultz (1998), who investigated links between high-achievement and self-regulated learning (SRL) strategies. Such research on the factors that play into high-achievement, like research on achievement motivation and learning, is rather far removed from what I am attempting in my work. By definition, such studies treat “achievement” as a given, rather than adopting the critical and investigative stance which I adopt here.

Of studies in education which focus on high-achievers specifically using such frames, there is a vein of work which examines the phenomenon of high-achievement within minority populations in the United States. High-achievement is investigated as a phenomenon with causes, these causes being related to personal and social factors which relate to motivation, self-regulation, self-concept, and resiliency (Gayles, 2005; Griffin, 2006), and some of the work is comparative, examining differences between low- and high-achieving minority students (Fisher, 2005; Lee, Winfield, & Wilson, 1991), and one (Hebert & Reis, 1999) adds a focus on how “high-ability” students become high-achievers (or not). The idea of “high-ability” students, phrased in an entire vein of research and writing as “gifted” students, which falls outside of the minority paradigm of

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the above studies. Some of these studies, for example, examine the ways in which “gifted” students become high-achievers or “underachievers” (Berkowitz & Cicelli, 2004; McCoach & Siegle, 2003). Muir-Broaddus (1995), in examining differences in transfer and strategy use between different types of students, even divides students into “high-achieving gifted, high achieving nongifted, and average achieving nongifted middle school students” (p. 189).

Again, the idea that achievement is taken as a given thing puts this work outside of my approach. Additionally, the emphasis in such work on inherent or internal traits, while it does acknowledge environmental factors, takes a stance which is inconsistent with the transactional and cultural views of individuals that underlie this study. This is especially true of the studies which work from an idea of “high-ability” or “gifted” students with certain inherent traits who either rise to the top, or stay at the bottom, of the achievement ladder in schools. That being said, these studies do serve to give some insight into definitions of high-achievement and, additionally, high-ability. Measures of achievement in these studies include grades, scores on standardized tests, participation in honors programs, academic honors and awards, and teacher nominations. In one study (Fisher, 2005), teacher nominations were broken down to show how high-achievement included grades, effort, preparedness, responsibility, desire to learn, and plans for the future. The portrait of achievers, then, is one of “good” students, who are good at school, good at standardized tests, and perceived as “good” by their teachers and other personnel who might reward them or choose them for advanced programs. Ability was measured by standardized testing, with over- and under-achievement a matter of school performance. Aside from this portrait of a high-achieving or “good” student, a picture emerges of a

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That being said, it is interesting to notice, from a point of view of asking what “high-achieving” is and what it means, that most of the studies cited above take place within the framework of examining how minority students become high-achievers, or what distinguishes minority high-achievers from other students. High-achievement in general is not much studied, but perhaps in the study of minority students, for whom high-achievement is seen as more of an exception or a difficult goal (a tone that emerges particularly in Gayles, 2005, and Hebert & Reis, 1999), high-achievement is more likely to be seen as something worth looking into. My own work, focusing on white, middle-class students who are themselves high-achievers, and asking about achievement itself, comes from a very different direction not only from its questioning stance toward achievement, but also as a study from a mainstream perspective.

School Culture and the Hidden Curriculum

Having established a bit about high-achiever culture, looked at what counts as achievement, and distinguished this work from studies of factors of high-achievement and traits of high-achievers, I can now turn to broader interpretations of school culture as they apply to this study. As a Deweyian study of high-achiever culture, relying at its base on the idea of collateral learning and the role of educators in it, this study finds itself allied with other theories, ideas, and studies which posit that the educational effects of schooling go beyond the formal curriculum and, further, that educators should attend to

all these educational effects, for a variety of reasons. Thus I look here at the larger realm of works on school culture, structure, practice, and ideology that can be classed as bearing upon the “hidden curriculum” in a wide sense.

Not all of these works use this term, and some indeed work in realms of culture of structure specifically, but the wider definition of what is “learned” in school is a common one between them. In addition to this, I find that these works, often making use of a variety of critical approaches, carry an implicit or (often) explicit message that educators (and, perhaps, students) should be aware of, and even involved in creating or changing, the hidden curriculum. Certainly, such ideas connect closely to my study of culture from a Deweyian perspective. While these works do not focus specifically on high-achievers, they do address ideas which may come to bear on a study of high-achiever student culture. It is these ideas on which I intend to focus. The literature on the hidden curriculum, and similar ideas relating to school culture, is voluminous, and so I will attempt to concentrate in particular on the ways that this literature comes to bear on high-achiever culture.

Since a study of the culture of high-achievement begins with the idea that students are learning more in school than is officially stated, this effort to find out to what to look for in a culture of high-achievement begins with ideas such as Dewey’s (1916) notion of “collateral learning” and Jackson’s (1966) description of the “hidden curriculum.” Jackson’s (1966) portrayal of the hidden curriculum, in turn, emphasizes that life in classrooms looks much like life in “the Company” and brings out strongly the institutional and bureaucratic nature of schooling. The connection between the hidden curriculum and the institutionalized nature of school environments is a major theme in

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the literature, coming out strongly also in Cusick (1973) who also focused on the effects of institutional structures in a “functional” (Lynch, 1989) approach, but also manifesting itself as a market focus in school (Labaree, 1997), schools patterned on industrial models to the detriment of intrinsic and artistic engagement (Eisner, 1985), schools serving the dominant capitalist ideology and/or the corporate or industrial order (Anyon, 1980; Apple, 1979, 1982, 1983; Brantlinger, 1993; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Everhart, 1983; Giroux & Penna, 1983; LaCompte, 1978; Mc Laren, Martin, Farahmandpur, & Jaramillo, 2004; Willis, 1977), though some deny that the curriculum is “hidden” (Apple & King, 1983; Vallance, 1983). In a similar vein, schools are seen as aligning with a middle-class, institutional, corporate way of living (Eckhart, 1989; Hemmings, 1996; Lareau, 2003; Mehan, Hubbard, Lintz, & Villanueva, 1994). In many of these studies, reproduction of existing class structures and economic inequalities, and the ideologies or practices which support such reproduction, are also of concern.

This lengthy list of references is not meant to imply that all of these studies take a common approach, say the exact same things, or attribute the same importance to various interpretations. The point is, however, to establish that there is a great deal of crossover among the literature that addresses the hidden curriculum, and that institutional, corporate, market, bureaucratic, and industrial themes are prevalent, as well as questions about social reproduction. Clearly, the ways that schools are structured, and particularly the ways in which these structures align with institutional, bureaucratic, industrial, or corporate forms, are of concern to the researcher studying school culture, and so they must be the subject of some attention in my own work. Further unpacking this literature will provide additional guidance for the study of high-achievement.

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After Dewey, a look at work on collateral learning must begin with Jackson's now-classic *Life in Classrooms* (1968/1990), in which he posits a "hidden curriculum" which is taught through the features of students' in-school lives and which must be mastered in the pursuit of school success. The way that the school day runs, student-teacher relations, definitions of "work" and "play," and the use and regulation of time, Jackson claims, combine to teach a powerful set of lessons to students. Many of these lessons center around turning the student into something of a Company Man, since, "From kindergarten onward, the student begins to learn what life is really like in the Company." (p. 37) For Jackson, the institutional nature of schooling, and the way that students were shaped into the mold of institutional individuals, were central themes. Jackson maintained that such an environment leaves students well-equipped for the world of work, having had long practice in engaging in activity defined by others and taking obedient and compliant stances regarding the vicissitudes of authority. An additional affect of the school environment is to make school success a matter of perceived effort and of conformity, with intellectual achievement of questionable value.

Grouped with Jackson as a "functional" account of school culture and the hidden curriculum (Lynch, 1989; Margolis, 2001) is Cusick (1973). Like Jackson, Cusick focuses on the organizational structures of schools, formal and informal, and he also portrayed school as ideal preparation for corporate life in the future. Because of institutional structures, students spend more time on "procedural and maintenance details" (p. 47) than on engagement with subject matter, allowing students to succeed with minimal engagement, attention, and time devoted to schooling. Cusick observed a dual-system structure in schools, with the formal structure on one hand and the informal,

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group structure on the other. The formal institutional structure is remote from students, and the group structure fills in the gaps. Students are not engaged by their work, or even kept busy by it, but they do derive a feeling of pleasure and independence from their small-group participation. Cusick also assigns students' group lives a role in maintaining the school structure, since it channels their "interest, enthusiasm, and involvement" in ways that these do not interfere with the organization of the school (p. 216). He notes that this sort of structure is a ubiquitous feature of bureaucratic institutions, and results from the way the school is set up. In the bureaucratic getting-along of students (and teachers) Cusick also noted a "truce" phenomenon that governed classroom activity, where teachers and students act in ways that are directed primarily toward keeping order, not toward learning. This same sort of "truce" or "bargain" shows up in accounts of school life by McNeil (1986), who also emphasizes the institutional features of school life and school knowledge, as well as by Pace (2003), Sedlak, Wheeler, Pulling, and Cusick (1986), and Sizer (1984).

The important piece that Jackson and Cusick bring to this work, by virtue of the frames they used in their analyses, is that certain features of school and life may be attributed to the school-as-institution. While later theorists who take approaches that criticize capitalism or social reproduction may find these views inadequate, I believe that they are a valuable addition to a study school culture. They raise a question for reproduction theorists and critics of capitalism, and provide a plausible explanation for some of the features of schooling that does not require the feel of large-scale conspiracy that hangs around the work associated with Marxist views: what if schools are like they are because of their institutional nature? Or, phrased differently, how does the structure

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of school as an institution, making institutional demands, shaping people to follow the rules and priorities of the system, contribute to what is learned? Such questions are not meant to leave aside notions of reproduction or capitalist influence, but merely to put forth the idea that institutions have influence as institutions, whether they are school institutions or work institutions.

Similar concerns with school as an institution, and with industrial influences on schooling, inhabit the work of Eisner, who also adds to the concept of the hidden curriculum. Feeding off Jackson's work, as well as that of Sarason and Dreeben, Eisner (1985) divided the curriculum of schools into three parts: the explicit, the implicit, and the null. Like Jackson, Eisner maintained that here was more going on than the official line, the explicit curriculum. There was also an underlying implicit curriculum, the "pervasive and ubiquitous set of expectations and rules that defines schooling as a cultural system that itself teaches important lessons" (p. 107). To the explicit/implicit dichotomy, Eisner added an important additional concept: the null curriculum, "the options students are not afforded, the perspective that they may never know about, much less be able to use, the concepts and skills that are not a part of their intellectual repertoire" (p. 107). He gives numerous examples of the sort of lessons students learn and the features of the implicit curriculum that teach them. Students learn compliance by learning to satisfy their teachers, competitiveness through grading and ability-grouping practices, an association of success with goodness through "honors" classes, the commodity value of grading through differential credit systems. The importance of the arts is signaled by the time and resources allocated to them. The school timetable and the school building, too, teach lessons. Consequences of the null curriculum include students'

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limitation to types of thinking that are narrowly defined and leave students with little appreciation for the more artistic pursuits of life.

Yet Eisner, rather like Dewey, takes an activist stance toward the curricula being taught in schools and also draws connections between schooling and larger socio-political themes. Citing the history of schooling, he notes that a “technically rationalized industrial culture” has arisen, and that this culture, finding expression in the American context in the work of Thorndike, Taylor, and Cubberly, has focused schools on teaching the wrong lessons, emphasizing an “industrial culture” that focuses on extrinsic rewards and where “achievement has triumphed over inquiry” (Eisner, 2002, p. 4). In emphasizing the industrial nature of schooling and searching for intrinsically satisfying work in school, Eisner follows other work on the hidden curriculum. In addition, his emphasis on school timetables, buildings, structures and the like echoes the institutional focus of Jackson and Cusick, but his emphasis on the ways that students are able to think, and his insistence that the arts are a vital piece of the curriculum, go beyond other accounts. The null curriculum, and its messages, are added to the lessons of bureaucracy, institution, and market-based influences in schooling. While the null curriculum is, according to Flinders, Noddings, and Thornton (1986) a hazy concept that is difficult to define and hard to use analytically, and is problematic because it is, at heart, a normative concept – what is not there is established by the priorities of the researcher - this does not seem to be a handicap for Eisner, who clearly lays out his normative position. Martin (1976) and Ahwee et. al. (2004), in analyzing various aspects of the null curriculum, both support a reflective, aware approach to it, one in which educators consider it as a part of schooling

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Labaree (1997) does not carry out a critique of school culture in the same manner as Jackson and Cusick, but rather performs an analysis of schooling. The results are not focused on bureaucracy and institutionalization, but follow a similar line, claiming that education is constructed along corporate, market-oriented lines, and that this is a problem both for the way schools work and for the ways education is viewed in American society. Education becomes a consumer good, not a public good, and so schooling becomes a matter of educational credentialism. This results in reproduction of existing social structures, game-playing among students, separation of school work from "learning" and credentials from content, and a consumer attitude among students. Like Cusick (1973), Labaree points to a lack of engagement with schooling, both note the exchange value/market/institutional nature of school knowledge. Both ask for changes, Cusick for structures that promote engagement, Labaree for schooling for the public good. The essential point to be taken from both is that the point of schooling is not education, but rather getting along with the institution, either to have time to be left alone, to gain credentials, or some combination thereof, something like what Jackson is saying, too.

Other work focuses on the ways which the market-based, bureaucratic, institutional nature of schooling is portrayed as a matter of the capitalist order. As Jackson is seen as the father of the hidden curriculum, Bowles and Gintis groundbreaking *Schooling in Capitalist America* (1976) is often cited as a major landmark in connecting schools to industrial purposes and the forms of capitalist society at large. Bowles and Gintis argued that school structures correspond to economic structures, and particularly

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those of capitalism, and thus that schools act to shape student into industrial modes of living, including “alienated labor” whereby they are separated from control over, and purpose in, their work. They also critique the progressive movement in education, and the entire concept that U.S. education is a system based on merit, as both being subsumed by the overall priorities of the capitalist economy, its sorting functions, and its maintenance of existing class structures. Schools have not solved problems of inequality, nor flattened out class, race, and sex differences. They promote a false meritocratic strategy that elevates IQ to a place of honor and legitimizes inequality by maintaining that any inequalities that come out of the system are due to people’s inherent differences or the choices they make. They claim that schools take a “technocratic-meritocratic” approach that serves to feed those who are talented and willing into the hierarchical economic system. The point of all this is to shape students, to modify their behavior, so that they internalized the discipline of business, and thus top students, our high-achievers, are conformists.

While Bowles and Gintis have been criticized because their “correspondence theory” was too deterministic, their ideas were nonetheless foundational. School work as alienated labor, the false meritocracy, and the sorting and reproductive functions of schools are all themes that continue to appear today. In some ways, they appeared before Bowles and Gintis – both Cusick and Jackson address school work as something out of students’ control and, particularly in Cusick’s case, not very interesting or engaging to students. Additionally, Cusick showed how informal student groups functioned to maintain the school structure by channeling student excitement and interest and keeping

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Following Bowles and Gintis, LeCompte (1978) studied the hidden curricula of four different teachers, and found all were similar in following management strategies which prepared students for the world of work, with acceptance of authority, and the need to work hard, as major themes. Anyon (1980) claimed that schools which served different classes in society prepared students for different sorts of work, work that corresponded to their future places in society. Though denying that the hidden curriculum is hidden, Vallance (1983) described schools as operating to foster the sort of docility and adherence to class structure that would fit into an industrialized society. Giroux (1983) also agreed that the hidden curriculum of controlling students was once openly the point of schools, though it has since been hidden behind a technical approach that leaves schooling looking neutral. Though the accusation that schools produce conformists had been made before (Holt, 1969; Kozol, 1975), and continues to be made today (Gatto, 2003), theorists from several Marxist, neo-Marxist, critical, and resistance perspectives (these vary depending on who is classifying them, see Lynch, 1989, and Margolis, 2001) have worked to update this notion so as to account for connections to industry and reproduction of social order and inequality while avoiding the idea that schools merely impress culture upon students with no active role on their part.

Apple, for one, switched from a more deterministic and correspondence-oriented view (1979) to one which made the school, or the workplace, a site of cultural production, giving an active role to students (and to workers) who, through their activities create, and resist, the dominant forms of society (Apple, 1982; Apple and King, 1983).

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He holds on to the ideas that the schools reproduce the social order, and that the idea of the meritocracy is a false one, but shows the ways that students and workers act to find meaning amidst the alienating and conformist structures in which they find themselves. Like Cusick and others, Apple, too, saw aspects of “the bargain” in keeping order in the school. Apple’s approach draws from the seminal work of Willis (1977), who studied working class secondary students in Britain, asking how these students act to create for themselves their place in capitalist society, yet also the ways in which their actions are meaningful for them and, additionally, how those actions open up certain truths about their position and opportunities – Willis calls this latter phenomenon “penetration.” Willis, like Bowles and Gintis and others, argues that the idea of upward mobility for all in the capitalist society – the meritocratic ideal - is a false one, but adds that there is a process of self-selection whereby working class students, defining themselves as opposed to school culture, actively create their future position as working class adults. While this active view of culture is a pessimistic in a sense, as it shows the students doing their part to ensure that they will fit into the mechanism of social reproduction, both Apple and Willis maintain that this active role in cultural production also offers hope that change may also be possible.

Like Willis, Eckhart (1989) focused in particular on the way that class plays out in school, but took a different approach. Rather than focusing on working class students, Eckhart looked at the dominant cultural groups in a high-school and looked at the oppositional relationship between the culture of the students who buy-in to schooling and find their meaning through going along with the school’s priorities and values (the “jocks”), and those who find meaning in opposing them (the “burnouts”). Rather like

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Cusick, who found that students' group activities maintained the school as it was, and like Apple and Willis with their ideas on the active nature of reproduction, Eckhart points to the maintenance function of the Jock/Burnout relationship, both of which live out their identities with or against the school while nothing really changes. The difference between the jock culture, a middle-class, corporate existence, and the burnout, a working-class, relationship-oriented one, shares some features with the difference between the institutionally-invested "ear'oles" and the institutionally-opposed "lads" in Willis. Eckhart also highlights the culture of the school itself, middle-class and corporate, with which the jock culture matches and, as in the above accounts, which prepares these students for their future corporate existence. The bargain of schooling comes out in a different way in Eckhart, not just as a way for students to avoid work and engagement with school, but as a process by which Jock students trade allegiance to school values for perceived freedoms and advancement within the school. On the other side of the reproductive process, the freedoms that burnouts seek, like the freedoms of Apple's workplace culture and Willis' lads, are not the sorts of freedoms that bring institutional advancement.

Class is a theme in Lareau's (2003) work as well, as she attributes the process of social reproduction to class and not to race. Studying poor, working class, and middle-class families, she shows how the childrearing practices of these families and the social activities the children engage in either match up with schooling, as in the case of the middle class students, or do not, as in the case of the others. School is, once again, portrayed as the site of middle-class values, which are institutional in nature, matching up with Eckhart in the middle-class piece and with many others in the institutional one

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though, again, the idea that the institutional nature of schooling advantages one class in particular is not universal. The idea that school is a place of middle class values and ways of doing things also comes out in work on race in schooling (Hemmings, 1996) and in attempts to teach the “implicit” curriculum of schooling to minority students who are not of the middle class, so they, too, are able to succeed (Mehan, Hubbard, Lintz, & Villanueva, 1994).

Everhart’s (1983) own Marxist analysis of junior high-school culture and cultural production follows the paths blazed by Jackson, Cusick, Apple, and Willis, among others, bringing out the way students “get by” in school so that they can find their own meanings. But Everhart makes an explicit connection between this behavior and the “alienated” nature of their school activities, taking disengagement and giving a Marxist twist, somewhat along the lines of Bowles and Gintis (1976) but with a more active and laid-out role for students. The alienation of school knowledge, which Everhart calls “reified knowledge,” from knowledge produced in involving social interactions, which he calls “regenerative knowledge,” is a major theme in his work, and contributes to division between students and their activities, school knowledge and practical knowledge, and, in a large sense, work and control of the purposes and results of work. In taking the reproduction of the capitalist order down to the very level of knowledge and how students deal with it and with their work, Everhart takes a step beyond accounts which emphasize structure and practices and even cultural meaning-making and brings in concerns about the ways knowledge itself is presented and dealt with.

Following the critical vein of the above studies, but operating from a social-cognitive perspective, Brantlinger (1993) did a class-based analysis to examine the ways

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that high- and low-income students conceive of their positions within secondary school. Class issues and dominant ideologies come out at school which, Brantlinger maintains, is not a neutral meritocracy, though it is described as such, especially by high-income students who attribute their success to their own merit rather than to class-based explanations. High-income students demonstrate behaviors akin to those of the middle-class students in Lareau's (2003) study, working within the school culture and expecting that they can manipulate it. High-income students were elitist, though not always directly, and looked with disfavor on the actions of their low-income counterparts. Like others, Brantlinger takes an active stance towards these issues, demanding that something be done.

The influence of the concept of "meritocracy" on this work is hard to miss, and so a bit must be said about this concept and work which refers to it specifically. The term "meritocracy," drawn from a book by Young (1958) which was a satirical historical portrayal of a society which worked entirely on merit, is now in general use. At times, it is used positively to describe schooling systems, and such a use by British Prime Minister Blair which appalled Young himself (Nicholson, 2003; Young, 2001). More often, as is the case here, the idea of meritocracy is used to describe a system which is supposed to be operating but which, in reality, is not, and indeed Young claims that his own predictions about the abuse of the meritocratic idea have come true (Young, 2001). The entire idea of meritocracy is said to be a bit of a cover-up for the truly unequal and static nature of society. According to the meritocratic ideology (Apple, 1982) or "myth" (Rodriguez, 1998), it is the best who rise to the top, the best in natural ability (Oakes, 1986; Oakes, Wells, Jones, & Datnow, 1997), though Bowles and Gintis (1976) also

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emphasize choice, bringing in a mix of the ability to do well and the desire to take advantage of that ability. Oakes et. al. (1997), Parker (2003), and Nicholson (2003) attribute the presence of meritocratic ideas in American schools to a resonance between the idea of meritocracy and deeply held American ideals, with Parker writing about the idea of the American Dream and Nicholson working off a piece by Fisher (1973) which analyzed the presence of two myths in American society, the “materialistic” and the “moralistic.” Fisher was particularly interested in analyzing the victory of Richard M. Nixon in the 1972 US presidential election, but, as Nicholson recognizes, his materialistic myth nicely captures the spirit of meritocracy:

The materialistic myth is grounded on the puritan work ethic and relates to the values of effort, persistence, “playing the game,” initiative, self-reliance, achievement, and success. It undergirds competition as the way of determining personal worth, the free enterprise system and the notion of freedom, defined as the freedom from controls, regulations, or constraints that hinder the individual’s striving for ascendancy in the social-economic hierarchy of society...it promises that if one employs one’s energies and talents to the fullest, one will reap the rewards of status, wealth, and power. (p. 161)

Fisher almost does it. Add in the particular emphasis on intelligence and testing that shows up in the educational setting (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Oakes et. al., 1997; Parker, 2003), and you have meritocracy as it is written about, and shows up in schools, today.

Oakes et. al. (1997) get more specific on how the meritocratic ideology transfers to teacher beliefs, describing how the ways that teachers regarded student differences in achievement related to the meritocratic ideology. Teachers at the schools studied by Oakes et. al. believed that intelligence was fixed and innate, unidimensional and equated with speed, easily assessed, found along normal curves within society, and connected to racial and cultural explanations which included home support as a factor. These same sort

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of explanations showed up in Everhart (1983), who showed teachers differentiating between students according to effort, ability, and personal characteristics, with ability being attributed partially to home life. Meritocratic ideals pop up in a variety of settings, justifying tracking, and resisting de-tracking efforts in American schools (Oakes, 1986; Oakes, Wells, Jones, & Datnow, 1997), connecting to the portrayal of Asian students as a “model minority” in America (Yu, 2006), and creeping in to the language of students in education courses in the U.S. (Applebaum, 2005) and Canada (Solomon, Portelli, Daniel, & Campbell, 2005). Meritocratic ideas are not only present and resonant, but they serve a function, and one that relates to reproduction: the meritocratic ideology allows inequalities and hierarchies to exist in a society that proclaims democratic values and a chance for all (Oakes et. al., 1997; Parker, 2003).

In Summary

The point of the above literature review is twofold. First, it is to position this work, a study of the culture of high-achievement, within the existing literature on high-achievement and the hidden curriculum and school culture, since Dewey-inspired studies of high-achiever culture are, in general, somewhat lacking. The second point of the literature review is to identify, within the existing literature that relates to this study, themes and ideas which give some preliminary ideas about what a culture of high-achievement might look like, as well as the sort of structures, ideologies, practices, discourses, and student effects, derived from a general picture of schooling, which may show up as a part of the culture of high-achievement.

High-achieving students, who in the literature (as a composite) get good grades, do well on standardized tests, get along with their teachers, participate in extra-curricular

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activities, and take advanced classes, will likely be the students who “buy in” to the institutional culture of schooling, akin to Eckhart’s (1989) “jocks” and Willis’ (1977) “ear’oles,” or the middle class students who fit into middle class school culture in other studies. As students from professional families at a school in a middle-class neighborhood, as well as high-achievers, the students in my study may show some of the strategic or manipulative behaviors of high-achieving, middle-class, and high-income students in these studies, and may also show some of the negative behaviors like cheating, compromising, game-playing, taking intolerant attitudes toward fellow students, and viewing their own goals and desires as things to be deferred to some unknown future time. High-achievers may put up a good front while engaging in such behaviors, in the interest of appearing to fit in with school demands, and they may also show valued school behaviors like taking strategic approaches to their studies or, again from an institutional standpoint, behaving in ways which are broadly compliant or demonstrate “buy in”.

It is also interesting to look at the relationship between these high-achievers and their work, given the prevalence of ideas of disengagement, alienation, and diversion of interest and enthusiasm that characterizes students’ relationship to work in the above studies. Focusing on high-achieving students in particular, Pope’s (2001) work suggests that high-achievers will often conform to institutional priorities, perhaps even adopting them as their own. Similar strategies come out in Willis’ (1977) “ear’oles,” Eckhart’s (1989) “jocks,” and in Lareau’s (2003) middle-class students. High-achieving students will also likely put forth the effort to do well in their schooling, whether for intrinsic or extrinsic reasons (Sedlak et al, 1986). And yet, with the theoretical frame of this study predicting a students’ part in creating culture, there should be another level of complexity

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beyond simple conformity. While a picture of high-achiever culture as merely conformist would be consistent with that painted by some school critics who emphasize the place of conformity in schools (Gatto, 2003; Holt, 1969), it should be considered that high-achieving students are, for all their conformist tendencies, learning more than simple conformity to institutional demands. The problem of disengagement from school work, and the phenomenon of “the bargain” (Cusick, 1973; McNeil, 1986; Pace, 2003; Sedlak et. al., 1986;Sizer, 1984) makes it seem that students are not buying into institutional goals wholeheartedly, but rather are participating in them only to the extent that is required by the students’ priorities, be those priorities an easy class, time to hang out with friends, or active resistance to schooling. Such a lack of engagement may carry over into the ranks of the high-achievers, but may take on a unique form. High-achieving students may suffer from the same disengagement from learning, from interest, from passion, and from quality that other students do. The key difference is that, unlike other students, who may be disengaged for the sake of pursuit of other goals, high-achieving students may undertake this disengagement as a strategy in the pursuit of the institutional rewards of grades and school success (Pope, 2001; Rizza, 1999).

Coming from another direction, along with the institutional, bureaucratic, corporate nature of schooling which runs through many of the studies cited above, there are other factors of the school culture which should be attended to. Cultural production, in the form of students taking active roles in high-achiever culture, is included in my theoretical framework as a facet, for some of the same reasons that Apple and Willis use it, because it gives a role to students, and it gives hope for change. Along related lines, the influence of capitalism broadly, and the meritocratic ideology in particular, is

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certainly something to look for in the culture of high-achievement. The ways that students and teachers talk about merit, intelligence, hard work, and students' background may find some connections to broader American ideas about worth, success, and the workings of society. All of this could be of particular interest given that this study is set in a middle-class school, with middle-class students. This brings up one last point, perhaps a minor one, but one which distinguishes this work from the particular influence of Marx. While not all the studies in the Marxist vein focus on the "working class," some do, and there is in such work the notion that it is the working class which must liberate itself. In the literature on cultural reproduction, one feels, again, that it is the working class and the poor who are getting shafted. My study, however, looks at the middle-class, the future managers, the bourgeoisie if you will. Thus it takes a different tone and emphasis, one which focuses its critique on the middle classes in particular.

The Culture of High Achievement and the Deweyian Educative Experience

One might wonder, upon reading the rather grim picture of school culture painted above, how anyone gets out of school with some semblance of self or any attributes approaching those of Dewey's democratic citizen, or how the positive aspects of the high-achiever cultural experience will be addressed in this study particularly. The answer is that the above is only a part of the story. A monolithic and negative picture of learning is not only unrealistic; it is also inconsistent with the very theoretical framework adopted in this study, which, after all, does not assign a deterministic role to culture. Since it is unlikely that all students who are high-achievers bring the same approach to their schoolwork, or take from it the same lessons, attention should be paid students' positive experiences within the culture of high achievement as well as to possible negative ones.

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Perhaps the disengagement, the playing of the school game, and the cultural shaping of students into work roles is not so prevalent as indicated above. Or, even if it is, some may learn the lessons of disengagement while others may learn to play the game without losing the spark of interest in ideas and learning, the personal investment in growth and involvement that Dewey calls for in an education for intelligent life and citizenship.

In looking for the positive in the culture of high-achievement, I will take as my guide the Deweyian notion of a good education. For Dewey, experiences are divided into two types: educative and mis-educative. The educative experience is purposeful, affectively engaging, intelligently directed, disciplined by the demands of social activity, and resulting in an open disposition to more experience that, in turn, leads to intelligent and purposeful direction of future action. The mis-educative experience, lacking some or all of these features, leads to closed-off perceptions, action without intelligence, direction, and purpose, and even disengagement with learning and life (Dewey 1916, 1934/1980, 1938/1997). The educative experience leads to growth, to greater potential for other educative experiences and for intelligent action, while mis-educative experiences actually limit these potentials. For Dewey, growth, an increase in connection with the world, was the very goal of life, and thus of education (Dewey, 1916, 1934/1980, 1938/1997; Granger, 2000; Hansen, 2000).

The upshot of all this, in terms of what a study of high-achiever culture, is that Dewey's philosophy offers the idea of the educative experience as an alternative to the meaning-poor nature of institutionalized activity. These sort of experiences, thus, may provide a contrasting case to the influences of the hidden curriculum and the institutional nature of school as laid out above. People fully engaged in purposeful activity not only

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find satisfaction in it, but also growth, and greater ability and power in their future activities. The powers of discernment they develop through participation in educative activities allows them to live more fully as individuals, and, at the same time, to exercise better and more complete judgment in exercising their responsibilities as members of a democracy. Further, the openness and awareness characterized by intelligent activity go right along with democratic ideals. Thus, in studying high-achiever culture, it would be informative to look for evidence of satisfaction with work, of students' feelings of personal success and achievement in and out of the context of the classroom. It would be good to look for students demonstrating personal, affective engagement with the subject matter and the lenses of the history class.

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CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Where is This Study Coming From?

"Since all the sciences, and especially psychology, are still immersed in such tremendous realms of the uncertain and the unknown, the best that any individual scientist, especially any psychologist, can do is seems to be to follow his own gleam and his own bent, however inadequate that may be. In fact, I suppose that actually this is what we all do. In the end, the only sure criterion is to have fun. And I have fun."

E.C. Tolman

This work is a qualitative, ethnographic study, focusing on the students and teacher of one AP US History class at one high school. An ethnographic study is called for because I am aiming to get at culture and the meanings attached to actions, what students make of their environment and thus how they shape and are shaped by it. The only way to get at such meanings is through close attention to participants' actions, the significance they attach to those actions, and their stated and even unstated intentions in undertaking them. Geertz's (1973) "thick description," where a thoroughly explored situation can be a site of larger meanings, is in keeping with this ideal. I also approached this study as an ethnographic project which aims, along the lines of Eckhart (1989) and Willis (1977), to get at the cultural interactions of students through regular observation and individual interviews. I have chosen this format with a view toward producing a deep account of the high-achiever culture in this one class, a level of detail necessary to address the questions of meaning that are the stuff of ethnographic study (Bogdan & Biklin, 2003; Geertz, 1973; Maxwell, 1996; Seidman, 2006).

Such a look at meaning, an emphasis on analysis of activity with attention to how school environments are realized through cultural responses, is also in keeping with this study's theoretical framework, rooted, as it is, in the American pragmatic philosophical

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standpoint coming from the work of Dewey and Peirce. The recursive nature of experience with its constant revision of ends and means in the light of each, and the connected idea that meaning is never fully defined but only realized through activity (Dewey, 1897, 1934/1980; Bernstein, 1971), support the position that school environments can only be studied by observing how such environments are really operating day to day. Just as, according to Peirce, no set number of occurrences can determine all the possibilities inherent in any concept (Bernstein, 1971), no formal definition of school structures can tell us how schools actually work. The creation of and by culture cannot be studied by setting a pre-defined standard and measuring a relation between that standard and observed results, since, Dewey would say, there can be no pre-determination of the outcome of the transaction. Only close observation, which notes not only what is there but also how that what is being lived out, can tell us about cultural activity, the realm of meaning. The relationship between culture, meaning, learning, and development must be looked for in the details-in-action.

There will, in my ethnographic methodology, be some features of a “critical ethnography” (Britzman, 2000; Carspecken, 1996; Madison, 2005; Segall, 2002), with an emphasis on the practices of ethnography, an historical viewpoint of the culture of schools, and an awareness of the responsibilities and commitments, personal and ethical, of myself as researcher, as well as of the “value laden” nature of qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p.8). Ethnography, as a general frame, provides the basic methods. The emphasis on criticality adds an awareness of history, an acknowledgement of the ethical stances taken in the context of the study, careful attention the purposes of the study and the ways in which the purposes shape the inquiry, and an alignment with

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the idea of praxis, of working for change in education. The awareness of history is manifest here in my reflection on the frames employed in the study, their contexts, and the ways in which they inform one another and the ways in which they clash. It also comes out in my use of work on the culture of schools that comes from the last 30 years of educational research. Ethics, purposes, and praxis come together in my use of, and acknowledgement of, the Deweyian frame, one which is based in the notion that schools and society should operate in certain ways, that schools teach more than formal lessons, and that educators have a responsibility to shape school lessons in the context of a democratic society. This is not just an inquiry into what is happening in a classroom, but a reflection on what should be happening there and a call for action, a bringing together of the work of research and moral values that Dewey would support (Biesta & Burbules, 2003).

If it is true, as Denzin and Lincoln (2000) maintain, that the current moment in the history of research is the “moral” one, this means that research cannot be carried on as though it were outside of morality. Research is more than a fact-finding endeavor, and this research makes no pretence of gathering what’s “out there” and presenting it as a final answer. For one thing, such a stance would be inconsistent with a pragmatic approach, and also with the critical one (Britzman, 2000, 2003; Segall, 2002) since the critical stance, in asking questions, would hardly do to provide certain answers. For another, this work was carried out informed by Dewey’s emphasis on the idea that philosophical and educational study should be applied to addressing, and not merely documenting, the problems of the world, a stance on inquiry also adopted by Weis and Fine (2000). Work in the Deweyian tradition cannot be said to be neutral.

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Research is invariably involved (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), and knowing this I have endeavored to be aware of my own views and their effects on this work (Angrosino & Mayes de Perez, 2000) by recording my ongoing thoughts in a research journal (Hatch, 2000). The journal allowed me to be more aware of my own ideas so as to be more aware of how those ideas shaped the progress and conclusions of the study (Maxwell, 1996). It served as a repository for thoughts that came up in the process of taking field-notes, and as a source for research memos (Bogdan & Biklin, 2003), which I used to share my thoughts, ideas, and progress reports with my committee. As a high-achieving student myself, and as a teacher, high-achiever culture is a highly personal subject to me. It fascinates me, and, at times, frustrates me greatly, both as something to observe and as something to participate in. I have, in the course of this work, been subject to pressures and experiences which connect to those of the students I have been observing and talking to. While this was a strength in a sense, because of my familiarity with the cultural setting in which I am working, it also called for ongoing care to see that my work did not exceed itself, a care I also addressed by maintaining a presence in the classroom through my analysis and writing and by sharing my ideas with the teacher as they came to me.

Finally, in keeping with the qualitative and pragmatic spirit, I approached this study from the very beginning anticipating that the plan, focus, questions, and ideas would change once subjected to the vicissitudes of a real high school classroom. This indeterminacy is seen by some as a feature of qualitative research, which is not to say that qualitative research does not know what it is about, but, rather, that it is oriented toward an exploration which may reveal unanticipated features of an environment (Bogdan & Biklin, 2003; Carspecken, 1996). Carspecken's point that the exact definition of variables

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and frameworks that characterizes quantitative research does not suffice to capture phenomena on the level of human meaning supports the flexibility of qualitative research is consistent with the pragmatic definition of meaning as not completely specifiable (Peirce & Turrisi, 1997; Bernstein, 1971) as well as with Polkinghorne's (1988) claim that research practices that are suitable for material and biological questions cannot capture the complexity of meaning-related topics.

On Writing

As an ethnographic study aiming at meaning, a Deweyian study which is based on the idea that knowledge and research are not neutral, and a study which makes use of Marxist and postmodern lenses to question the notions of scientific and institutionalized knowledge in schooling and to look for discourses and narratives of high-achievement, this work would be inconsistent were it to adopt a neutral, scientific, objective form and tone. Being aware of the demands of the form of the dissertation, and seeing value in descriptive writing for making points and arguments, I am not attempting to write a research novel, as Eisner has argued may happen in educational research (Saks, 1996), yet, as Eisner calls for, I do hope to maintain continuity between my theoretical frames, research questions, and practices of inquiry and writing. Research consists of putting together a story for a purpose. It is the researcher's responsibility to acknowledge that purpose and to serve it well, both by putting together a good story (both an interesting and a warranted one), and by doing research that does not contradict the commitments in which it is rooted. Angrosino and Mays de Perez (2000), Denzin and Lincoln (2000) and Fine et. al. (2000) reinforce this idea, emphasizing the importance of bringing one's work in line with one's purposes. Therefore, in doing ethnography, work aimed at meaning, I

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am making some use of narrative ideas and narrative forms in the writing of this work (Polkinghorne, 1988, 1991). In doing so, I also I draw on Tyler's (1986) notion of ethnography as evocative, and work from the idea that a case study format (Stake, 1980, quoted in Donmeyer, 1990) or narrative research (Ellis & Bochner, 1996) can provide a form of vicarious experience of a setting. Use of narrative forms is also consistent with the general, critical tone of this work, with the intention of producing, not an authoritative and controlled account, but one which is an interpretation of interpretations, as Geertz (1973) puts it, and which itself will be interpreted.

All that being said, it is natural that I make use of short, narrative pieces in this work, descriptions that are drawn from fieldnotes and classroom experiences, but which are written with the intention of giving the reader a feel for the AP US History class, and Fairlawn High School¹, that goes beyond the possibilities inherent in descriptive writing. These narrative pieces, along with sections where I adopt a less formal and more speculative tone, are intended to accompany the descriptive sections of the work, but also to stand as evocative renditions of the classroom. They are my own written renditions of my own observations, and make no claim to portraying the classroom "as it is," yet they may do a useful job as presenting as I saw it, in a way that complements and adds to the other sections of this piece.

Positioning Myself in this Work: Part I

It is the fall of 1998, and I am standing before my second-hour World History class. It is my second year of teaching, and I have begun to feel more confident, and even a bit more competent, in running my classes. On this day, I am introducing a project, and I'm pretty excited about it. The focus is on the era after the Fall of Rome in 476 A.D.,

¹ All names, those of the school, the teachers, the students, and the community, have been changed.

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known as the “Dark Ages.” It incorporates some research, some discussion, and an artistic or narrative component where the students are asked to imagine what a “Dark Age,” a fall of “civilization,” might look like in their own day. I stride around the front of my classroom as the students sit in their ordered rows, and I’m sure my excitement is evident as I go over the assignment sheet I’ve handed out. This is better than a worksheet, better than a reading, better than an essay. I finish laying everything out, take a breath, smile, and ask if there are any questions. One student raises his hand, and I call on him, wondering what he’ll ask.

“How much is this worth?” he says.

My world is shattered. Of all the things he could have asked about, of all the facets of this assignment, all the creative possibilities it contains, question #1 is on points. My thoughts spiral off. What is the purpose of schooling? Why are my best students always running after points? What am I doing here? Why do I always end up giving C’s to kids who write thoughtful papers, and A’s to kids who write papers which are quite correct and not quite interesting? I snap out of it and answer my students’ question, but the damage is done. This is a pivotal moment in my teaching career. Now I am doomed, for there are some questions to which I have no answers, and this means, as it turns out, that I will end up in graduate school.

Positioning Myself in this Work: Part II

There were several instances in the course of this study when things seemed to become clear, when I glimpsed an important idea, when I saw the world in a different light. Here I describe one of them. The difference between this instance and all the other ones, which I do not describe in depth, is that those instances became chapters or parts of

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chapters, the “rags to riches” class, for example, or the political cartoon analysis where the teacher did most of the analyzing – the reader will see these later. This particular moment, while important enough to write about, was not meant to become a theme, a chapter, or a telling point. It was just a good idea, a resonant idea, one which really stuck with me. It says something about me as a researcher, something about this study, something about schooling and high-achievement.

So let’s go back to that idea...

I am sitting in the Fairlawn High School cafeteria at about seven-fifteen in the morning. I have arrived early, before 1st hour, to conduct a student interview before school. This was not easy. In the winter, school starts before the sun comes up. I used to know this, of course. I lived it. But graduate school has made me forget and now, sitting at a little round table in a hard plastic chair, in the brightly-lit cafeteria which even now smells of lunchroom food, I think to myself: this is no way to start one’s day.

Rachel Early arrives and sets her heavy backpack down. Rachel, 17 years old, a junior, has seldom gotten anything but a straight A at Fairlawn High School: her GPA is 3.967. She is taking four AP classes, plays saxophone in the school band, and has participated in the school’s Human Rights Club. In more than one interview, Mr. Elliot, the AP US History teacher, identified Rachel as a student who is capable of, and ready for, more than even AP US History is offering. In a later interview, Mr. Elliot will say, of Rachel as a student, that “her writing is publishable,” and “the style is the most original style I’ve ever heard.” When I ask what makes her one of his best, he answers, “enthusiasm, work ethic, brilliance of mind, and she’s grown.” But I don’t know most of this when she sits down on this January morning. What I do know is that she is a quiet

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student in class who perks right up when modern political issues are mentioned, and that her history teacher thinks she is a good student.

I start my tape-recorder, and we begin the interview with a brief and somewhat nerdy digression – my fault - on the joys of playing in the school band. We talk about her schedule, why she is taking so many AP classes. “I was kind of hoping that, like, AP classes you, that students would be a little bit more serious,” she tells me, “like you wouldn’t have kids...,” she stops herself, “...students in the class that didn’t want to be in the class.

“Um hm,” I say, hoping she’ll say more.

She adds only a bit. “But, it’s not really always the case, so, I’m kinda disappointed in it.” She laughs, and we move on and talk about her interests in school. She is not, she has figured out, a huge fan of math and science classes. We get around to talking about the students in AP classes, and of them she says, “I think you should take an AP if you have some interest in the subject. And, like, I would like it if, like, like for history, if like everyone in that class was interested in history outside of class too...”

“Um hm,” I say again, staying out of the way.

She complains that the students in AP US History are too grade- and transcript-focused. “I think an AP should be only people who are...er, it should be people that want to be studying it or are like interested in it.”

We talk about this for a bit, and Rachel goes on to claim that she is not the sort of grade- and transcript-focused student she is complaining about. I ask her about her own approach to school.

She gives a long answer:

Um, well it, I guess...more focused on learning the material...like my big thing that I wish more of...is like more of a discussion focus. Like...especially in the humanities and the liberal arts subjects... if you were to leave class...to be able to like go to [a local coffee shop] and talk about, like, the class... you know, current events and stuff but be able to, like, apply it to that. And then a lot of people...they're bored by it, and it's more of like a chore, and they don't really wanna talk about it outside of taking the test or like getting an A in the class. And, like, I personally wouldn't want to sit through a class that I didn't have enough of interest in to... then leave class and wanna talk about it.

Of AP US History, she has good things to say, and she enjoys the challenge and the independence of the class, the very things Mr. Elliot is aiming for in this advanced class. "I think, history is my favorite AP," she tells me. "I think Mr. Elliot does a really good job of, um, it's more student-driven...he expects a lot out of you."

But she also says, of this AP class,

I was kind of hoping it'd be more like, ah, um, like how college would be. Like by taking AP it'd be kind of like, getting your feet in the water as far as more of a college experience by starting earlier. But it's definitely just a high school AP class. (laugh)

Rachel goes on to talk, among other things, about the ways in which people take AP's for transcripts, the way a friend of hers is taking easier math classes, even though she wants to be an engineer, so that she can keep her four-point. Rachel Early believes that this sort of thing is a "waste of talent."

Something in this interview hits me. As I walk with Rachel up to Mr. Elliot's class, through the madness that is the hallways five minutes before first hour, I am thinking about her description of wanting to take AP classes to find something "better," to work with students who were actually interested in the subject. I think about how she would like people, and her friend, to take classes because they are interested in them. I think about how she mentioned college as the model for what she hoped AP would be;

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college, the next place, past AP classes, where the students might be taking classes for the right reasons, where classes might be *better*.

These words strike me for two reasons. First, I feel like I've heard them before. I remember talking to Adam Braff and to Connor Imboden, two of Rachel's classmates, in the two previous weeks. I think of how Adam wished that classes could be about interest, and how Connor claimed that, having taken classes for the "wrong" reasons before, he had made interest a priority in his class selection. I recall that Adam hoping that college will be about interest, intellectual engagement, appreciation of the subject, though he's heard otherwise. I also think of two other students who mentioned college as the place where they will finally be able to pursue their interests. As I pondered of all this, it occurred to me that a part of being a high-achiever, at least for some of these students, was about deferring that day when it would finally be good and interesting and worth it.

This was not a new idea. Dorothy Pope wrote about it in *Doing School*. But it suddenly occurred to me what a useful idea it was if you wanted to keep things just as they are. Tell the students who want more, who could make trouble, that they'll eventually get more if they just keep plugging away. Tell them this at every level. By the time they realize that they should have made some trouble at some point along the way, they'll be too far along, too invested in the whole thing, and they'll just keep moving on. Willis (1977) also pointed out the "ear'oles" investment in schooling, the ways that they act to enforce the school rules because they have given up on their chance to oppose them. Eckhart (1989) writes about the apparent freedoms gained by the middle-class jocks, freedoms contingent upon participation in the purposes and structures of schooling.

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Now, when such thoughts creep into my mind, I tend to view them with some skepticism. They sound rather conspiratorial, the sort of ideas held by people who wear tinfoil on their heads to keep the government from reading their thoughts. Yet such ideas really don't sound too wacky, not when set up next to some of the educational writing that curses the influence of government and business in schools, articles that talk about things like "U.S. phallomilitary warrior nationalism" (McLaren et. al., 2004). Still, I wonder, is it necessary to posit a conspiracy when a system promotes ideas that tend toward the preservation of the system? Isn't this what systems do?

Perhaps it is, but this doesn't make it any easier to swallow. This brings me to the second reason that Rachel's words were so striking to me as I sat in that cafeteria. Not only did I feel like I'd heard them before, but I also felt like I'd *said* them before. Those words resonated with me, dredged up memories of my own thoughts about college and, somewhat more disturbingly, my thoughts about graduate school. Yes, when I came to graduate school, I thought to myself, "finally, I will be in classes with people who want to be there, who will be really interested in their subject, who won't care about grades and hoops and games and the sort of necessary evils of schooling." When I dropped out of graduate school, two years later, it was because I was disappointed, somewhat like Rachel has been in her AP classes, but in a much deeper way; at that point I realized that I'd gone as far in school as a person could go and – guess what? – it still wasn't about interest and learning and deep discussions about ideas. It was about assignments and readings and papers and grades. It was still, even though we were all grown-ups, all about school.

This makes my feelings about graduate school, and schooling in general, rather obvious. This is a dangerous thing for a researcher to do, as it risks the reader will place my observations, interpretations, and conclusions into the category of polemic rather than research. But it must also be said that I do not approach school as one who hates it and wishes it gone, but rather as one who loves it too much and wishes it were about all of the lofty things we claim for it, things I still believe it could be about. Like the campaign workers in the 1996 novel *Primary Colors* who work for a presidential candidate because they actually care about him and the issues, I am afflicted with the “true believer” syndrome. These campaigners were not being “professional” because they were letting themselves become involved. I am a professional student – lord knows I’ve been doing it long enough, and I’ve gotten pretty good at it – but I am not so professional that I can view school with any sort of detachment. When fall comes and the sweater breezes blow and the leaves crackle, I can’t wait to get back into classrooms and libraries and coffee shops. And when all the time and energy and genuine effort that goes into school is channeled into stilly, stupid pursuits like grade-grubbing and game-playing and achievement-for-achievement’s sake, it makes me feel sad for what could be.

When I said earlier that this idea would not become a theme or a chapter, I wasn’t exactly right. The idea that high-achievers are always looking ahead, that achievement is a pursuit that has no end, runs through much of what I have written about. High-achievers, to continue achieving, must prove themselves worthy over and over again. They must play the game while pretending not to, or not wanting to, always telling themselves that they will eventually get to some point where the game no longer matters. I guess the idea that high-achievers are looking to the future and hoping for more is not

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just a theme; it's practically *the* theme. And I think it's a good theme, a right one, one that captures something about the experience and the culture of high-achievement, something that needs to be talked about.

School is not an inherently bad thing, and neither is achievement. Obviously, I came back to graduate school. I passed comps. I am writing this dissertation. I am here and doing what I need to do to get my degree, because I think it's worth it. And I've started to see, after all this time, that if high-achievers go on and on, waiting for enlightenment and interest from without, they are going to be waiting a long time. You have to find ways to love what you are doing and make it worthwhile. This is Dewey's vision too and, like him, I think it should be a societal goal for all citizens. Heck, I think we should teach it in schools, instead of teaching our "best" students that they need to wait, our "middle" students that they aren't a priority, and our "worst" students that they shouldn't even try.

Positioning Myself in this Work: Part III

There is a bit of the romantic about John Dewey. His view of schooling and society, where a democratic way of living is possible, where philosophy informs life, where people live aesthetically is deeply optimistic. He began his work during the period of American history referred to as the Progressive Era, the era of muckrakers and trustbusting, of strikes and strikebreakers, of vast growth in the industrial base of the country and of attempts to control the new influences of the industrial way of life on society. Dewey himself put forth a vision that relied on the old Jeffersonian ideal of the independent farmer or small town-type individual who has a great deal of control and choice over their own work and time, and he feared that the Jeffersonian ideal of a

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Republic made up of free persons, for a long time threatened, was disappearing under the weight of industrialization (Bernstein, 1966; Cohen, 1998; Dewey, 1935/1946; Feffer, 1993). As Bernstein puts it:

Dewey's life spanned the radical changes that were taking place in America. He perceived quite acutely that the fortuitous set of circumstances that had given birth to American democracy were rapidly disappearing....The very agencies that were originally looked upon as those that would advance the cause of freedom now pose the most serious threats to democracy. (1966, p. 136)

The agencies included literacy, mass communication, and laissez-faire economic ideas (Bernstein, 1966; Dewey, 1939). Overall, Dewey seemed to believe that a threat to democracy existed in what might be called the "industrial" way of life.

One of the focal points of public concern among progressive activists and elsewhere was the erosion of traditional work values under the factory system...In the years after the Civil War, it became apparent that factory production was transforming work into industrial drudgery, from an artisan enterprise that reinforced social responsibility and built good character. Modern factories turned crafts into labor done for wages and turned workers' minds from the intrinsic value of labor to extrinsic rewards. (Feffer, 1993, p. 98)

Dewey was deeply concerned with these changes, and directed his philosophy toward solving what he called the "problems of men" (1946). He was hopeful that the changes that seemed to be coming in society, the realization of the plight of the workers, would be the start of a movement toward a democracy he envisioned (Menand, 2000), a democracy structured philosophically, not solely according to the dynamics of the market or of science and technology devoid of moral considerations (Dewey, 1935/1946; 1937/1946, 1944/1946).

The idea that industrial ways of living are a threat to democracy, and the accompanying idea that things used to be better or different, is not unique to Dewey.

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Weber (1905/1952), in his seminal work on the now widely referred to “protestant work ethic,” wrote of the old capitalist class before they became capitalists of the “protestant” type. The old capitalist business, in Weber’s account, ran in a rather relaxed fashion, with the work getting done and nobody straining themselves overly to do it. The new capitalism arose in the combination of neutral (by Weber’s definition) capitalist business practices with protestant ascetics, making for an emphasis on accumulation and increase for its own sake, changing the definition of quality of life and business to a new, competitive, and all-consuming one. Mills (1959) also writes of an “old” middle class, one identified with the small business owner or entrepreneur, and he points out that this ideal is not just a type of business owner but also a rhetorical strategy in America, one embodied in the Progressive Era. Indeed, Dewey’s educational work was identified within a realm known as “progressive” education (Dewey, 1938/1997).

I mention all this because I have a great affinity for Dewey’s views – I think he was on to something – and the situating of Dewey within a progressive framework is a situating of my work as well. Like Dewey, I have a vision of schooling and democracy which equates learning and activity, as they should be, with purpose, meaning, and value. I find “industrial” approaches to education and life, in the broad sense of disconnected and alienated, done for bureaucratic or institutional purpose rather than meaningful one, disturbing. I realize the limitations of this approach, its identification with the progressive narrative of the evolution of society, and even problems that arise given postmodern criticisms of the subject, and the all-encompassing nature of discourse. Dewey is not the person with all the answers, and his own frame, taken to its limits, has holes as big as any:

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It is here that we reach the contextual and conceptual limits of the pragmatist tradition. As a radical self-realization theory, pragmatist social psychology offered a democratic alternative to an emerging mass production society in which education and participatory organizations would heal social divisions and enrich otherwise degraded lives. It suggested that the agency of social change would be ordinary people encouraged to self-active reconstruction by a democratic reform movement. But as a theory of moral imminence, Chicago pragmatism also rooted social transformation in a dying tradition of civic virtue, community, and productive labor, thereby imposing a shape and direction on what should have been a process of self-transformation. (Feffer, 1993, p. 270)

All this being said, the Deweyian progressive vision resonates with the ideas that I have come to hold, based on my own experiences as a student and as a teacher. I think that my stance in this work is a necessary one, which can be used to examine and to open up high-achiever culture. Yet I take a critical stance, an open and questioning approach toward high-achiever culture, because I do not wish to fall into the trap of taking one view to the exclusion of all others, even as I must adopt a frame if I am to carry out any sort of critique. In my work I tried to look for more than I had expected, to be open to ideas outside of my expectations and my frame, and even to employ ideas from a variety of traditions to enrich and to challenge my fieldwork and analysis. If it can be said that educators must be aware of the language and practices and ideals that shape what they do and what they teach, so too must I keep in mind my own Deweyian leanings and the place which my arguments find in the rhetorical field of culture, society, democracy, and schooling.

On Methods

Methods used were those commonly associated with ethnography: interviews, observations, and gathering of artifacts, in this case, documents. Observations were carried out using hand-written field notes, taken in a manner similar to that suggested by

Hatch (2000). Notes were taken on a pad during class and then typed into the computer, usually immediately after a class session so that the memory of the class was fresh. The notepad was used in class, rather than a laptop computer, because I believed that a laptop would form more of a barrier between myself and the class and, furthermore, because the tapping of laptop keys would have, in a relatively quiet lecture-intensive class like AP US History, been too obtrusive. As I took notes, I made marks to indicate points of particular interest, adding additional comments if I had the time right away, and if not, adding them when I typed the notes up after class. The class activities and self-notes were written in separate fonts to distinguish my observations from my thoughts and ideas related to those observations.

Observations were carried out over a period of four months in the 2006-2007 school year. Initially, I visited the class every day, and continued this pattern for the first two months of the study, then dropped my visits to once or twice a week. Each visit lasted the entire class period, and I usually remained at the school for one to two hours more, typing up my notes in the school library. Even after the fourth month, I continued to stop by the classroom every week or two, to maintain a presence there, see how the class was doing, and to remind myself, as I analyzed my data and carried out my writing, of the classroom setting that was the source of that data. This latter purpose was a way of getting a feel for whether my analysis and conclusions were staying close to what I'd seen or if they were wandering too far from the class as I'd experienced it, this being done in the interest of keeping my account close to the situation studied (Schofield, 1990).

Observations covered all manner of classroom events, from lectures to tests to assignments, and even included one class in the computer lab and a three-hour, after-school review session for the first semester final exam. Short conversations with students before, during, or after class were likewise recorded in field notes. Initial observations began with descriptions of everything about the class, classroom, desk arrangements, posters, pictures, lighting, sitting and standing and movement, a general writing-down of classroom features as recommended by Hatch (2000). I attended to the teacher's lecture topics and his lecture style, how he addressed and talked about history, how he presented it to his students, and how he interacted with them in terms of his questions, answers, and monitoring. I also watched how his views came out in class, how he referred to his students, to history, to the AP, to the school, and on and on. I watched the students in the same way, noting what they said, how, and to whom, being especially alert for the ways in which they acted to exert control or to act strategically in the classroom environment.

Documents collected included both class and school documents. School documents, obtained from the main and guidance offices at the school, were things like maps and schedules, school demographic information, a school course guide, and the year-end guidance office report from the previous year, which included information on grades, standardized testing, and college attendance for Fairlawn students. Class documents included class tests, assignments, practice AP tests, worksheets, readings, and the end-of-year review guide compiled by the class under Mr. Elliot's guidance. These documents supplied information on the type of work being done in the class, the opportunity to study and review the work that was being done while I was taking field notes, and general information on the school and the students who attend it.

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Interviews were carried out with the students and teacher of 1st hour AP US History, as well as with several other faculty members. All interviews lasted approximately an hour each, since, even though the stated aim was 45 minutes, they tended to run long. Several were shorter, but none were under 35 minutes in length. Most of the interviews, with the exception of one student interview, one interview with Mr. Elliot, and one interview with school principal Dr. Riveli, were carried out with a tape-recorder running; for the remaining three interviews I took notes. All interviews were transcribed so as to have typed records of conversations and, additionally, as a way of getting to know what was in the interviews. Student interviews were fully transcribed, as were the initial interviews with Mr. Elliot and both interviews with other AP social studies teachers. Later interviews with Mr. Elliot, and the taped interview with Dr. Riveli, were partially transcribed.

Students were selected for interviews by virtue of their membership in the class under study, and I interviewed every student who volunteered. The students' willingness to be interviewed, even enthusiasm for it, was a surprise. Along with this willingness, initial interviews yielded results which were unexpected, both in the topics which came up and in the answers to anticipated topics. Taking all this into account, I felt it was best to interview as widely as possible just to see what else might come up, and so my initial plan to interview only a select few, picked as representative of different class groups, evaporated in the face of the possibility to speak to almost four-fifths of the class, 20 of the 26 students, about their experiences. This may seem like the abandonment of my "purposeful sampling" plan of choosing students to interview (Maxwell, 1996), where students are picked for particular attributes or as representatives of groups of interest, but

it is actually an enhancement. These students, in this class, with this teacher, at this school, were all chosen for specific purposes, that is, because they represent an educational ideal, high-achievers in an advanced class taught by a renowned teacher at a suburban school with a reputation for rigor and a college-prep atmosphere. Within the class, it was my intention to interview selected students to represent the class, and so the opportunity to interview more of the students, representing all the initial grouping categories I was going to use to choose just a few, was a gain for this work. While it could be pointed out that there is a bias toward people who would volunteer to be interviewed, all the students who did not volunteer were in class peer-groups which were represented by those interviewed. All racial and ethnic groups in the class were present among the interviewed students.

Interviews took place in a variety of settings, most in the school cafeteria before or after school, but several took place in the school library and one was done in a coffee shop off the school's campus. The settings were chosen with a mind toward maintaining privacy yet keeping interviews in public settings where the researcher and the student were never really alone or out of sight of others. This later point was an idea impressed upon me while I was a teacher, that being alone with students can lead to accusations of abuse, but for the purposes of this research another consideration was student comfort, since I was an adult that they did not know well. Sitting in isolated but visible parts of the cafeteria or library seemed to work best for these interviews though, on one occasion, a crowded and noisy coffee shop proved to work well, even though it made the transcribing a bit more challenging. All of this was taken into account as I considered the possible effects I might have, as an interviewer, a researcher, an adult speaking to students, and a

person from outside of the school, on those I was interacting with (Angrosino & Mayes de Perez, 2000; Fine et. al., 2002; Kirsch, 1999).

These interviews followed a partially-structured format (Bogdan & Biklin, 2003; Carspecken, 1996; Scheurich, 1995) to allow for a certain indeterminacy in what I would find, an indeterminacy consistent with the open nature of qualitative research, my interest in exploring this particular context in depth (Maxwell, 1996), and the Deweyian pragmatic tone of this work. In simpler terms, I had some idea what might come up, but I did not assume that I knew everything, and wanted to make some room for students to bring out pieces that I had not anticipated or imagined. As it happened, these interviews ranged over a broader scope of topics than I'd initially intended, and these were incorporated into the study. To facilitate this openness, yet maintain some continuity between interviews that would help me to get at my specific interests and would also facilitate comparison and analysis, I did not use set interview questions, nor did the topics I addressed follow any set order. Instead, I brought with me to each interview a list of thematic talking points. As the interviews progressed, sometimes starting off with a few simple questions about name and classes and such, other times flowing right from pre-interview conversation into the interviews themselves, I would glance from time to time at the talking points and attempt to guide the interview so that all of them were touched-upon. Though the interviews did share some commonalities, all were different, and student responses to the different talking points varied quite a bit.

The interview format also followed the idea of "active interviewing," (Holstein & Gubrium, 2002) because, in asking these successful students and their teacher critical questions about their class, school, and experiences, I found myself not only questioning

their beliefs about school and purpose, but also providing them with alternate frames for their answers. Instead of operating from the perspective that I was gathering “data” and should step back from influencing this collection by adopting a neutral tone, I participated in the interviews as conversations, or as much like conversations as I could within the framework of a taped interview with a graduate student doing research. This meant that I pressed, challenged answers, or proposed alternative possibilities, more mildly with the students and more explicitly with the teacher, since the students were younger and viewed me as a teacher-like figure, while the teacher is my own age and not a reticent individual. In addition, the teacher was involved from the beginning of my study with its critical and questioning aspects, and as I shared my ideas and interpretations with him, he used these as an opportunity to air his own speculations and questions.

Faculty interviews worked along a similar framework and structure. Though we had occasional conversations before and after class which I added to field notes, I conducted five interviews with the teacher, four of these lasting around an hour and one about twenty minutes. Four of the five interviews were tape-recorded, one was done using notes. I also interviewed the other AP US History teacher, Mr. Brown, as well as Mr. Schlieffen, one of the two AP Government teachers; in the end I talked to three of the four AP Social Studies teachers at Fairlawn. Mr. Brown and Mr. Schlieffen were each interviewed once, and each interview lasted one hour. Finally, I interviewed the school principal, Dr. Riveli, twice, once for half-an-hour using a notepad, and once for an hour-and-a-half using a tape-recorder. Mr. Elliot was interviewed for obvious reasons, and these interviews provided not only the opportunity to talk to Mr. Elliot, but also the

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opportunity run by him my ideas, observations, and initial conclusions, to carry out a bit of “member checking,” as they say (more on this below). Mr. Brown and Mr. Schlieffen were interviewed to provide more insight, from different directions, into the AP social studies experience at Fairlawn and high-achieving students and their culture generally. There are two AP US History sections at Fairlawn High School, and Mr. Brown teaches the other one. Mr. Elliot and Mr. Brown work together to plan the AP US History class and to choose the students, and often share ideas, opinions, strategies, and even frustrations as the year progresses. Mr. Schlieffen teaches AP Government, the other AP social studies class at Fairlawn, and aside from his experience teaching high-achievers in an AP class in general, Mr. Schlieffen also has many of Mr. Elliot’s former AP US History students, who took AP Government as seniors after taking AP US History as juniors. Dr. Riveli was interviewed to get a different point of view on the school and its functions, as well as on high-achievers, the community, and Mr. Elliot and his teaching. I also had brief, unrecorded conversations with the director of guidance, Mr. Riveli’s secretary, a substitute teacher who covered Mr. Elliot’s class one day. These conversations mainly covered the topic of how good a teacher Mr. Elliot is, a topic which these individuals brought up, and held forth upon, with no prompting from me.

As mentioned above, the partially-structured, active interviewing process was employed with a mind toward creating space for the unanticipated. This space was not just necessary because of my inability to fully anticipate what I might find but also because it was the point, to a great extent, to see what was happening with high-achiever culture. Openness was thus necessary because, if I already knew what was there and just what to ask about or look for, there would have been little reason to spend all this time

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and effort doing a study. The whole point of qualitative work, particularly ethnography, is to see what is there or, rather, to create an account of what is there, bearing in mind that such an account does not tell what is “there” in any objective sense, but rather in an interpretation of the ‘there’ that was the immersion of the researcher in the setting in the context of the researchers goals, beliefs, methods, and purposes. The partially-structured, active interview process fits with all this by taking seriously the idea that the participant and interviewer are engaged in making meaning (Holstein & Gubrium, 2002; Scheurich, 1995). Furthermore, given that research must take responsibility for its possible effects (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Fine, Weiss, Weseen, & Wong, 2000) which might include changes in the participants’ views, an active approach makes this possibility a part of the interview itself.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was approached as an ongoing process, begun while observations and interviews were still in progress and continuing afterwards (Maxwell, 1996). Analysis began on the first day of observation, when I typed up the fieldnotes I had taken and recorded the thoughts, impressions, and ideas that I drew from that initial experience. As already mentioned, I typed up all fieldnotes, most often immediately after the class observed, and this process always involved more than retyping what was written in the notebook. Typing up of fieldnotes also afforded opportunities to look for emerging themes, regularities in speech and behavior, certain ways of addressing ideas or topics, and the like, as well as the chance to reflect on how the classroom was looking the same and different as observations continued. Emerging themes were looked for in later observations and incorporated into research memos and interviews.

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Transcribing interviews also presented an initial opportunity for analysis. As I did all the transcribing myself, I became very familiar with the interviews, and while transcribing I took notes on pieces which stood out, themes across interviews, or other items of interest. Later, when reading through the transcripts of the interviews, I had the notes to use as a resource, one which not only gave me some ideas about what to look for, but some insight into the ways I was looking, how it had changed and stayed the same between the time when I was transcribing and the time when I was re-reading and performing further analysis. My thoughts recorded in fieldnotes, my research journal entries, and my transcription notes, along with my research memos, were all quite helpful in establishing what stood out for me and what I ended up leaving behind, as well as reminding me of where I had started off. This helped prevent me from getting swept off by new ideas as they arose and forgetting other, older but still important notions.

Dedicated analysis occurred in two stages, one halfway through data collection and one as data collection was wrapping up. The first analysis involved a read-through of all notes, journal entries, memos, fieldnotes, and interview transcriptions, in search of themes and ideas which could be used to monitor what was emerging in the course of the work and to shape and direct the second half of the study. The second stage, which really represented the start of analysis as a focal process, began in earnest as interview transcription came to a close. Again, I started with a read-through of all notes, journal entries, and conceptual memos and making a list of themes, commonalities, and possibilities. Then I read through all the fieldnotes and made a similar list, and read through all the interview transcriptions and made two more, one for the student interviews, one for the faculty interviews. These lists were then used to construct an

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overall list of themes, which were then organized into categories, then shuffled around until they began to form a coherent picture. Having put together the master category list, I returned to the data to re-check the categories, fill in specifics on the master list, and so to begin to construct an account.

This form of analysis was drawn, very broadly, from Weis and Fine (2000) and Bogdan and Biklin (2003), but the read-through and categorize plan also relied on recommendations from Seidman (2006). I did use the categorization process to “fracture” the data (Maxwell, 1996), to take it apart and recombine it thematically, but my “coding” process operated from an annotated master list of themes and categories which I used to reference parts of transcripts and fieldnotes, rather than from cutting up transcripts as some recommend. The use of a master category list also operated to insure that I returned to the data periodically during my analysis. When I wanted to refer to a particular part of my fieldnotes or interview transcripts, I went back and looked at that event or statement in context, which kept me close to the data and reminded me of where various pieces had come from. The repeated returning to the data and to the themes, coincidentally (or perhaps not) close to Dewey’s recursive process of experience, was also meant to fit my general practice of writing, which is to return to the information time and again until I can envision how I wish to write about it. In this spirit, the master category list became not just an organizational tool but also a writing guide. The re-shuffling and re-organizing of data into categories, and the reworking of categories to find connections, commonalities, disagreements, eventually turned from categories into sections and chapters.

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Addressing Validity and Generalizability

As with any study, issues of validity and generalizability, of the authority of the research to say what it says and its applicability beyond the immediate setting, arise and must be addressed. Neither of these terms, here, is meant to be used in the terms employed in statistical analysis, that is, as in terms of accuracy of measures or the applicability of findings from a sample to a population. Indeed, I agree with Donmeyer (1990) in his skepticism of the generalizability even of statistically-based work, but that's a whole other argument. On the results of ethnographic studies, Geertz (1973) claims:

They are interpretations, or misinterpretations, like any others, arrived at in the same way as any others, and the attempt to invest them with the authority of physical experimentation is but methodological slight of hand. Ethnographic findings are not privileged, just particular: another country heard from. To regard them as anything more (*or anything less*) than that distorts both them and their implications, which are far profounder than mere primitivity, for social theory. (p. 23)

Nor is it assumed that validity means a match up between an objective classroom reality and the account of it which I provide (Schofield, 1990), nor that generalizability means proof or prediction. As I am employing these terms, validity is a matter of evidence, of warrant, of attempting to produce an account that, if it is not the same account that anyone would produce, is one that could be seen as connected to, and derived from, the observations and interviews which I carried out:

The goal [of qualitative research] is *not* to produce a standardized set of results that any other careful researcher in the same situation or studying the same issue would have produced. Rather it is to produce a coherent and illuminating description of and perspective on a situation that is based on and consistent with a detailed study of that situation. (Schofield, 1990, p. 203)

In addition, I will try to meet the criteria that Jackson (1990, drawing on Wolcott, 1990) puts forth when he says that:

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We should all try...to be as credible, balanced, fair, complete, sensitive, rigorously subjective, coherent, internally consistent, appropriate, plausible, and helpful as possible. (p. 154)

I especially like the bit about plausibility and helpfulness.

While I agree with Maxwell (1996) that method does not guarantee validity, and that validity is something to aim for rather than something to be produced, there are still some steps one can take to aim for it. Already mentioned was my use of research memos, a research journal, recording of thoughts and ideas, and repeated returns to each of these, all of which were meant to keep me aware of my research process and thinking and to share those thoughts with others (Hatch, 2002; Hamilton, Pinnegar, Russell, Loughran, & LaBoskey, 1998). Member checking (Denzin and Lincoln, 2002; Fine, et al., 2002; Maxwell, 1996; Weis & Fine, 2002) came into my study as I ran my interpretations and ideas past the teacher of the class I studied, in the course of the five formal interviews I carried out with him as well as in informal conversations before and after class visits. In producing my account of high-achiever culture, I attempted to use multiple data sources and points of view (Maxwell, 1996; Weis, 1994), an idea sometimes referred to as “triangulation.” I performed observations, carried out interviews, and collected documents. Interviews were carried out with as many students as volunteered, to get as many perspectives as possible. I also interviewed not only Mr. Elliot, the teacher of the class I studied, but also two of the other three AP social studies teachers, as well as the principal of the school. I also had shorter conversations with the director of guidance, the principal’s secretary, and a substitute teacher who taught Mr. Elliot’s class one day while I was observing. Finally, I have endeavored to look for “validity threats” (Maxwell,

1996), alternative explanations for what I was seeing, and to include alternative explanations into my results as a way of questioning my interpretations.

Generalizability, coming from a study of a particular class, is here a matter of fit, in situational or thematic terms, with other settings, as well as one of usefulness in prompting questions. This is, as the reader may have ascertained, a study of one classroom. As such, it cannot be said, in some senses, to represent the culture of any other classroom or school. Yet the goal of this study is not simply to describe one classroom, but rather is to gain insight into a larger culture of high-achievement, widespread practices and learning associated with the culture of high-achievement, and the relationship between these features of school and their societal context. Thus, there is an assumption here that the findings of this study will be applicable beyond their immediate setting, though this assumption does not extend to the idea that these findings will be generalizable in a statistical sense.

To start off, generalizability, in the sense of direct application of the findings of this study to another setting, is not a desirable or even a possible goal given the philosophical commitments of this work. This study's Deweyian, cultural, pragmatic features deny that any site of culture could be completely described beforehand, since the culture is created even as it guides participation in the learning activity. Given this, no study about any particular setting could be said to fully describe any other setting. Additionally, as a work of qualitative research, this study does not aim for the same narrow sort of generalizability that is required of quantitative studies (Schofield, 1990). Insights about the "system" of high achiever culture, to use the Wolcott's (1990) term,

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will not tell us anything definite about what any one student will do in any other setting, a point similar to that made by Donmeyer (1990) and Kohn (2006).

Still, there are several ways in which this study's applicability can extend beyond its own immediate setting. First, there is the idea that a culture of high-achievement could exist in any number of other schools, and while the situations and enacted cultures will not be exact matches, work in one area can inform ideas about others. Other ethnographic work does seem to indicate that such connections do exist. As an example, Eckhart (1989) pointed out in *Jocks and Burnouts* that she found variations of the Jock/Burnout cultural dichotomy in existence across different schools in different towns. Indeed, the very idea of "culture," as it is used in educational and sociological research, implies that there are similarities that cut across specific situations and bind together groups with comparable experiences. Other qualitative researchers have used terms such as "transferability" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, cited in Donmoyer, 1990) or "fit" (Schofield, 1990) to indicate that findings in one setting might be applied to other, similar settings. Thus, my findings about this particular group of high-achievers, while not definitive about any other group, can certainly provide some insight into the educational experiences of high-achievers in similar situations elsewhere in the American educational system.

Along a different line, and following both my qualitative methodology and my use of narrative, this study will aim for what Eisner (1997a, 1997b), Bruner (1991, 1995), and Bochner and Ellis (1996) call "verisimilitude," a notion of fit that goes beyond the exact conditional similarity that is characteristic of experimental generalizability. The sense of the culture of high-achievement, the meanings attached to schooling and the

possibilities realized in this classroom, may find some connection to schools that are not exact replicas of the school that will be the site of my study. Still, students and teachers may note that this study of the high-achiever culture resonates with their own educational experiences, perhaps even giving them new insight into their lives and work. Ideally, this study will, in the sense of verisimilitude, “hit the nail on the head” regarding high-achiever culture, forming a connection between the specific site of my work and other schools and settings and giving others a broader perspective and more power in viewing their own surroundings.

Setting and Participants

In studying the culture of high-achievement, I wanted to pick, not only high-achieving students, but an advanced class with a “good” teacher at a high-achieving school. In studying the “best and the brightest,” I wanted an environment that represented, at least to some, an excellent public high school. In this way, this study of high-achiever culture would be a study of what our educational system does when it works well, with motivated students, a highly qualified, experienced, and passionate teacher, at a well-funded, relatively new high-school with a reputation for rigor and a high-rate of college attendance among graduates. In many ways, Fairlawn High School is a good school, and in the context of carrying out my study I came to admire the workings of this school in some ways, including the work of Mr. Elliot. But I was also there to question what I was seeing, and, in a larger sense, to question just what this large, rigorous, suburban high school, and the culture of high-achievement as manifest in Mr. Elliot’s class, stands for in education.

There were other factors that went into the selection of this class and these students in particular for a study on the culture of high-achievement. The AP class is ideal because such classes attract the sort of students that are the focus of this study, that is, “high-achieving” students. High-achieving here means students who perform well in their classes (they get good grades), who work at the honors or AP level, who are recognized as high-achievers by their teachers, and who are involved in school or extra-curricular activities such as organizations, clubs, teams, music, and the like. These features were chosen because they appear as attributes of high-achieving students in other work (Eckhart, 1989; Fisher, 2005; Gayles, 2005; Hebert & Reis, 1999; Pope, 2001; Rizza, 1999; Wineburg, 1991) and because grades, advanced classes, and school activities can, because they figure prominently in college applications, be taken as common measures of school success.

I choose a social studies class for particular reasons as well. Social studies is the subject area which takes, as a major reason for its existence, development of students-as-citizens, a topic well within my area of concern as a researcher working from Deweyian ideas. Secondly, I have studied history and economics in college, I read large, unwieldy history books for fun, and I have taught high school history and other social studies classes. Thus I am conversant with the subject matter and teaching practices of such classes. This familiarity allowed me to better understand and interpret the students’ work and also what is happening in the classroom. High school was my preferred age group for several reasons. High-achievement at the high-school level, with honors and advanced classes, takes on a different role than at other levels. Also, in my experience as a high-school teacher, high-school students are accomplished and aware players of the school

game, and they are thinking very much of their identity as high-achievers as they prepare for college. This impression is backed by Pope's (2001) work. Also, I am familiar with the age group and comfortable working with them, which will contribute to my ability to work within the high school setting.

This section, on setting and participants, is divided into two main parts. The first is a description of the community, school, teacher, and class, put together with statistics drawn from census and school data, as well as from self-reported information from the teacher and the students. This part is presented in a traditional mode, descriptive and with many numbers, and it does present some information which tells quite a bit about the site and the participants. The second part of this section takes a different stance, a description of my arrival at Fairlawn and the view from the school hallways and Mr. Elliot's classroom. This section is meant to round out the picture of Fairlawn, to give the reader a more complete impression of this site.

The Fairlawn Community and Fairlawn High School

Fairlawn High-School is located in Fairlawn, a suburban community located in the middle of a Midwestern state, only a few miles from the state capital and the campus of the state university, and functions as a bedroom community for people who work at both the capitol and the university. The old town center of Fairlawn is a stoplight and a set of two-story buildings around an intersection, but Fairlawn has grown to include a mall to the north of the old town and a strip of shops, gas stations, restaurants, coffee shops and other businesses that crowd around an exit for the freeway that runs south of Fairlawn. With a population of approximately 23,000, Fairlawn is a majority white community, with 75% of residents falling into this category. African-Americans make up

12% of the population, Hispanics another 12%, Asians 4%, American Indians 1%, which sounds impossible since it adds up to over 100%, but some people are double-counted as more than one race (U.S. Census Bureau).

The median household income for Fairlawn residents is \$62,810, above the U.S. average of \$41,994, and the per capita income is \$33,401, as compared to the U.S. average of \$21,587. Families below the poverty level make up 3.3% of the population, below the 9.2% that is the U.S. national average. On a census map of the state, Fairlawn shows up as the most affluent area in the center of the state (U.S. Census Bureau). In terms of occupations, 60% of Fairlawn residents work in management or professional fields, another 24% in sales and office occupations. Of the remainder, 10% work in service occupations, 3% in construction, extraction, and maintenance, and 5% in production, transportation, and material-moving occupations. While the definition of “middle class” is imprecise, Fairlawn can reasonably be described as a middle-class community. The household income definition of middle class, operating off of the median household income of \$46,326, or on other definitions which place the middle class household income from somewhere in the range of \$40,000 to somewhere in the range of \$200,000 (Cashell, 2007), fits Fairlawn either way. Additionally, the preponderance of professional and managerial occupations meets the general conception of the middle-class as the corporate, professional class (e.g. Eckhart, 1989; Lareau, 2003).

Approximately 1400 students attend Fairlawn High School. The student population is 75% white, 14% Asian, 8% Black or African-American, 3% Hispanic or Latino, and less than 1% American Indian/Alaskan Indian (Fairlawn High School, 2007).

Fairlawn fits the definition of a “high-achieving” school as employed in a study of high-school science teaching and school culture (Carlone, 2003), with high-achieving meaning a middle-class population and a high (97%, for Carlone) rate of college attendance. Of the Fairlawn graduating class of 2006, 97% of students continued on to post-secondary education, 74% of those at four-year schools, 24% at 2-year schools. The drop-out rate was 1%. Similar statistics run all the way back to 1996, which is as far back as the information I got went. The percent continuing their education ranged from 88% in 1997 to 97% in 2006, the highest, but all the percentages save the 1997 numbers were in the 90’s (Fairlawn High School, 2006).

Fairlawn High School was included in Newsweek’s top 1,200 high-schools in America, the top 5% of the 27,500 public high-schools in the country. Fairlawn came in at right around 800. Using the statistics and criteria of the Newsweek report, the Fairlawn guidance department report places Fairlawn in the top 3% of public high-schools in the United States, and the top 1% of public high schools in the state. Of the class of 2006, 71% of the class was honored by the state for their performance on standardized state assessments, each receiving \$2500 from the state to be used at an in-state university. GPA distribution at Fairlawn angles toward the high-side. Of the total population for the 2005-2006 school year, on a four-point scale, 47% had a GPA between 3.5 and 4.0, 29% were between 2.8 and 3.49, and another 19% were between 2.0 and 2.79. Only 5% of Fairlawn students had GPA’s below 1.99, and only 1% below 1.49. As for the AP program at Fairlawn, in 2006, 245 Fairlawn students took a total of 473 AP exams (Fairlawn High School, 2006).

Mr. Elliot and his 1st Hour AP US History Class

There are two sections of AP US History at Fairlawn High School, one taught by Mr. Elliot during first hour, the other taught by Mr. Brown during sixth hour, the last of the day. Mr. Elliot has been teaching for a dozen years, and teaching AP US History for seven of them. Mr. Brown has been teaching AP US History for four years. They work together on the class, though each teaches according to his own style: Mr. Elliot has been teaching for a dozen years. He is renowned throughout the Fairlawn High School, praised by every individual I ran into and by his current and former students. The praise I heard was sometimes in response to direct questions about Mr. Elliot's reputation, as it was when I talked to his colleagues in the social studies department, but in many cases the praise was offered without solicitation on my part, a spontaneous response when people found out that I would be spending time observing his classroom. The principal, the director of guidance, the secretary in the principal's office, all gushed about Mr. Elliot without any prompting from me.

Mr. Elliot has a B.A. with high-honors from State University, with a major in History and a minor in French. He has an M.A. in Curriculum and Teaching, also from State, and is working on completing a second M.A., this one in Humanities, from another university in the state college system. Along with AP US History, Mr. Elliot teaches or has taught World History, Economics, French, History of Film, 20th Century Humanities, and Psychology. He is on various school committees relating to curriculum design, building planning, tolerance and community issues, and training and planning involving online curricula and the FHS computer grading system. He is also a member of two North Central committees that focus on curriculum planning. Aside from teaching at Fairlawn,

where he did his student teaching and where he has taught full-time since 1996, Mr. Elliot also spent a year teaching at a Comprehensive Secondary School in England as part of a Fulbright International Teacher Exchange Program. He is a regular attendee at conferences and workshops relating to teaching.

AP US History is a prestigious class at Fairlawn High School, and one of the only two AP's offered in the social studies department, the other being AP Government. Most students who take AP social studies take AP History as juniors and AP Government as seniors, though some take both simultaneously. All students take regular US History their freshman year, and World History as sophomores. The AP results from the two sections are impressive: in 2005, 51 students took the AP US History test, 37 of which got a "5" and 13 a "4," with one "2". In 2006, the "5" and "4" numbers were 36 and 9 respectively, with the remaining 2 students receiving a score of "3". To take AP US History, students must, the spring semester before the fall in which they want to take it, go through an application process. They must fill out an application form (which warns of dire consequences for incomplete or falsified applications) and take a 45 minute multiple-choice history entrance exam. In the selection process, equal weight is assigned to overall GPA, teacher recommendations, adjusted GPA for social studies and English classes, and the score on the entrance exam. Two interesting tidbits – there is a definite similarity between these criteria and the criteria by which students are classified as "high-achieving" in education literature and, secondly, Mr. Elliot has expressed some concern that the process selects for students who are good at playing the school game. Once the application process is complete, Mr. Elliot and Mr. Brown rank all the students according to these factors and then hand pick their students for next year, aiming to get around 50,

or 25 for each class. Of the 83 students who applied to be in AP US History this year, 56 were accepted, an acceptance rate of 67%.

It is reported to be something of a big deal to get into AP US History, and even though not all students agreed with this assessment, the two that disagreed have the highest GPA's in the class, so for them, perhaps it was not as big a deal. There is a certain feel of *esprit de corps* that inhabits the AP US History class. The application process contributes to this, as do class meetings the spring semester before the fall semester where the students take the class, and summer work including reading books and watching movies which pertain to the topics of AP US History, and writing reports on the same. Every year, the AP US History classes make t-shirts, which they wear to take the AP together. (In a rather interesting turn of events, in terms of researcher involvement, my name was a prominent part of this year's 1st hour class' t-shirt, which would seem to rule out any thoughts that I was an unobtrusive presence in the class) Mr. Elliot and his students also engage in class study-sessions before the AP exam, consisting this year of two three-hour sessions, one the week before the exam, the other the night before. Mr. Elliot also gave his students a two-and-a-half hour review session before their fall-semester final exam.

Mr. Elliot's first hour AP US History class has 26 students, one over the target class size of 25. There are 14 girls and 12 boys, all but one of whom participated in the observational portion of the study. Of the total of 26, 20 of them volunteered to participate more intensively in the study by being interviewed. Having not worked with any other student populations, I cannot make any comparative statements, but I can attest to the willingness of high-achieving students to participate in research, or at least in this

study. Perhaps I gave a particularly compelling description of my work. Four of the students are seniors, the rest juniors. Of the 25 participating students, 19 identified themselves as white, two as Asian, one as Hispanic, and three as “mixed” (white/black, white/Hispanic, white/Asian). Their parents are a mix of doctors, lawyers, professionals, professors, small-business owners, teachers, and office workers, and five of the students had stay-at-home moms. The students’ GPA’s, upon applying for AP US History, ranged from 3.585 to 4.0. As students taking an advanced class, with good grades, participating in one or several extracurricular activities, and with good enough teacher recommendations to get into AP US History, they qualify as high-achievers as defined in various realms of educational research (Eckhart, 1989; Fisher, 2005; Gayles, 2005; Hebert & Rice, 1999; Pope, 2001; Rizza, 1999; Wineburg, 1991).

Arriving at Fairlawn High School, December

“We shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us.”

Winston Churchill

Fairlawn High School sits in the middle of a field, in an area that was once farms and still is if you drive for a couple minutes. Most of my drive to Fairlawn, which took me from the vicinity of the state university in about ten minutes, was through farm fields, white and empty and stubbly on dark winter mornings like this one. The darkness is something that takes some getting used to. I have become accustomed to my cushy graduate student existence, one which has seldom involved alarm clocks. After a long time out of the high-school classroom, there is part of me that was slightly shocked to recall that high-school students, and their teachers, are in their classrooms before the sun at this time of year.

Aside from farms in the area, there are businesses which line Baxter Road, the four-lane road which runs in front of FHS, as well as a large and modern-looking church. Starting on the next block down from FHS you can find the sort of suburban developments that people refer when they talk about “sprawl,” large houses on curving residential lanes, all rather close together. Continuing down Baxter Road, you find an area of strip malls, gas stations, restaurants, and stores. Many of them are clustered around the intersection of Baxter and Fairlawn Road. Just south of Baxter is the interstate, and there is an exit which connects the interstate to Fairlawn Road. This means that the intersection of Baxter Road and Fairlawn Road looks like a thousand freeway exit strip-mall sections in a thousand American towns, with a McDonalds, a Cracker Barrel, tall gas-station signs, and plenty of traffic, especially around morning and afternoon rush hour when the commuters leave Fairlawn or come home.

On this morning, I arrive at Fairlawn High School about fifteen minutes before school starts. This is not the best idea; making a left turn off Baxter Road into the front entrance of Fairlawn, fifteen minutes before school starts, is neither pleasant nor advisable. There is no turn lane, and there are lines of cars, coming from both directions, waiting to get into this entrance. We unfortunate people who must make left turns not only get to wait for all the people turning right, but we also get to block a whole lane of traffic, which seems to endear us to few. And this is not even the entrance the students use; faculty use it, but they are all already at school. School buses use it, but they, too, have already arrived. All the cars I am competing with are driven by parents who are dropping their students off. They may be fine parents, but they aren't much for letting people into the traffic stream.

After finally making a hair-raisingly quick turn into the driveway ahead of a clump of oncoming traffic, I head for the visitor lot and park. The school looks new, the brick walls and many windows clean, and it is in fact a dozen years old. It is a rambling structure, yet imposingly tall in some parts, noticeably the three gymnasiums, the auditorium, and the library, which has a peaked, translucent glass roof. The building has a main section with offices, the cafeteria, and the library, four classroom wings, and the fine arts and sports wing which includes art and music rooms as well as the auditorium and gyms. The classroom wings have turrets at their ends, and there is another turret in the front of the building by the main entrance; these contain stairwells, and the break up the angular lines of the building.

Walking into the main entrance, the door nearest the visitor lot and main office, I join the rush of students, most wearing large backpacks with the straps adjusted so that they hang low. As I enter, I am facing the cafeteria, two stories high, with a glass-windowed front wall which faces the hallway in which I'm now standing. The hallway itself is as tall as the cafeteria, and the effect is impressive, airy, somewhat imposing. I imagine being a new freshman and looking up at that ceiling and being awed, but perhaps these kids are more sophisticated than I was. They'd almost have to be. The tall cafeteria has a tiled floor, which you'd expect, and is full of round tables, eight loose plastic chairs to a table. There is an open serving line, and students go through getting snacks or drinks. The cafeteria smells of school cafeteria food, an aroma that is as distinct as it is hard to describe, something of old grease and heavy processing. It brings back memories. Several of the round tables have students sitting at them, studying before school or just taking.

The lighting is fluorescent but recessed into the ceiling, a different effect than the industrial light strips I've seen in other schools.

To my left is the main office, and I walk in; the first thing I must do when I arrive at the school is sign myself in. The office is clean and new-looking. Two desks sit in the front room of the main office, wooden desks, not the gray metal office furniture usually associated with public schooling, at least as I remember it. There is also a small round table with a couple chairs, where the student assistant sits waiting for errands. The secretaries are businesslike but friendly, and one encourages me to take a piece of candy from the basket on her desk. Signing in is a simple process, consisting of putting my name, purpose, and time-in on a sheet on a clipboard. There are no visitor passes, and in my visits to Fairlawn I have never been required to show any form of identification or documentation of my status as a researcher. When I explored the school, I was never stopped in a hallway and asked why I was wandering around peeking into classrooms. Perhaps I am a particularly innocuous-looking individual, but in my researcher-mind it occurs to me that Fairlawn High School is not the sort of school where they are worried about strangers sneaking in and making trouble.

Leaving the office, I hang a left and head for the classroom wings. Mr. Elliot's classroom is in the "B" wing, on the second floor. The hallway is all jostling, yelling chaos, with students walking, running, standing in groups, sitting against the walls, talking, shouting, eating, punching each other, and laughing. The contrast to the relatively empty and sedate hallways of the College of Education building at the university is striking, and as always my brain begins to throb with the sensory experience of a 1400 student high school five minutes before first period. The halls are carpeted, the recessed

lighting rather subdued, the colors in brownish tones, again different from the bright tile and fluorescent bank lighting of the schools of my teaching and student experiences. The class wings, labeled with letters, have a different appearance than the travel and office hallways. Lined with lockers, with off-white walls, they are taller and lit up brighter. All the classrooms are labeled with numbers and with the teachers' names, indicating to me that many teachers likely have their own rooms, a nice deal. A strident electronic tone sounds in the hallways, the five minute warning, and I pick up my pace. Heading up the stairs to the second floor amidst a jostling herd that puts me in the mind of commuters in New York City, I wonder, as I often do, about the institutionalized nature of mass schooling. As I arrive in the classroom, the two-minute warning tone goes off, a tone even more strident than the five-minute tone and made up of three clashing notes. It sounds like a malicious, synthesized train-whistle.

Mr. Elliot's classroom is carpeted in gray, with off-white walls, a drop ceiling, and fluorescent lighting. It also has the two pull-down map sets and one projection screen that are familiar from when I was in high-school, even elementary school. I wonder if the company that makes those map sets is not the world's most tradition-bound organization, because they look exactly the same as the ones I remember seeing in classrooms twenty years ago. Mr. Elliot's room is covered in posters and pictures. I see a mix of history posters, art, recruiting posters, and pictures of far-off places. Near his desk, there is a wall of personal photos and decorations. There are dry-erase boards, whiteboards, on the wall at the front of the room, where the students face when they sit in their desks. At the back of the room, across from the door, Mr. Elliot has a big teacher's desk and a padded teacher's office chair. Behind this desk is a table on which sits Mr. Elliot's computer.

There is another teacher's desk at the front of the room, in the center, about five feet from the center whiteboard, and next to this desk sits a stool. These, I have learned, are popular sitting spots for Mr. Elliot as he lectures, when he is not pacing or writing on the whiteboard. The classroom also has a television at the front of the room, up toward the ceiling on the right side, and a projector hanging from the ceiling that faces a pull-down screen up by the maps.

Mr. Elliot

Mr. Elliot, the teacher of the first hour AP US History class, is 32 years old. He is not a reticent man. When he speaks, making a point in class, or in conversation, he says what he thinks and gets the whole point out before he entertains a response. He is about 5'10", fashionably dressed most days in slacks and button-down shirts, or sweaters; sometimes he'll show up in a suit. Thin, with a mustache and goatee and short black hair, he is one of the few people I've seen, outside of pictures in history books, to whom the adjective "dapper" applies. He is often in-motion, and his energy stands out during the first hour of the school day. With degrees in history and education, teaching experience here and overseas, and an impressive grasp of the subject which he teaches, he is fun to watch as a lecturer. He tells good stories, adding little bits not found in the textbook, throwing in his own opinions, illustrating his points by modulating his voice and gesturing expansively. He can be seen, at various times, stomping around, yelling, joking, adding sarcastic asides, making scathing criticisms regarding historical figures, or quietly pointing out poignant moments in history.

Mr. Elliot has a reputation as an excellent teacher. Fairlawn faculty and staff, upon learning that I was going to be observing Mr. Elliot's class, lost no time in letting

me know that he is very, very good. The principal of Fairlawn High School, Dr. Riveli, claimed that anything he could say about Mr. Elliot would be “all superlative.” His students also praise him, and even amidst the occasional complaint, often having to do with Mr. Elliot’s domineering style of lecture, their overall response is overwhelmingly positive. His unique educational background is known around the school. His encyclopedic knowledge of history comes out in his teaching. He gets results on the AP test. Mr. Elliot is good at what he does.

The Students of AP US History

On my first days observing, I expect that the students of AP US History, as a bunch of high-achiever-types, will show up to their class early, but this is seldom the case. They begin to filter in as the two-minute tone sounds, and a torrent arrives as class begins with the final tone. They generally continue to trickle in as Mr. Elliot gets things started. They are talkative when they arrive, but when Mr. Elliot begins class, they quiet down immediately. When they do arrive and sit down, they most often sit in or near the same seats every day, and when a student comes in late and sees his or her seat taken, this sometimes results in a look of confusion which I always find a little funny.

They tend to cluster in groups. Helen Wei, Bill Newton, and Sara Pleasanton always sit on the left side. Bill and Helen are in quiz bowl together, and all three are serious students. As Mr. Elliot lectures, Bill will often mumble answers to all the questions Mr. Elliot asks, even the rhetorical ones. Most of the time, Bill gets these answers right. Helen is not as outspoken, but when she and Bill talk they make jokes which require some knowledge of history to be understood. Helen is first-generation Chinese-American, is one of the two students in class who has a straight 4.0, and claims

that her heritage plays a part in her academic achievement. Sara talks little in class, but she loves history, especially the story of it, and Mr. Elliot believes her to be one of his best students. Other students will sit on the left side occasionally, if their seats are taken, but Bill, Helen, and Sara are the regulars.

The middle of the class is a mix. Connor Imboden often sits in the back, near Mr. Elliot's desk, and Thomas Ames usually sits right in front of him. They will work together when the class divides up into groups to do assignments. Connor is a senior, one of the few in the class, and is looking forward to going to college where he can study music. He is taking six AP tests this year, three of which he is studying for on his own. Thomas is the only male student with hair that falls below his ears, almost to his shoulders, and he wears black shirts and combat pants and boots, the exception to the usual jeans-and-shirt look of his counterparts. He is a transfer student, from Florida originally, and is considering the FBI as an eventual career. Connor is outspoken in class, Thomas is usually not. Rachel Early and Janice Warren often sit together too, usually in front of Connor and Thomas. Rachel, who also came into AP US with a 4.0, is a star in AP US, and Mr. Elliot calls her writing publishable. She was hoping that AP US would be more like a college class, by which she means a class that is about learning and not about grades. In this, she has been disappointed. Janice has a quiet way of speaking, claims she is not a competitive person, and plays in the school orchestra. She does not like it when Mr. Elliot fires questions at his students as they sit and listen to his lectures.

There are other groups in the middle. Rich Barlow sits in the middle, but he often sits alone, at the one student desks which is not in a row and is in fact placed in front of all the student desks. He is very low-key, and says little except in response to direct

questions. Reilly Howard and Laura Pender always sit next to one another, and they form part of a larger group which includes, at various times, Emma Armistead, Candice Andueza, Adam Braff, and Andy Meade. Reilly is tall and smiles often, and laughs at all of Mr. Elliot's jokes, while Laura, the other student in class with a Chinese heritage – her mother is Chinese, her father American – is less enthusiastic about class. She does not enjoy school as much as she once did, and refers to herself as “lazy” in her schoolwork. Adam and Andy are seniors, the former wants to be film director and the latter a stage actor. They are seniors, they are the two Jewish students in the class, and they are characters. Adam wears a long wool coat, carries a briefcase, and moves around with a frantic haste. Andy is often late and is the best student in class for shouting out answers and joking and arguing with Mr. Elliot. Candice, who is Mexican-American, is also a senior, also does theatre, and, like Andy and Adam, is less motivated by grades than the juniors in the class. Candice is politically active, and will be taking a year off after high-school to do community service. All three of these seniors will see their GPA's drop this year; lack of motivation. Emma is a quiz-bowl kid like Bill and Helen, and can be found before school in the cafeteria, doing homework. Showing her horse, along with her schoolwork, keeps her quite busy.

The right side of the room is itself a large group, dominated by the student-athletes in the class. The exception to this athletic theme is Allie Meredith, who is more of a musician than an athlete, who always sits in the front corner desk nearest the middle and who, after Andy Meade, is the second most outspoken student in the class. She will frequently argue about assignment due dates and once told Connor to “eat it” when she was running a class discussion on a test date and he disagreed with her. Cathy Kilpatrick,

a soccer player, and Margi Doubleday, a former gymnast who's on the track team, always sit behind Allie. Allie and Cathy often chat, and while Cathy does not have much to say in class, she will occasionally get Allie to make a point for her. Margi, one of the other minority students in class, identifying herself as half-black, doesn't say much but can be seen talking to Jim Schurz, a baseball player, Matt Ward, who is on the basketball team, and Eric Morris, who runs track. Jim has a reputation from his other classes as a smart-ass, but likes Mr. Elliot's class because it is fast-paced and interesting. Eric, one of the only students with a job outside of school, took AP US History because he is a fan of the Civil War, which was not much covered in AP US History. Pete Reynolds, who plays soccer at times, also sits on this side of the room, but he will drift around. He is very earnest, striving to do his work very carefully, and AP US History has been quite demanding for him.

They do not form a unified picture of the high-achieving student. They have varied interests and varied interest in history, they sit in different groups, they laugh at different jokes. They do not all know one another very well – twice when I arrived I ask students to tell me other students' names, and they could not answer me – and this has been disappointing for some, like Candice and Allie, who expected a more close-knit class. Some of them talk constantly in class, others say little, a few do not wish to say more. Most of them like Mr. Elliot as a teacher, and they overwhelmingly claim that his class is better and more interesting than their previous history classes, though a few wish for something more – more discussion, more student excitement about history, less emphasis on grades. But all of them have chosen to take AP US History, a class with a reputation for being fast-paced and work-intensive, and they all listen to lectures, take

notes, and work steadily when given in-class assignments. They are the high-achievers who are the focus of this study, and for all their differences, they are all in this class together.

Sitting in Desks

Mr. Elliot is lecturing, and I am listening from my seat. I am in one of the student desks, as I always am. The furniture in the classroom is of the old style, the desks of the integrated seat-desk type, but they are not old. The shiny, unmarked student desks match the teacher's furniture, which is shaped like the big, gray, metal desks I've seen but made of plastic. For all its newness, though, much of Mr. Elliot's classroom is familiar to me, and not just because I've been sitting in it for weeks. From the neutral colors to the maps and posters to the way that the teacher stands and the students sit, it is a classroom like many others. What is perhaps most intimately familiar to me, however are the desks in which the students sit, and in which I sit with them. They are one-piece units, desk-and-chair together. The chair has two legs underneath it, and is connected to the desk by a diagonal bar on the left side, so that students enter the unit by sliding in from the right. The desk is supported by the other two legs, for a total, for desk and chair together, of four. There is a space for books under the chair, and a little trench for pens or pencils at the head of the desk surface. I have spent a significant portion of my life sitting in some variation of these desks, as have most of us who have gone to school. There is nothing new about them.

If the furniture is built in the same old way, the students sitting in them also adopt poses that are not new to me, though I am perhaps really noticing them for the first time. The desks seem to inspire one of two postures in the students, postures which I, in my

weeks in the classroom, have named the “slouch” and the “curl”. The “slouch” is where the students slide forward on the chair until their bottoms are on the forward edge, splay their legs out in front of them, and rest the top of their back on the top of the chair back. Their body is thus at a shallow, almost laying-down angle, except for their head, which is kept level and facing forward. Students sitting in the other most popular posture, the “curl,” rest their bottoms fully on the chairs and tuck their legs underneath. They lean the top halves of their bodies forward, and their heads are bent over even farther than their backs. The “curl” gets its name from the way these students seem to be curled around the desk, not only in their backs and necks, but also in their arms, which form crescents that outline the paper on the writing surface.

In taking notice of their postures, I find myself sitting up straighter, trying hard to resist either the “slouch” or the “curl,” both of which feel quite natural to me when I attend to them. I also find myself attending to the looks on the students’ faces, looks which at times seem as standardized and functional as the furniture. The students are never all truly still, but when individuals are not talking, responding, questioning, or looking incredulous, they adopt a neutral expression that one might call “resigned.” It seems, to me, that this not-quite-bored, not-quite-excited, energy-saving expression could be one mark of the experienced, professional student. They stare straight ahead, their eyes not quite down but not quite level. In this way, they can avoid accusations of inattention that might come from looking elsewhere while also avoiding the direct eye-contact that might draw a question or comment from the teacher.

The overall impression of all this, when one sits back and tries to take in the room as a whole and the postures of the students as a group, is disconcerting. These students

are shaped by their desks, and the shapes these desks give are not particularly flattering. When the students curl, they wrap themselves around their papers, like bent old men and women toiling at some exacting task, or misers hoarding their money as they count. They almost look deformed. When they slouch, they seem hunkered down against the pounding rain of information. The resigned look gives them the appearance of lifelessness, like the animatronic figures at Disneyland when seen between shows. I have watched lively faces go slack and blank as the teacher throws questions. To see this room of young kids curled up or slouched over or staring blank-eyed at a point between the board and the floor is to wonder what is being accomplished through the routine and regimen of institutionalized education. And this, mind you, is a class which students praise as interesting and even fun, and I have to agree with them about the passion and dynamism of their teacher.

Why notice these things? Is this anything new? Certainly not. But the point is not that anything new is happening in this classroom, but rather that old and unsurprising things are happening, some of them accepted as natural and run-of-the-mill, others not just accepted but even praised as examples of education working well. These students are high-achievers. By measure and by design, they are some of the best at Fairlawn High School, certainly the most talented and dedicated of students to come through the social studies department. Their teacher is experienced and highly regarded. And we educate them (as we educate all) by stuffing them into one piece school desks, wrapping them around plastic and metal and paper, bringing stillness, contorting them, fitting them to a particular model of intellectual engagement. You see, to “think,” to be “smart” to be a “good student” is to be shaped to a passive, contorted existence under florescent lights.

Though many critics of schooling have pointed out its conformist tendencies, I do not mean to place this shaping of these AP students solely into that league. Putting the slouch and curl into the context of knowing and knowledge, they may reveal themselves as occasions of more than conformity, and far more than the adoption of blank expressions or poor posture. The curl, while it is an occasional note-taking posture, is a universal test-taking posture in AP US History. It is a guarded posture. The miserly image may not be far off. The curled-up students seem to be hiding their information, defending it from prying eyes, maintaining a private interaction between person and page, or between person and teacher. Knowledge thus demonstrated is used to measure, and it must be kept close. The slouch, on the other hand, as a posture of resignation, is not guarded but open, and also passive. It is a posture of listening, of the taking-in of information, almost of surrender. Information here is the transfer of fact, Freire's banking model embodied. The slouch and the curl thus seen are not only postures of sitting, but are indeed posture of *learning*, embodied commentaries on the nature of knowledge in education, metaphorical representations of history-as-taught within the particular institution of schooling.

The ways in which the students of AP US History are shaped is my concern, not only how they are shaped by their desks, but also by their position as students, and in particular as students at an elite class at a high-achieving school. This shaping is not a passive affair, as the students adopt these postures themselves, sometimes unthinkingly, sometimes strategically as when they avoid questions or hide their papers. Nor is this solely a matter of the students, since the process of becoming a high-achieving student, and the process of continuing to be one, says quite a bit about the school, the class, the

teacher, and learning and knowledge themselves as these students encounter them. The culture of high-achievement, embodied in one section of AP US History, is a crossroads of theories, intentions, practices, and ideologies that move across levels from the individual to the societal, and as such it is more than a story about these few students. But it starts with them, juniors and seniors with excellent academic records, well-behaved and hardworking, sitting in their classroom, and in their desks.

CHAPTER 4: THE GOOD STUDENTS

Opening - Fifteen Minutes of Mr. Elliot's 1st Hour AP US History

It is another cold, dark morning in January as the tone sounds signaling the beginning of the school day at Fairlawn High School. In 1st hour AP US History, Mr. Elliot is at the front of his room, launching into a lecture. There is no call for quiet or attention. He simply begins, and the students cease their conversations and settle into their seats. Two minutes into the lecture, Allie walks in and takes her seat at the front of the room. Mr. Elliot asks a question about congressional debate and a student at the front answers "the gag rule." Mr. Elliot acknowledges the answer and moves on. Matt walks in late, sits down. Amy is next, and she stops to say hello to Allie before taking her seat. Mr. Elliot pauses in his lecture, turns to the whiteboard, picks up a marker, and begins writing. As soon as the pen hits the board, the students leap into action, and notebooks and pens fly out of bags and appear on desks in with a bustling series of rustles and thumps. As the rustling and thumping fades, the students are writing, faithfully recording Mr. Elliot's notes.

As Mr. Elliot warms to his topic, the students sit quietly, facing their teacher, only occasionally whispering or gesturing to one another. This is not to say that the class is quiet; Mr. Elliot himself is an enthusiastic lecturer who asks frequent questions, and his students talk back to him. Some give answers before he asks. Often the whole class laughs as Mr. Elliot makes one of his more colorful illustrations of a historical point. And yet, while the class cannot be called quiet, it could most certainly be called "orderly." There is noise, but very little extraneous noise, the occasional whispered conversation, but very little talking that is not related to or sanctioned by Mr. Elliot.

Mr. Elliot has turned from the board and is talking again, and here he pauses in his narrative to emphasize a particularly useful piece of information, the perceived role of the U.S. government in depressions in the mid-19th century. “This is important,” he tells the students, “I want this stuff to stick in your head.” Four of his students scribble in their notebooks. He turns back to the board, writes the name of an historical figure. The rest of the students, as a unit, pick up their pens and begin writing. He steps away from the board, takes a seat on the stool that sits at the front of the room, and begins talking again, his voice rising and falling as he speaks. Most students set down their pens.

Eight minutes have gone by. Mr. Elliot asks Mike a question on the method parties used, at that time, to choose their candidates. Mike answers incorrectly, and Mr. Elliot supplies the correct answer and then holds forth for a minute or two on how parties choose their candidates now, connecting and contrasting former and current practices. He then jokingly illustrates the concept of a “dark horse” candidate by asking his students to imagine a complete unknown, “Thomas Crumplebottom,” suddenly nominated for president. In the back of the room, Reilly and Laura, who seem to always laugh at Mr. Elliot’s jokes, supply a snicker. At that moment, Andy, who seems to always show up late, strides in and, finding his customary seat taken, looks confused for a moment before sitting in another.

Ten minutes into class. As the lecture moves into Polk’s campaign for president, Mr. Elliot walks over to the left side of his room and presses play on a CD player he has resting on a shelf there. One of James Polk’s campaign songs, sung by a folksy-sounding guy with a guitar, fills the room. Mr. Elliot gets into it. He grins at his class, sings along, taps a dry erase pen on his hand. Several students smile or laugh quietly. As the song

ends, Mr. Elliot reveals that Henry Clay will also run in this election, and several students groan audibly – Henry Clay’s status as a repeat candidate who never wins, “always the bridesmaid,” as Mr. Elliot says, is a running joke in AP US History, and the students remember it.

High-Achievers in the Particular Institution

“Those are regulars, by God!”

Major General Phinias Riall, Royal Army, at the Battle of Chippewa, 1814

General Riall was remarking on the appearance of Colonel Winfield Scott’s American troops which, though they were dressed in the uniforms of militiamen, advanced in good order like the disciplined regular soldiers which they were. Watching Mr. Elliot’s students produces a similar impression. Fifteen minutes of AP US history on a January morning, and several things stand out. Mr. Elliot begins his class right away, and the students settle in without direction. There are no calls for quiet or attention, and neither are any of the late students called out for their tardiness. Mr. Elliot gives a lively lecture with humorous examples, board notes, connections between historical times, and a song, and he asks only one question in fifteen minutes. The students are quiet, cooperative, and responsive. They listen, they answer, they occasionally laugh. They write down everything Mr. Elliot writes on the board, and little, if anything, else. The students know enough about Henry Clay that some groan when his name is mentioned as a presidential candidate in the 1800’s. As high-achieving students, they are successful within their school, and within the social studies department, as attested to by their presence in this class. They are the “regulars,” well-disciplined and knowledgeable about the work of being students.

This first look at them, then, is one which emphasizes their identity as “good” students, as high-achievers who are known as such by their place within the particular institution that is school. In this study of the best-of-the-best, I start with the students themselves as the best. Schooling itself, a unique cultural environment, and one formed by the idea that knowledge can be taught in decontextualized form to large numbers of students in institutional settings, is the ocean in which these high-achiever fish are swimming. Thus, in this chapter, I come at the phenomenon of high-achiever culture by exploring their position as “good” students, and, in particular, as students who have demonstrated, and who must continue to demonstrate, that they are trustworthy and competent within the context of schooling. As trustworthy and competent students, they have a place within the school, AP US History being the manifestation of that place. Yet this place is at times insecure and difficult to define, and the definitions, boundaries, and contradictions within these two facets of high-achiever culture are important in shaping who these students are, what they do, and how they view their world, and how they are viewed within it.

Trustworthy and Worthy of Trust

Mr. Elliot’s AP US History students know how to act in class. They seldom need to be told to be quiet or to pay attention. They never need to be told to behave themselves. There are no detentions or office visits for these students, no spit wads or snoring to mar Mr. Elliot’s lectures. I never saw an AP US History student disciplined while I observed Mr. Elliot’s class, and Mr. Elliot only needed the occasional “shh” or call for quiet to keep order. They are “good” students in their class behaviors, akin to the on-task and focused students in other “high-track” classes (Oakes, 1986). Mr. Brown, the

teacher of the other AP US History section, calls teaching AP US History “teaching without discipline,” and said of AP students, “I don’t have to discipline these kids. I’ve never had a single conversation with an AP student about their behavior in class” (Interview with Mr. Brown, 1-27-07). Mr. Brown has been teaching AP US History for four years.

These striking student behaviors and activities formed the basis for my first take on high-achievers as the “good” students: their trustworthiness. As high-achievers, they have shown themselves to be students of a certain sort, and in AP US History the structures of work and discipline reflect these students’ unique position. They are given a bit more, brought into the purposes of the class, allowed some flexibility in how they carry out their assignments and in the ways they are “managed.” This is a part of their identity as high-achievers, but it also shapes them, determining the ways in which they must act, yet doing so in ways which show that they can be trusted to do what is expected of them. The culture of high-achievement, seen through this lens, is a culture in which teachers and students exist in a particular relationship, one defined by additional freedoms, on the teachers’ side, and by an implicit promise to use those freedoms in certain ways on the part of the students.

Really, Mr. Elliot’s class is a teacher’s dream. The in-class behavior of the students is really quite striking to this researcher, who is, after all, a former high-school history teacher. Mr. Elliot knows that he can hand out an assignment and, after minimal direction, set them to it and leave the room to make copies; the students will work away, unsupervised, until he returns, a phenomenon I have witnessed. Indeed, both AP US History classes seem to be like this, as Mr. Brown tells it:

...my AP students, I say, alright, here's a series of documents. You've got a series of questions to go with them. I want you guys to get in groups of three, you've got a half hour, you've got to be able to answer these questions when you're done. They will work diligently until they are done, either the entire 30 minutes or until they can answer every question ...
(Interview with Mr. Brown, 1-27-07)

When Mr. Elliot writes something on the board, all of the students take notes. This is automatic, and never needs reminding. They do not have to be told to take out their notebooks; as soon as marker touches whiteboard, the rustling and thumping begins and the pens go to work. Except when starting his lectures, Mr. Elliot does not have to talk over his students, and once he starts talking, they almost always stop. They may speak without raising their hands, and some even argue with Mr. Elliot on occasion, but they are respectful. And when class ends with a lecture, the students sit dutifully in their seats and record what is to be recorded, even after the tone has sounded signaling the end of class. They seldom are seen to pack up early. They leave when he tells them that they may do so.

In academics, they have demonstrated similar dedication. Having gotten the grades, and having signed up for an AP-level class, and in particular having gone through the application process to get into AP US History, these kids have proved themselves. They have proved themselves by their behavior and achievement in previous history classes. Mr. Elliot spoke of their dedication when he described the difficulty in constructing a survey-level course that works for all students:

Because, they, they're so motivated that they're gonna do, they're gonna do all the completion, that's not an issue. And then, they're gonna get all of the "all" questions on test and quizzes and activities and things that you set up, and then so you're trying to set up both activities, as well as rubrics, assignments, et cetera, that somehow have some area of both reward and challenge for those upper level students in the 9th and 10th grade curriculum. (Interview with Mr. Elliot, 1-30-07)

One might say that they have proven that they will act in certain ways, that they “buy in” to the ideals of advanced classes and good students. Mr. Brown, teaching the other AP US section, described the biggest difference between his AP students and those in his other classes as “automatic student involvement,”

...my AP classes, the students are involved every day. They’re asking questions, they’re communicating, ah, they’re workin’ hard. Whereas in my regular classes, you’ll have kids who just come and just wanna shut up for an hour. They just, they don’t make a big stink about bein’ here, but they’re happy just to sit in their desk and just not converse either with myself or with anyone else in the class. (Interview with Mr. Brown, 1-27-07)

Because they have proven themselves, because they will do what is expected of them, and because their expectations match those of the school and the teachers, AP students can be trusted. The idea of “good” as “trustworthy” takes some shape. Mr. Elliot can structure his class, not as a survey course, but as an advanced course, selective in membership and set to operate at a higher level in terms of the content and type of work. He gives his class a bit more flexibility and responsibility, since he can be relatively sure of what they’ll do with it. And he can use the language of personal responsibility, attributing students’ results to their own actions, because these students have shown that they will take responsibility. The students of AP US history, in becoming high-achievers and AP students generally, have bought into the school’s values and assessments, like the “jocks” of Eckhart (1989) or Willis’ (1977) “ear’oles”. Their generally high GPA’s and records of achievement demonstrate this to their teachers. Mr. Elliot and Mr. Brown both acknowledge that AP US History students have succeeded in the past, and they expect to continue to do so:

You know, progress in a 9th or 10th grade class for these kids is an A. There's nothing else. All of these kids were A students, straight A, in all their other history classes, with a couple of exceptions...but in general, their expectation is a perfect A. Anything beneath that is failure. It's not OK. It's failure. (Interview with Mr. Elliot, 1-30-07)

These high expectations also come out in interviews with the students themselves.

Connor described to me how he had "just sort of tuned-out Algebra III honors" and when I asked him if he'd gotten a bad grade, he said, "B+. It was the lowest grade I've gotten, all high school" (Interview with Connor Imboden, 2-13-07). Another student, describing to me how she was not a very stressed-out individual, said:

...I try hard but I don't like beat myself up if I get, like, a B+. If I make, like, a stupid mistake and, you know, like that kinda thing. (Interview with Reilly Howard, 3-1-07)

Having high-expectations, and buying into the school's achievement structure, also manifests itself in the idea that these students are willing to do what they must to succeed, and this includes doing things they do not like or care about. They get their work done, and done well, and they do this whether they personally find it of interest, or enjoy it, or wish to do it.

...like in all, all my classes I'll do the work whether I like it or not, just because, to get a good grade. Like, ah, like my French class. I don't really like it all that much, but I'll do all the homework, as pointless as I think a lot of it is, just so I can get the credit. (Interview with Thomas Ames 2-13-07)

I like getting good grades, you know, I get that...self-appeasement by getting good grades...So I figure, OK, I wanna get a good grade, so I have to do this, so just grind it out, do whatever it takes, and then just move on. (Interview with Jim Schurz, 1-24-07)

...my work is very, quote-unquote, puritan work ethic... You know, I, I just sort of, I just do it...I tough it out because, for one I just find...that the benefits, like the, I feel rewarded when I tough it out and do well. (Interview with Connor Imboden, 2-13-07)

AP US History students, then, come to class to learn, to do their work, to do what is expected to them, and to succeed. Because of this, they are trustworthy, and thus they receive special treatment. The students of AP US History and their teacher have a “bargain” of sorts. Mr. Elliot can treat his students with a certain flexibility because he knows that they will do what is expected of them. The situation in AP US History seems, oddly, to share some features of the “bargain” found in classrooms in the work of McNeil (1986) and Sedlak, Wheeler, Pullin, and Cusick (1986) and also in Pace (2003), where students and teachers agree not to bother one another and academic work suffers as a result. The bargain in Mr. Elliot’s class, however, seems to operate on a rather higher level. These students do not merely stay out of trouble, they are actively engaged and they do good work. And their teacher does not just avoid hassling them, but selects them for an advanced class where he negotiates and lets things slide and talks to them. One of the more popular responses, when students were asked what they liked about Mr. Elliot as a teacher, was that he *cares* about students, and, connected to this, that he knows how busy students are and that he talks to them.

It seems like he’s really enthusiastic about the teaching, I think he really cares about how we do in the class, I feel like he’s really there for us. Like if you have a question maybe you can pop in and ask him. (Interview with Sara Pleasanton, 1-26-07)

I guess it’s just his teaching style. Like, you’ve seen, he’s very, he goes up there, he talks a lot, he’s very, vocal...He puts a lot of energy into his, ah, presentation...it keeps you hooked. He puts some humor into it, he’s, and he’s very, I don’t know, I guess he’s on the same level as all the students, he understands that you have your, you have other tough classes, you have other activities you do (Interview with Thomas Ames, 2-13-07)

In his behavior toward his students, Mr. Elliot is also acting like teachers of other “high-track” classes (Oakes, 1986). This bargain seems to resemble a bargain proposed

by Eckhart (1989) between the “Jocks” in a high school, the kids who find success through compliance with the school system, and the school administration. Although Eckhart’s bargain refers specifically to extra-curricular activities, there is still a trade-off between apparent freedoms and dedication to school values:

The institutions that appropriate student energy and cooperation also socialize participants for a corporate mode of existence. In return for the opportunity to play roles within the school and enjoy the status and freedom associated with them, the student must endorse the corporate norms of the school and the overriding authority of the adults who run it. The school thus strikes a limited bargain with its student population that mitigates, for some, the loss of freedom that attendance imposes. (p. 100-101)

One student even mentioned the relationship between the teachers’ perception of AP students as “good,” the comparative nature of this perception, and teachers’ attitude toward their classes:

I feel kind of like the teachers like their AP classes more than regular classes, because then they feel like, even if it’s not true, they’re getting the brightest and the best, the cream of the crop, these kids want to be here. So if they, appreciate the fact that you are interested in their subject, and you want them to teach you, and so, if a teacher is told, I want to learn about this, they’re gonna, they’re gonna put their best foot forward and, and try and do their best. So I think that has a big impact. I mean, you know, look at Mr. Elliot, how he gets so, you know, energized and emotional about history. (Interview with Andy Meade, 3-8-07)

And yet, their positioning as AP US History students, and their part in this bargain, does not earn them a place where they are finished in proving themselves:

MR. ELLIOT: And when I provide them with a cartoon which is, pretty much, to be honest, quite a step back, you know, um, cartoon analysis is difficult, it’s not the easiest thing in the world, however, because it is primarily just visual, it doesn’t involve interpreting a lot of writing and things like that, students generally have an easier time with this so we give them even though it involves a different slate, a different skill set, it tends to be something that, um, at this level that they find easier. Even when I’ve presented them with cartoons, recently, I don’t, I’m not sure if you

were here when we did the cartoon on reconstruction, ah, had the white league and the, um, the KKK member joining hands.

SW: Nope, I wasn't there that day.

MR. ELLIOT: And they were, they were talking about worse than slavery, the just cause and still about, I'm going to say about ¼ of the class totally misinterpreted it, the, the cartoon. And it's, it's difficult because the things that they're reading are not necessarily wrong, like all the elements but when they put it together they arrive at the wrong conclusion. If that makes any sense. So, I'm looking at the individual pieces "a" they got right, "b" they got right "c" they got right, but when they add the 3 together they don't get "d". They're getting "e" or "f" and it's not like they've gone further, it's that they've gone off track and so it's like, it's been difficult because I feel like I haven't trusted them enough to turn a lot of the locus of control in the classroom over to them.

SW: Right.

MR. ELLIOT: And I'm sure, I'm assuming, I'm sure that you've seen that and then those are choices that I'm uncomfortable with but I have made the choice to do that because of the group and where I feel that they are at certain points. (Interview with Mr. Elliot, 2-23-07)

Mr. Elliot's feeling that his class could do more, and that if they did do more he could give them more "control," clearly fits within the same structure that got them into AP US History in the first place. They must earn their places as students in AP US History, where students get to do work that is higher-level and less just about the facts, but when they get to US History there are still more hurdles for them to get over. They must demonstrate ever higher levels of commitment, showing, not just that they will carry out the more directed and constrained tasks of survey classes, but that they are also capable of working with less direction and direct supervision in AP. If they do this, then they are granted a measure of control in their classroom, and may move on to higher-level tasks.

The feel of this, then, is twofold. First, that much of what goes into these students identification as AP students, the best of the best, worthy of doing better work, is that they are trustworthy. Second, that even when they reach the level of AP US History, they

must continue to work to maintain, even to increase, their worthiness of trust. They are willing to work hard, to behave themselves, to sit quietly, to get good grades. The way the teachers talk about their suitability for AP classes include a combination of reasons, some relating to their academic skill and readiness for “higher” work, others to their past records of achievement, their priorities, their dedication. Indeed, it seems that much of what defines an AP US History student, a high-achieving student, is less their *readiness* and more to their *willingness*. They come in with records which say they are worthy of the trust bestowed upon them in their advanced, AP-level class, and once there, they are far from done.

Competence, but not Too Much

The students of 1st hour AP US History at Fairlawn High School are attentive, clever, compliant in their behaviors yet occasionally pushing the boundaries of their teacher’s forbearance. In all this, they are not only trustworthy, but also good at what they do. They are good students, then, in that they are competent students, able to assess, and to meet, the demands put upon them by AP US History. This is not to say that that they are perfect students, that they have no trouble with this rigorous class, or that Mr. Elliot is not at times frustrated with them. It is to say, however, that they work at a level which has gotten them to AP US History, and in AP US History they are called upon to continue to develop their competence as students, sometimes in new ways. Still, the notion of competence is not without its contradictions, and the tricks of the student trade, while they are necessary for high-achievers, are sometimes viewed as necessary evils by teachers and students alike. Indeed, student competence includes strategies and attitudes which fall outside the boundaries of acceptability in the context of AP US History, as

well as in the contexts of school and of learning. Here I explore the identity of high-achievers as competent students, and the difficulties and questions that arise when competence becomes too much, crossing the boundary into scheming and manipulation.

This competence comes out in many ways, the first being their classroom behaviors. It is very apparent that they know their way around Mr. Elliot's classroom, and know how to get what they need within it. Now, Mr. Elliot gives a fast-paced lecture; his questions are short, and he expects quick answers. In fact, he acknowledges that patience is not his strong point, and that he would like to give the students more room to speak. Some of his students feel this as well; Candice referred to him as "a dictator-ish lecturer." As can be seen in the above glimpse of his classroom, sometimes he gets into a lecture and does not want to stop. When he does ask questions, I have at times had trouble distinguishing whether the questions are rhetorical or merely asked-and-answered too quickly for student input. Taking this into account, students who wish to escape Mr. Elliot's questions know what to do. Specifically, they have learned to stall until Mr. Elliot moves on.

Surprised by a question from his teacher, Adam simply began talking, stringing together words that had appeared in the last few minutes of the lecture. This he did until Mr. Elliot, not getting the answer he wanted, let him off the hook. Similarly, when asked an unexpected question, Leeza looked up from her notes and smoothly rephrased the words in the question to provide two answers without really saying anything. This prompted Mr. Elliot to shift his attention to another student. Matt used a different strategy – when asked a question he did not want to answer, he simply said nothing, waiting until Mr. Elliot asked the question to the entire class. This ability to avoid questions,

apparently, transfers to non-class situations: in an attempt to avoid directly answering a couple of my questions during an interview, Allie began questioning me.

While Mr. Elliot's fast pace gives advantages to students who wish to dodge questions, it presents a challenge to students who do wish to speak. He is reluctant to stop in the middle of a point, even if hands are up, so the eager, too, have found ways. Among her other strategies, Allie will wait for Mr. Elliot to make a mistake on a fact or date, and will then call out the correction from the textbook, earning a place in the sun. She also knows that hand-raising is not always enough, but hand-raising and talking simultaneously sometimes does the trick. Bill, not so bold but quite knowledgeable, will mumble answers to every question Mr. Elliot asks, rhetorical or not. In this way, Bill occasionally draws an acknowledgment. Andy, who aspires to a career in theatre and who knows no such shyness, shouts out any answer or question that comes to his mind, sometimes also raising his hand. Often, he will get a response, too.

As "good" students, the students of AP US History also demonstrate intentional, strategic behavior in other ways, inside and outside of class. As I circulated around the room one morning, observing the students work on a group assignment, Adam expressed his opinion on it: since it was not a test or a lecture, he said, it was "probably not even worth any credit. As long as there's pen in each of the blanks, it will probably be fine" (Fieldnotes, 12-12-06). He called this manner of working "apathy mode." Their note-taking behavior, closely connected to what Mr. Elliot does or does not write on the board, is also an adjustment to what they believe will be important. Figuring out what is important is often a matter of "reading" their teachers, and in general, they seem to have some skill at this. Indeed, all of them are quite good at it, in Mr. Elliot's assessment.

Because of this, they know what hints to look for, when an assignment requires in-depth work and when is merely a matter of filling in blanks, and what will be on a test. This teacher-reading goes beyond the bounds of AP US History:

Well, I'm sure that we all play the game to a certain extent. Um, we know what teachers are looking for, and, we know the quality of work that will get by. (Interview with Pete Reynolds, 2-27-07)

Well, I mean, you kind of learn, like, depending on how much, for example, how much a teacher reviews a certain subject, you know whether that's going to be a big deal or not, you can tell if something comes up more than once or if it seems to have some sort of significance depending on whatever it is, that, it's probably going to be something that you'd need to know, or something that is going to be good to remember. (Interview with Bill Newton, 2-1-07)

For my chemistry class, her homework check-ins are, like, just looking at the paper and seeing that there's writing on it and seeing that it's done. And so playing the game would be, like, filling in, like, just like writing stuff. (Interview with Allie Meredith, 3-2-07)

In math class, you can usually tell, like, if you know your teacher you can, like, guess what the homework is going to be and you can do it during class. (Interview with Cathy Kilpatrick, 3-2-07)

And this sort of thing goes beyond teacher-reading, too. The students of AP US History know, by "instinct" in Helen's words (Interview with Helen Wei, 3-6-07), just how much effort to put in, how much they must do to get by or go through the motions. They tell of being able to get "A's" in many classes by doing the bare minimum, though this is not the case in AP US History, as Mr. Elliot tells me. The students agree, citing workload and difficulty. They also refer to Mr. Elliot's savvy as a teacher:

...he can see past you when you do, like, minimum. He has high demands, because he was kind of a nerd... And so, it's like, you know, you have to do everything too, really intense, and... ..he knows kids' tricks. And he also knows that... kids like skip test day, to find out what's on the test and they try to make it up, he knows that, yeah. (Interview with Allie Meredith, 3-2-07)

In hearing this, Mr. Elliot would no doubt be pleased; the increased difficulty of playing the game in Mr. Elliot's AP US History class is something that Mr. Elliot aims for.

Mr. Elliot's AP US History students are also cognizant of the ways that their work varies, and can be varied, according to content and interest. They know that they study differently for different classes, and even plan to take those classes for different reasons, some for intellectual interest, some for how those classes will look on their transcripts. Of course, they do not claim to be interested in all of their classes, but they have learned to take this into account as well. Approaches to getting homework done, for example, seem to account for variations in interest. One does her fastest work first, so as to get something accomplished quickly. Several related that they like to start with subjects that they do not like, so as to save time for the things they like better, with one indicating that this pass over un-liked work was a quick and not-too-careful one. Some do what is immediately due first and save other work, at times including the notes for Mr. Elliot's class, until later.

It is apparent that, as "good" students in the sense of "competent" students, the juniors and seniors of AP US History demonstrate an awareness of environment and goals, and a concurrent strategic approach to getting what they want. These students' work habits seem to demonstrate just the sort of knowing, intentional approaches that educators would like to see, approaches praised in Rizza's (1999) positive account of the school game. The students of AP US History are "metacognitive," in the words of Rizza and of Mr. Schleiffen, an AP government teacher (Interview with Mr. Schleiffen, 1-27-07). Students described knowing what they "get" and "don't get" as a method of budgeting time and effort. Their frequent comments on "busywork" reflect their sense the

difference between work that requires effort and that which can be completed without much thought. Time management and organization were praised as skills for coping with their large workloads.

In a sense, none of this is terribly surprising. One would expect students in a class like this, in a school like this, to know the score. Rizza (1999), and Pope (2001), have both written accounts of high-achievers' lives and strategies, and both described "playing the game," with Pope even naming her book "Doing School," after the students' characterization of what they do in classrooms every day. It is important to note that "the game," in the sense used here, is the particular game of success in schooling. There may be as many games as there are cultures and discourses, ways to act and to get ahead in various settings. Indeed, some of the above-cited studies on minority student achievement (Gayles, 2005; Hemmings, 1996) examine the challenges some such students may face in playing multiple games. This game emphasized here is particular to schooling, and thus particular to a middle-class, corporate ideal of behavior, thinking, achievement, and success. And the students of AP US History seem to be well-versed in this particular school game. The similarities between the strategic, aware, and at times conniving approach to school shown by the students of AP US History and the approaches employed by Pope's and Rizza's students is striking, and this is important here for the way it links the students of AP US to high-achievers in other high-schools. That being said, "playing the game" is interesting for reasons that go beyond a catalogue of similar behaviors between high-achieving students in different settings, reasons that get at a tension within the game itself and how this tension might play out for the students who operate within it.

This tension occurs in the experience and definition of “good” students when “playing the game” seems to shade into the negative. On one level, such actions seem desirable, but they also have a whiff of corruption about them. At times, as with teacher-reading, it seems that such awareness can easily go beyond strategy and into scheming, and the transition is not quite clear. It is hard to say, perhaps, where being a “good” student ends and where being a schemer begins. Consider the above example of students employing certain strategies in order to participate in Mr. Elliot’s class. Here we have students who are paying attention, who are eager to talk in class, and who are savvy enough to find ways to do so that take the teacher’s particularities into account while not stepping over the bounds of decorum. Yet they are, in a sense, manipulating their teacher through these strategies. In addition, leaving aside the slight feel of manipulation that accompanies these efforts, game-playing may be operating on another level as well. Andy, the non-shy aspiring actor from above, described his in-class questioning and answering in these terms:

I think participation in class really makes you stand out, to a teacher. So, in my classes, I’m always raising my hand to participate. I feel like, if you show the teacher that you want to be there, even if you don’t, it’s gonna give you extra points even if, you know, you don’t wanna be there at all. (Interview with Andy Meade, 3-8-07)

Thus does participation go beyond any desire to participate, and thus do the two types of playing the game – being strategic and asking questions in order to learn and to participate, and being strategic and asking questions in order to kiss-up to the teacher – blend together.

Other examples of the scheming side of the game abound. They include some of the strategies described above, such as teacher-reading, as well as others described by the

students, like doing uninteresting or “pointless” work for credit, knowing and doing the bare minimum, signing up for classes just to pad transcripts, and pursuing grades over interest in learning. Sometimes, students team up to carry out their schemes. Allie described an episode in which she mustered a group of students to all show up late together to AP US after a junior class meeting. They were supposed to go right back to their class after the meeting but figured, correctly, that if a group of them skipped out they would not get into trouble (Interview with Allie Meredith, 3-2-07).

Illegal or discouraged approaches like copying, cheating, and learning without understanding are also associated with the game. Two students, for example, gave accounts of rampant cheating in self-grading in another class, though one denied participating and the other claimed her participation was limited to necessary times. Allie described the widespread (in her eyes) practice of “pattern checking” on standardized bubble-form tests:

...you have your scantron [standardized test form], and then you just look at the person next to you to see if, like, your pattern matches up a little bit. And if it doesn't, you go to the question that is like different on the pattern, you'd be like, no, I know this one is the answer. I do that all that time, actually. Yeah, and so I'll just be like, no, that other person got it wrong...everybody like “checks patterns” you know. ‘Cause that's the easiest thing on...bubble scantrons...actually on the last test we had, like, five answers of “D” in a row. And I get freaked out about patterns. So I just kinda glanced at Pete's and he had five “D's”, and I was like, OK. That's OK. (Allie Meredith, 3-2-07)

Not only does this show a questionable practice of checking out other students' exams, but it also indicates a strategy of test taking, the idea that a set of the same answers, all in a row, is suspicious and perhaps indicative of wrong answers on the students' part.

Cramming is another strategy relating to testing, another way of playing the game. It was always described in unfavorable terms, as a less-efficient way of learning that led only to

“short term” memory. For all that, though, students admitted to cramming, when necessary. As Helen put it, “you gotta do what you gotta do” (Interview with Helen Wei, 3-6-07).

This dual nature of the game, good and useful yet perhaps also underhanded and manipulative, comes out in Rizza’s (1999) and Pope’s (2001) opposing accounts as well. Rizza gives a largely positive interpretation of game-playing behavior among high-school students. Rizza focused heavily on studying and homework in her account, and students playing Rizza’s game take an aware, strategic approach to their studies, consciously used a variety of study methods, and were aware of what worked best for them. Pope (2001) includes such methods but emphasizes a definition of the game that is something more akin to scheming, short-cuts and little tricks that take away from learning and life and give the game a decidedly negative image. Pope emphasizes, among the seeming good qualities of high-achievers, that they are forced to “participate in behavior of which they are not proud,”

They learn to cheat, kiss up, form treaties, contest school decisions, and act in ways that run counter to explicit or implicit rules and guidelines. Often their behavior contradicts the very traits and values many parents, students, and community members expect schools to instill. (p. 149)

Thus does Pope add to her negative portrayal an additional concern, that of the effects of game-playing on the students who participate in it.

It seems, then, that the students of AP US History are walking a fine line as “good” students. The same sorts of behaviors that earn them praise and position, and which are necessary (“you gotta do what you gotta do”) to maintain the grades that are a part of being high-achievers, can turn sour when taken too far or applied in the wrong circumstances. It may be hard to tell which game one is playing, Rizza’s useful and

admirable one, or Pope's unfortunate and troubling one. When students attempt to seek advantage within the approved boundaries, sometimes they go too far. Another example shows how this strategic behavior, calculating in several senses of the word, can switch from admirable to regrettable rather easily:

Mr. Elliot tells them...that the choice is between [a test on] chapters 11, 12, 13 on this Friday, or 11, 12, 13, and 14 next Thursday. When the class hears "next Thursday," the mood changes, heads nod, approving murmurs rise. Mr. Elliot tells them to consider their schedules, what else will be happening this week. Also mentions that he's finished "review guides" for each chapter and thanks them for their patience, noting that these guides are difficult to put together.

Mr. Elliot then asks if anyone wishes to campaign for [one of the] test [dates]. Andy notes that "just in the back row here" there are students who already have two AP tests on Friday – sitting in the row are Connor, Candice, and Emma. Connor speaks up, disagreeing with Andy and saying he wants the test Friday. Opinions fly in a low rumble, but aside from Connor nobody else speaks up.

There is a moment of relative quiet, and then Allie asks if the bigger test will be longer. Mr. Elliot says no, 80 questions like always. Bill asks about the number of questions per chapter, and Mr. Elliot answers that it will be fewer per chapter, probably around 20, in the longer version. Adam says, loudly, that this means there will be less impact if the students don't know a chapter. There are chuckles. Mr. Elliot replies "it's not supposed to be like that." (Fieldnotes, 12-13-06)

As one might expect, the class choose the later exam with the greater number of chapters. This would have been fine had they only been considering their workload and schedules, but in considering what might be to their advantage in terms of the structuring of the test, they stepped over a line, signaled by Mr. Elliot's disapproval. It was Mr. Elliot's encouragement of a strategic approach, of debate and voting on the test date, which inspired the students' pro- and con- conversation in the first place. Yet when they went from acceptable considerations of a convenient date to less-reputable discussion about the effect of the date on the form of the test, Mr. Elliot balked. The way that these two ways of viewing test-scheduling seem very different, yet flow into one another, is indicative of

the already mentioned tension that exists within the idea of the game and in the identity of the “good” student.

This tension seems to cause Mr. Elliot to view his students’ behaviors with a certain ambiguity. He wants his students to be intentional and strategic. He wants to give his busy AP US History class some flexibility in their schedules, and additionally to give them some ownership over their class. In bringing responsibility and strategy together, Mr. Elliot takes a stance that can be seen in Rizza (1999), who brings together her students’ dedication to learning with their aware approach to schooling. It is “good” for students to take control over their learning, to be “goal” oriented (Rizza, 1999), to get on-board with their teachers and classes. Because of this stance, Mr. Elliot will often grant his students the benefit of the doubt, and he is usually willing to negotiate with them. As seen above, the students have some say in the scheduling of quizzes and tests and due dates on assignments.

Like, with Mr. Elliot, he’s a big softy. (laugh) Like, no joke...chapter 21 was supposed to be due today, and, like, this other...imperialism essay was supposed to be due today, and it’s got moved to Monday. Like, big softy. (Interview with Allie Meredith, 3-2-07)

His allowance of negotiation also came out as his students attempted, on another day, to bring about some changes in the project they had to complete over their winter break. Excuses for lost, late, and partial assignments were, at least when I was watching, accepted, though with some hemming and hawing on Mr. Elliot’s part.

And yet, this same strategic approach which Mr. Elliot wants to support can, when it appears at the wrong time, become exasperating for him, as his “it’s not supposed to be like that” shows. It appeared at a wrong time, for example, on the day that Mr. Elliot set up an extra-credit review game for his students. They took far longer to get

ready for the game than he had anticipated, because they had so many questions about the rules and took so long time in preparing their game boards. Concerned about winning the game, because extra credit was at stake, the students took the time to try and find out as much as they could about the game and how they might win it, and they reacted badly when things did not go their way.

8:30 – Mr. Elliot tells them “You know what you’re playing for? A bonus point on next week’s quiz.” Bill makes a comment. “What? Is that not enough?” Mr. Elliot asks, putting disbelief into his voice. Bill backs off, says it’s fine. Blank grid sheets are passed out, and Mr. Elliot projects a list of terms onto the board. The students fill the sheets with terms, and then Mr. Elliot reads descriptions which match the terms which they can then cross off. When they get a full row, they yell “Reform!” instead of “bingo.” (these are questions about reform movements). Mr. Elliot notes that this will be hard, that he won’t give them definitions to use, and that “this is AP.”

8:32 – Many questions on the rules of the game, Bill contributing especially. Mr. Elliot wonders aloud why this is so complicated, says “It’s just bingo,” but then comments aloud that, perhaps, these kids haven’t played much bingo. He then asks “are you finished?” The question is met with a resounding “No!” He tells them to hurry. Mr. Elliot seems impatient. (Fieldnotes, 12-15-06)

Once the playing actually began, the students argued and complained about the conduct of the game and their ability to win. There was groaning, whining, and wheedling:

8:38 – Another question about the rules, this time from Amy. As Amy talks, Mr. Elliot answers “Five in a row, five in a row, five in a row,” talking over her, until she stops talking. Amy and Eric appear to be sharing answers. Laura makes little comments after each question. Clearly, he’s impatient. He seems annoyed, perhaps a bit surprised...

8:39 – Mr. Elliot clarifies a question, “wait, wait” Reilly says. More clarification – it’s a question on the Mormon church, and Mr. Elliot will take either the church name or the founder to make up for his lack of clarity, a solution that seems to satisfy the masses.

8:42 – The game goes on. Allie says “ah, reform!” Mr. Elliot mentions that he’s not looking for straight across anymore, but lines, a point he made before but didn’t emphasize or repeat after Sara won. Mr. Elliot says

he wants a “T” shape now. “Oh, thanks for saying that,” Allie responds, sarcastically. Mr. Elliot says “sorry” but doesn’t sound all that sorry.

8:45 – Mr. Elliot starts to read a description, says “no, that will give it away.” “That’s OK!” many voices shout.

8:46 – Jim asks if his “T” shape can be sideways. Mr. Elliot says yes, Jim says “Ah, Reform.” Mr. Elliot picks up Jim’s paper, says “No more T-shape. We’re looking for a box.” Much groaning. As the kids complain, Mr. Elliot again chides them for being so slow in filling out their sheets, then points out that their whining is depriving them of the chance for additional points since it’s taking up time.

8:48 – The tone [signifying the end of class]. Mr. Elliot does one more description, but there are no more winners. “That was fun,” Mr. Elliot says. The response is sarcastic. “Oh, it wasn’t fun?” He says, pretending to be offended. “Fine! Fine! No games for you!” The kids shuffle out. (Fieldnotes, 12-15-07)

One can see that AP US History students take their extra-credit bingo very seriously.

“Little legalists,” Mr. Elliot called them, after class. And as with the test-moving scene, above, it can be seen that this legalism is “good” strategic and aware and goal-directed behavior showing up in a new and wrong way.

Mr. Elliot is not alone in his ambivalence. The tension that inhabits the “good” students’ strategic behavior is manifest, too, in students’ contradictory attitudes toward game-playing. As with the above “you gotta do what you gotta do,” Several of the students claimed that the game is something everyone must play and that, to some extent, it is necessary. This is especially true if one wants to get into college:

[Playing the game] means learning how to succeed in the environment you’re gonna be in, adapting to different things, and, um, learning from your mistakes ...kids who don’t learn how to play the game, um, don’t succeed. (Interview with Andy Meade, 3-8-07)

Oh, yeah. Well, I think everyone has to play the game, in some sense, to, you know, get by...I guess, by playing the game, I mean...doing the things that you’re supposed to do in order to get...I guess, into college...It’s basically all about college. ...there’s just certain things you

do that...if you do them, and you do them well, then you get rewarded by going to a good college. (Interview with Candice Andueza, 3-1-07)

I've heard people say...you know, even if...you do art, but you still have to play the game, you can't just completely drop out of high school, and pursue that exclusively (Interview with Adam Braff, 2-2-07)

Yet, for all its seemingly wide use, students' descriptions of playing the game did tend to take on a rather negative shade: students described taking "short cuts," doing things they are not happy about, behaving in a manner that may seem, ultimately, to be unfulfilling. For some, the game is perceived as something that has to be done rather than something one would choose. If playing the game is a necessity, than this necessity is also portrayed as more of a necessary evil than anything else. As the "good" students, they are expected to work to a certain standard, to do what needs to be done, to bring a sense of detachment, of adopting a view that enables one to get the job done however one feels about it. Connor described his contradictory feelings in this way:

I don't think there's a problem, I don't think it's a bad system, I think to a, it's very hard to be able to do things purely because you have a genuine interest in them, purely for all those reasons. You always are gonna have to do stuff, because it's there. I mean, it's just the nature...I can't think of anything better...I can say that there's problems with it, but can I do any better? Absolutely not...I look at the system we have and I'm like, you know it sucks sometimes that you have to get, be a valedictorian, take a thousand AP classes in order to get into an Ivy League school but, you know, how else you gonna test that? I don't know. I couldn't tell you how. (Interview with Connor Imboden, 2-13-07)

Andy, too, provided a mix of justification and regret about the need to play the game:

You either have to know how to play it, or you have to care about playing the game. There are some kids that I know that don't care, you know, so they don't even take the time to learn how to succeed in high school. And, you know, hearing about how the politicians run their races for president and how, really, it's not like what you would want from your president...you know, they'll strategize, and, you know, even if the best candidate is from Iowa, they'll still run the person from Illinois because it's a swing state...it's awful, but it happens. And I think that happens here

too, you know? Even if you want to take a different class, you take what you need to because it's what's expected of you...even if I don't want to hold a conversation with Doc [Dr. Riveli, the principal] for five minutes in a hallway, I will, so that when the times comes and I need him to help me out with something, he'll help me out...the other week I talked to Mr. Elliot. He stopped me in the hallway, and I really needed to get home, but I stayed and talked to him for like 10 minutes...just to keep up the, you know, kind of...we're friends as well as teachers...I feel like if you become the friend of your teacher, rather than just them being your teacher, you're much better off. Because then they, you know, actually will care about you and try and help you more. And, understand, as a friend talking to a friend more, rather than as a teacher seeing a student slack off. (Interview with Andy Meade, 3-8-07)

Aside from the feeling that this passage gives of the necessary-but-unpleasant aspect of game-playing, it is telling for another reason. It can be used as an opening to explore the game a bit more closely, to see if it is possible to glimpse the source of the ambivalence that surrounds these “good” students. In that spirit, let us digress for a moment from our concern with ambivalence about the game and “good” students. Looking again at the passage, it can be seen as a cogent analysis of the actions of AP students. Rather impressively, it includes comparisons across contexts and levels of society, deployment of knowledge from AP US History, personal examples, and an argument. We might look at how it measures up to Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom, 1984), a system which this researcher had drilled into his head during teacher education, and a system that Mr. Elliot himself believes in with a certain fervor. In his answer, Andy gives evidence of knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and even evaluation.

Perhaps it is not so surprising to get such an answer from a high-school senior taking an AP US History class – or perhaps it is, if your views of the American educational system are less charitable – but it may be surprising to learn that the student

who made the comment, Andy Meade, senior, aspiring actor, is not, according to Mr. Elliot, the sort of student who should be taking AP US History. This is because he is not dedicated enough. Andy is suffering from a bad case of senioritis, is more interested in his theatre pursuits than in school, and is frequently late for Mr. Elliot's class. Andy plays the game, and is aware of how he plays, but in Mr. Elliot's class he has not been playing it well enough, for surely part of being a "good" student is showing up on time and giving due attention to one's classes.

This, of course, brings in another disturbing aspect of the game, namely, that it does not necessarily have anything to do with actually learning about the subject that is ostensibly the purpose of the class. In focusing students' attention on external or "performative" (Lyotard, 1984) features of the classroom environment, the game may take away from the things school is, at least as the story goes, supposed to do. This is certainly Pope's (2001) contention. This, of course, raises some pretty complicated and divisive questions about just what "learning" is and, in a different vein, just what schools are supposed to be accomplishing. As Pope sees it, the game's very goal-orientation can become something akin to the striving for credentials that is described by Labaree (1997) as the very problem with American education:

...credentialism undercuts learning. In both college and high school, students are all too well aware that their mission is to do whatever it takes to acquire a diploma, which they can cash in on what really matters – a good job. This assumption has the effect of reifying the formal markers of academic progress – grades, credits, and degrees – and encouraging students to focus their attention on accumulating these badges of merit for the exchange value they offer. This strategy means directing attention away from the substance of education, reducing student motivation to learn the knowledge and skills that constitute the core of the educational curriculum. (p. 259)

It is intriguing that Labaree cites “the game” as an effect of credentialism (p.4). And it is rather nifty that his use of “badges of merit” is echoed in the words of Andy on playing the game in the form of choosing AP classes. It should be noted that Andy is, among his other accomplishments and interests, an Eagle Scout:

It’s kind of like, you know, getting a merit badge in scouting, you know. Even if you’re not that interested in it, fingerprinting, you basically just have to put your fingers down on a piece of paper and learn like swirls and loops and then you have a fingerprinting merit badge, so it’s so easy why not do it? You know, basketweaving you have to make one basket and the pack, you know, the package comes pre-assembled you just have to basically weave the things through and you have the basketry merit badge. I think lots of kids, just taking an AP, and having, just being able to say “I took AP Bio and I took this and I took this” is kind of like just being able to put more pins on you and say “I did all this” and even if they aren’t that interested they just want to be able to say that. (Interview with Andy Meade, 3-8-07)

Of course, the game as a part of the “good” student experience is not always so explicit, or so much a matter of scheming, cheating, or working with a lack of interest. Rizza’s (1999) positive version, and the way AP US History students carefully approach their homework and participate in class and know what they are about generally, does not seem inherently bad. On the other hand, there is a sense that the game may be just that. When practicality becomes the language of “good” students, other types of learning may be threatened. As Blake, Smeyers, Smith, and Standish (1998) put it, when speaking of the discourse of control in curriculum:

Where what is learned is subordinated to outcomes and usefulness, intrinsic worth is surreptitiously eclipsed. It is a different idea of education that she acquires. (p. 82)

While Blake et. al. were talking about the curriculum, the same might be said of students’ actions. Their note-taking is a relevant example. The pattern of note-taking, repeated daily in Mr. Elliot’s class, centered around what Mr. Elliot wrote on the board.

Discussions, digressions, ideas, and even facts which arose in class but which did not make it on to the board were not generally recorded. Only a few students, if any, could be observed to be writing anything down if Mr. Elliot did not write it down first. Yet, every time Mr. Elliot put his marker on the whiteboard, the students responded immediately by recording what he wrote. More tellingly, all of them, every one, could be seen to write when Mr. Elliot himself was writing.

Of course, I write down everything he puts on the board, except...I tend to not write down as much of the books and other artsy, literature stuff that he puts up there...and then I emphasize the big points. Like...the...Kansas-Nebraska act. Like he, put that on the board, put the two things under it, and then he talked about it for a while and that's the stuff I took notes on. (Interview with Jim Schurz, 1-24-07)

While note-taking is a useful and even necessary activity for students, and these students are disciplined enough to do it without being told, their priorities also demonstrate the utilitarian nature of this information-gathering activity.

A consideration of the separation of activity from worth, of doing from thinking, brings Dewey to mind. His philosophy is shot through with the idea that the things people do, in and out of school, should be whole activities (Dewey, 1916, 1922/1957, 1934/1980, 1938/1997). Goal-orientated game-playing, on any level, opens up the possibility of the separation of ends from means, of changing activities from “intelligent,” in a Deweyian sense, to activities which are merely mechanical. For Dewey, intelligence requires possession of intention and purpose, along with an awareness of how they line up with means, ends, and consequences. In this aware and purposeful activity, the esthetic and educative experience, a person does not merely do things well, but indeed dwells within the things they do:

...the difference between the artist and the mere technician is unmistakable. The artist is a master technician. The technique or mechanism is fused with thought and feeling. The “mechanical” performer permits the mechanism to dictate the performance. (Dewey, 1922/1957, p. 71)

There is a difference, then, between activity that is undertaken with intelligent direction and that which is undertaken without. This difference between intelligent and mechanical activity is not the same as the difference between unthinking activity and strategic activity. Goal-oriented students, as Dewey sees them, are not necessarily intelligent, just as a skilled craftsman is not necessarily an artist. This difference between the purposeful and the merely skilled is characterized by Field and Latta (2001) as the difference between wisdom and competence, between doing that involves the self and doing which does not. In Dewey’s account, purposeful, intelligent activity, educative activity (1938/1997) is self-involving, engaged activity. Put another way, in order to learn about themselves and the world, students must have experiences in which their selves are fully involved, challenged, changed, and expanded.

It may be disturbing to think that, in selecting for “good” students, schools such as Fairlawn High School are selecting the competent and having little concern with the wise, and that this may be the competence of Dewey’s craftsman rather than his artist. Still, this idea is not disturbing for everyone. In fact, the goals of a middle-class suburban school like Fairlawn certainly seem to tend in this direction. Teachers’ accounts of the goals of FHS lean heavily toward a college prep explanation. And Dr. Riveli, when asked what sort of students Fairlawn is aiming to produce, responded that when I asked the question, “Capable first came to mind.” Going on, he said, “we hope to produce capable students. Capable for what? Capable for continuing their education.” He mentioned that 93 to 95%

of FHS students go to college, and that they are “well-prepared” when they get there (Interview with Dr. Riveli, 1-8-07).

Still, while arguments about school goals are a part of what I hope to address here, it is high-achieving students’ experience and culture that is my focus. If there are questions about what schools should be accomplishing, then the high-achievers of AP US History are embroiled in them and living them out. Yet, coming back from this digression, it may be found to have been of some value in bringing additional perspective to our earlier concern with the tension inherent in being a “good” student, ambivalence toward the game, and the blurred line between strategic and scheming, good and too good. Perhaps negative conceptions of playing the game are rooted in the same sort of concerns that Dewey brings to schooling.

For Mr. Elliot, negotiating the day of a test, the students’ strategic behavior is acceptable as long as it stays within non-academic boundaries. Once it enters the realm of academics, however, it becomes something else, namely, a threat to the idea that the test to be taken could be about anything except learning. This boundary may be seen in other areas where the game could be considered to be either positive or negative. Cheating, which makes school about some skill other than skill in learning, is a bad instantiation of the game. Knowing what to study and for how long, which supports students’ achievement without raising unfortunate questions about what they are achieving, is a positive example. Reading teachers is something in-between. It is not exactly cheating, though it does smack of success in school coming from some source other than academic prowess. Schmoozing, brown-nosing, and the like fall into a similar category. Andy, who

earlier described how he talked to Mr. Elliot and Dr. Riveli on occasions just to gain advantage, said of such tactics that:

I feel like I'm kind of cheating, but, everybody's cheating, so you have to go with it. Or, you know, even if everyone's not cheating, well, it's not really cheating, it's just using the system in your favor. (Interview with Andy Meade, 3-8-07)

Using the system, then, is not cheating. Reading teachers and brown-nosing and aiming for every possible advantage is permissible, up to a point, and that point seems to be the place where the game intersects with the question of learning.

If the line can be drawn at learning, it certainly seems that Mr. Elliot would like to draw it. He openly acknowledged, when asked, that his students are accomplished game-players. "I would say, actually in AP almost all of them have gotten really good at playing the school game" (Interview with Mr. Elliot, 1-30-07). He even described some of the strategies they have developed, and how these strategies were fostered by the structuring of their 9th and 10th grade history classes:

they're very aware that the knowledge is discrete, and that it's meant to be class contextual, it's not meant to carry on to the next class level...the average unit is, you take the notes, you either get the review sheet if the teacher is giving you another crutch, if not you make it yourself. Um, you study really, really hard, all the factual information, you regurgitate exactly what was said back to from the teacher, based on what the teacher told you...And then, you follow that up with a teacher-written test, that is written, again, in the language of the teacher, asking for regurgitation by the teacher of what the teacher said, and the questions are clearly meant to have three wrong answers and then only one correct answer. And...the correct answer is not interpretive. It's not up for debate or discussion, or any kind of deductive reasoning or anything like that. Students are even rarely challenged with something they haven't seen before...where they've been given a document or something where they're supposed to apply the knowledge... (Interview with Mr. Elliot, 1-30-07)

Yet, even as he acknowledges their game-playing, he insists that this is not much help to them in AP US History, and in fact is a hindrance that can explain some of this year's class' difficulty with the advanced work he asks of them:

...we're having students who've learned very well in some cases how to play the hidden curriculum, how to play the school game, if you will, and as a result when they come in here, they sometimes come in with false expectations of their own abilities, false expectations of what the course is going to entail, the challenges they're going to face. And, um, we spend a lot of our time and energy kind of dealing with that... (Interview with Mr. Elliot, 1-30-07)

The reason that playing the game does not work in AP US History is that, unlike previous classes that operate in the ways Mr. Elliot described above, AP US History requires that students learn their factual knowledge and then, having learned it, apply it in some challenging ways. To use the language of Bloom (1984) again, a language to which Mr. Elliot would not object, AP US History demands analysis, synthesis, and at times even evaluation. This is a point he stressed repeatedly. In criticizing the AP US History selection process, for example, he worried that:

We're just rewarding students who are really good at playing the school game, which would be fine, only that's not what we do when we get them in here. And so, we are being a bit disingenuous in letting kids into the class based on the fact that they've been really good at playing school, and then once they get here, they're going to do very badly at playing school. (Interview with Mr. Elliot, 3-6-07)

AP US History demands more than playing the school game, more than the regurgitation of rote knowledge, an idea Mr. Elliot believes and which he bolsters by placing great faith in the AP test itself:

And I guess, if I'm biased toward anything, it's probably toward promotion of students success on the exam... And part of that is because I think it's a good exam, I think it's a really challenging exam, and I think it does a good job of testing where the students' individual ability is in regards to both, not just knowledge acquisition, but interpretation,

analysis, and ultimately synthesis, where is where the essay writing does such a good job. (Interview with Mr. Elliot, 3-6-07)

Since I did not do a thorough study of the AP test and the ways that it assesses students' abilities, I will leave aside the question of whether one can succeed in an AP class or on an AP test by playing the game. It is rather tempting to *not* leave this question aside, since personal experience would suggest that people can get all the way through graduate school by playing the game, but I shall resist this temptation and focus instead on what seems most important here, namely that Mr. Elliot knows that the game is out there, but does not believe that it makes its way into AP US History. He wants to draw the line between the game and learning.

The students, too, draw such a line. Some of this can be seen in their assessment of game playing tactics such as cramming, which, as seen above, they deride as poor learning. It can be seen, too, in a desire that some of them seem to have for something more, something beyond the game and "good" students as they have known them:

Um, I think that, generally...in high school ...at least in our high school...the students are ...very smart. They're very, like, they're very smart. They...know how to get by, and...play the game. Which is what I hate. Because I, I don't like to play the game. I don't know. I don't like to do things just for, like, dumb, like...treat at the end. Like college, or whatever. Which is what I was trying to get out of when I signed up for an AP class. (Interview with Candice Andueza, 3-1-07)

...ideally I wanna education where I'm, everything is very interesting, challenging, and you're genuinely interested to understand something, and you can use it yourself. It is...there's a level of sort of fascination that I, that I like, and if that, if you have that sort of throughout an entire course, and you do well on the course based on, you know, intellectual motivation as opposed to strictly, logistics, or playing the game, or that sort of thing. That sounds great, I mean that sounds like the utopia of education. (Interview with Adam Braff, 2-2-07)

I think you should take an AP if you have some interest in the subject. And...I would like it if...for history, if like everyone in that class was

interested in history outside of class too...that's ideally how I think and AP should be. But, um, a lot of people take it and they're really grade-focused. Like, on getting an A, or, like on having it on a transcript. And then...it's not really an interest of theirs outside of class which, I don't know, I don't think that's the best situation. I think an AP should be only people who are...it should be people that want to be studying it or are like interested in it. (Interview with Rachel Early, 2-28-07)

What is to be made of the tensions inherent in the game? Why is the definition of the “good” student as “competent” so loaded with inconsistencies and ambivalence? Why are the two sides of the game, the strategic and the scheming, divided for the teacher and students of 1st Hour AP US History? Why is the game separated from learning? How do these students negotiate the line between encouraged and admired competence and unsanctioned scheming and even cheating? I suggest that an interpretation may be made through the Deweyian lens brought in earlier, the one which suggested that game playing, in separating ends from means, makes activity mechanical rather than artful, leading to competence but not to wisdom. This in mind, it can be proposed that the game is divided from learning because that game is not about learning as learning is ideally defined. Students want to really learn². Their teacher insists that the game is not enough for his class. For each, the game, when it pops up outside of its accepted boundaries, threatens what they are about. If students can play the game and succeed at school, then they know that what they are doing is not the learning that they hope for, or at least have heard about. And if they can succeed in Mr. Elliot's class by playing, it tells Mr. Elliot that what he is doing is something less than he would wish. The school game, operating out of bounds, raises the question of whether students really can get through school, in Labaree's (1997) words, “without really learning.”

² Though they may not know just what “learning” is.

For high-achieving students, competent professionals at student-hood, this situation suggests an endless wading through murky waters. They are called upon to be “good” students, and indeed it is necessary for them to do so. Yet, they must walk the line between strategy and scheming, realizing that, if they must be “good,” they must not be *too* “good.” In a sense, they have been put into a situation where their goodness can slip at any moment and become something disreputable, even morally wrong if attitudes toward cheating are any indicator. Furthermore, their position as high-achievers is a matter of endless compromise, a point made by Pope (2001) but approached a bit differently here. Pope emphasized that students know that what they are doing is not what they would like to do, but they must do it to succeed. I would agree, but add that this goes beyond even Pope’s concerns about workload and stress and the pressure to compromise one’s values. The very position of the high-achiever, seen from this particular definition of the “good” student as the “competent” student, carries within it a tension that makes achievement within the system of the school an inherently conflicted and incomplete accomplishment.

This is not a final answer, but merely a suggestion, and not one that everyone would find agreeable. Indeed, the one person I spoke to at Fairlawn who brought up, acknowledged, and shared his views about the tension between strategy and scheming would likely disagree with what I have written here. That person is Fairlawn’s principal, Dr. Riveli, the enthusiastic, sharp, 28-year administrator who claims that he has “the best job in the world” and can often be seen in the hallways between class periods, chatting with his students. He brought up the tension of the game, and the “good” student as the “competent” student, at the end of our interview when I asked if he had anything further

to add. He began with a question of his own, rhetorically asking, “Do these kids really wanna learn, or is it all about grubbing for the grade?” Giving an example of a student who has a 96% on a test arguing to get a 98%, he noted that this can be “tiresome,” that teachers just want to say, “That’s your grade. It’s a good one. Move on.” Dr. Riveli insists, however, that such behavior, seeming to be grade-grubbing, is something that his teachers must accept if they wish to work with Fairlawn students:

It’s a total package....I continually have to make that argument...Some don’t fully get that yet, and they will with time...they see how tiresome it is, but it’s difficult for them to understand, if you wanna work with bright people...with challenging, bright kids that invigorate you as a teacher, ask good questions, give you good answers, stimulate you as a teacher, do the work, take it seriously, have goals, are looking for education, education is not terminal at the 12th grade – you want all that, then you better be understanding of the fact, that they’re gonna ask you why they didn’t get 98 rather than 96. It’s a part of the total package. You can’t say you want one and not the other. They come together, so embrace it, enjoy it for what it is. Accept it. (Interview with Dr. Riveli, 3-7-07)

CHAPTER 5: THE GOOD CLASS

Opening - Lecture and Analysis

It's half an hour into class. Mr. Elliot writes "Tippecanoe and Tyler too" on the board, singing to himself as he does so. He says that their campaign song reminds him of "Winnie the Poo." He then strides over to the left side of his room, where he keeps his CD player, and puts in a CD of old US presidential campaign songs. Seeing this brief break develop, Allie and Cathy, Amy and Jim, Laura and Reilly immediately begin chatting. The song comes on, and Mr. Elliot says "Take a listen. Shush. Shush." The students quiet down. As the song plays, it draws a laugh from Reilly and Laura, a comment from Allie, chuckles from Rachel and Emma. Mr. Elliot asks if the 1840 election issues are obvious from the song, then notes that "hard cider" is big, also that 1840 is the election with the biggest percentage turnout. As he brings up points, Mr. Elliot adds them to the board. Whenever something goes on the board, all the students faithfully record it.

Mr. Elliot is joking around about the "Log Cabin Election" and alcoholic cider. "Did I mention the log cabin?" he asks, then adds, of William Henry Harrison, "he kills Indians, too. People like that." This is going back to his Andrew Jackson lecture, when he satirized Jackson's campaign emphasis on his popularity as an Indian-Fighter by calling out "I kill Indians!" Kids laugh, especially Reilly, who I can now see (since I'm sitting right next to her today) laughs at everything. Mr. Elliot asks the class a question, which he answers himself. Happens again. Then back to lecture.

Another campaign song. "This is the stuff right here," Mr. Elliot tells the class. He dances as the song plays, and Reilly chuckles once more. Mr. Elliot asks about the tune

of the song, and Reilly answers “Yankee Doodle.” As the song repeats, he points out that “Log Cabin” and “Hard Cider” are definite themes, “Just in case you didn’t remember.” Laura, Candice, Reilly, Helen and Connor laugh out loud at the song, and Laura and Candice are talking about it, pointing out funny parts to one another.

Mr. Elliot moves into a lecture on William Henry Harrison’s inaugural, which Harrison gave outside in no coat or hat, after which he died of pneumonia. Then Mr. Elliot moves on to John Tyler, Harrison’s vice president, who became president and who, during the US Civil War, served in the Confederate Congress. Mr. Elliot does not seem to like John Tyler very much. “John Tyler is a miserable bastard and I hate him,” he tells his class. He also adds that he knows why Tyler did the things he did, and wants to do what he can to “present him equally and fairly,” a comment which draws a pretty big laugh from the students.

He then adds that Tyler, though elected as a Whig, was “a closet democrat” – “What’s that I smell?” he asks. “Is it a closet democrat?” The animated lecture continues. Allie’s hand is up. Mr. Elliot emphasizes that Tyler got into office because Harrison died. “On our next presidents quiz, if you write that John Tyler was elected, SHAME on you!” Allie still has her hand up. Mr. Elliot cracks a joke, a few chuckle. Allie puts her hand down. Then she puts it back up. Finally, she puts it down again, turns, and says something to Cathy.

The lecture goes on a bit longer, swerves into Irish immigration. Allie is eventually called on, and she asks a question about why Tyler was on the ticket. Mr. Elliot connects the Harrison/Tyler ticket to the Kerry/Edwards ticket and talks about ticket-balance, noting that “We still do this today, Allie.” A few more minutes of lecture,

during which Mr. Elliot takes another shot at Texas, one of his favorite targets, which he refers to as “Tex-ass.” Then he tells his class “let’s break” and shifts from a lecture to an activity. He will project a political cartoon on the projection screen, and he wants the students to “analyze as much as you can” about it. They will have five minutes. There are fifteen minutes left in class.

He asks students to “go up and take a close look” or they can do it from their desks. He encourages them to get up, to stretch while they’re taking a look. Candice, Laura, and Reilly half-stand, stand, hesitate, then pick their way up the backpack-strewn aisles to the front of the room. They are the only students who stand. They kneel at the big, teacher-style desk that sits at the front of the room, writing, looking for all the world like supplicants at an altar. Nobody else moves. The class is silent. Mr. Elliot stands on the left side, makes a comment to Sara about Tyler, which she acknowledges.

A few minutes in, Reilly asks a question. The class is beginning to talk. Eric, Mike, Pete, Jim, and Seth are talking on one side, Laura, Reilly, and Candice on the other. The conversations are on the cartoon. Mr. Elliot tells the class to try to find 15 things in the cartoon. Students ask each other questions. One, Adam, looks to be asleep. He puts his head down on his desk, and Mr. Elliot immediately moves to his side of the room and asks him the meaning of the cartoon. Adam’s eyes pop open and he begins spewing verbiage, random pieces of what Mr. Elliot had recently said. He is way off, and Mr. Elliot mocks him a bit in a friendly way. Then Cathy adds a comment about the picture, and LeAnne adds to Cathy’s comment. After these brief comments, Mr. Elliot then takes over, begins pointing out features of the cartoon. He does this for three

minutes, steps back, and tells them “this is a very, very pro-America cartoon”.

(Fieldnotes, 12-19-07)

Interview with Mr. Elliot – 1-30-07

MR. ELLIOT: I would like to see them critically analyze and consider – ultimately, ultimately this is like the big goal – to synthesize, to critically analyze, take apart, um, the different time periods, the different figures, the different theories, the ideas, that we’ve had across time. I see some of the students doing that. I don’t see all of them doing that. Um, the difficulty is those would normally be things that I would get a lot more time to do during the hour, during the class time period.

SW: Hm.

MR. ELLIOT: And I’m still...to be honest I’m struggling a little bit right now to figure out how to balance because they’re, they seem to be really having a hard time with the base content, with that level 2 and even level 1, knowledge and comprehension. You know, getting them to do application, when I whip out the documents, I put them on an overhead, to be honest has been disheartening this year so far.

SW: Was it...

MR. ELLIOT: ...especially early on...

SW: ...I was gonna say, I didn’t see it early on, did, was there, did you try it more early on and it kinda...

MR. ELLIOT: ...I tried a lot more, early on, and I found that those lessons didn’t tend to go very well. Or well at all, because it was like, ah, it would be like pulling somebody out of the hallway who wasn’t in the class and ask them to analyze this cartoon, what are they gonna say? You know, and so, we worked at the skills of cartoon analysis, document analysis, we looked at those things. The problem comes, though, if...um, and, as I’ve felt, accurately or inaccurately, that without the base content there it’s a lot of guessing, it’s a lot of...which would be OK, only it’s not really OK. There is, like, a true historian knows at least some of the stuff basically so then they can approach it with different eyes. They approach the documents, the history, with informed eyes. And with the, with that information, even if it’s bad information, even if it’s a, something you’ve read from a history book that is, you find it ultimately is untrue. That would be fine, but you still have to know what that first theory is, that first idea is, and, I haven’t really seen that. And I, that’s been probably my biggest frustration this year, that I keep feeling that I have to fall back on base lectures of rote information and comprehension. And, I don’t know. My fear is that, early on...and this, this has been probably true more in the past than in this class...was that other groups were able to get more of that rote information, from reading the text. And from of the other stuff that I would set up for them to do outside of class.

SW: I see, and so you did not have to spend as much time on it.

MR. ELLIOT: I, I didn't. And so we could do more interesting things. Like, you have no idea. I'm not trying to say this just because you're here or anything, but, I could show you, some, some of the materials that I've used in the past that I've, I'm, I'm not even getting, there's just no time. Like, I can't spend three weeks on reconstruction. We don't have time. I just don't. It's...we'll never get past World War II. And then what? You know, it's like...and I can tell you then what. There's, there's a whole body of knowledge, even if it's just factual knowledge, that, they're gonna hit on there, and I don't trust them, at this point, to get that information on their own.

SW: Hm.

MR. ELLIOT: And, what I think...if, if there's anything wrong, that I think I'm doing, it's that, because I early on I think I didn't see that happening, um, I think I fell back into the very comfortable role of providing basically a very, very quick survey class. Moving rapidly, but still at a survey level. Which is, which is to say, not that it's not challenging or anything, but it's, it is challenging perhaps in a different way. Rather than cognitively challenging them to constantly synthesize and analyze, it's simply forcing them to learn larger volumes of material in a shorter period of time. It's a different challenge but it's, it's not...

SW: ...yeah...

MR. ELLIOT: ...and I'm aware of that. I do think, um, what else was I going to talk about? Oh, I was gonna say that, and I think that, when I say it's like survey, it's not like a survey, it's much harder than that. But it, but it is, force, it's, I'm fitting into their learning styles that they used at a survey level, is what I meant by that.

SW: ...I see...

MR. ELLIOT: Where, basically, traditionally is what students do is, we assign a reading. They don't do it, or if they do it they don't really pay too much attention to it. And then they wait for us to tell them in class, usually via lecture activity, especially lecture, 99% of the time, what they're waiting for. This is what you should remember, this is what you should know. And then we might explore it a little bit via an activity, or some sort of other in-class assessment. But, they, students are notoriously bad at using both video, or other types of activity, and then, going from there and counting on that as the only form of knowledge acquisitions.

SW: Right. Seen it, been there. Right.

MR. ELLIOT: Yeah. It's, it's frustrating. And I think that, if they're anything that I'm doing that is sort of survey it's that I'm falling into what worked for them well at the other levels, the lower levels. Um, which is hard, because there are people in here who are ready for much more. For example, Rachel Early, Connor Imboden, Bill Newton,

Helen Wei, um, Sara Pleasanton. They're...and among others...there is, there are some students who are ready for far more, far more.

High-Achieving Students in A Good Class

While Chapter 4 took a view of students as “good” students, trustworthy and competent within the particular institution of schooling, Chapter 5 adopts a different stance so as to get at some other aspects of high-achiever culture. This stance begins with the idea of the “good” class, the ways in with the students of AP US History, and the culture of high-achievement, come out in the unique setting that is Mr. Elliot’s class. Mr. Elliot is, by all accounts, a good teacher. His class, known for being interesting, rigorous, and good practice for the AP, is a good class. In this study of the best-of-the-best, it is not only the students who were chosen for their high-achievement, but also their teacher. And so this chapter looks at the view from his classroom, starting with Mr. Elliot’s skills and style, his ideas and goals, his actions and definitions in structuring and running this good class, and then looking, as always, at what it means for the students. What the students think and do, how they see themselves and their position in relation to others, and how they talk about history and their class-work are all shaped by this class and Mr. Elliot’s running of it.

The structuring of AP US History, both as a class in and of itself and as one which plays a certain role in the social studies department, is a big part of what I’m looking at here. AP US History is not just a good class with a good teacher, but it is also an “advanced” class, where students who have reached the AP level encounter history differently, by their accounts and by their teacher’s, then they have before. This difference, and the way it shows up in the facts and the work of AP US History, give a perspective of the good students which shows them doing the sort of work for which they

are ready. Free of the need to work with a mixed group of students, different in ability-level and motivation, the high-achievers of AP US History can take a class which moves them beyond the realm of the standard history classes and into this class, one which is portrayed as “advanced” and run accordingly. Here they are pushed to take on work which is challenging, not only in volume, but in type and in their own relation to it. This process is quite interesting from the perspective of high-achiever culture.

The analysis of the “good” class touches upon ideas of what it means to teach history, and so I will also address questions of how this class works, how it is positioned among the history classes at Fairlawn, and what sort of history Mr. Elliot’s students are experiencing as they take this AP class. Recent work on social studies curriculum and teaching identifies the social studies as the place where we educate, not only students, but citizens, and questions the ways in which students encounter social studies in relation to how they will encounter society (Parker, 2003). Seixas (2000) and Segall (2006) examine the ways in which history can be taught, identifying three approaches, the “collective memory,” “disciplinary,” and “postmodern” (for Segall, this third is the “critical”). The first is teaching the story of history, with a mind toward giving an account of who we are, the second an approach which adopts the view of the historian in analyzing and creating history, the third takes a view of history in its political and rhetorical functions, which and whose purposes are served by the stories told. How these approaches and functions of history come out in the “good” class that is AP US History tell us something about what the high-achievers of AP US are achieving when they get to this elite level, and of how they are prepared to view and to use knowledge and history.

While all of this is situated in 1st hour AP US History at Fairlawn High, these cultural features touch upon themes which extend far beyond the walls of Mr. Elliot's classroom. The very ideas of advanced classes, good teachers, advanced students, and different types of learning and knowledge for high-achievers, are nothing new. They are, however, very much a part of what makes a high-achieving student. In this chapter, I examine the good and the advanced in such a way as to acknowledge how they are taken in the context of Fairlawn High School, but I also look to their place within the culture of high-achievement, to read them in different ways from those commonly held. What these definitions of "goodness" mean, how they play out within the structure of the school and in the running of the class, and the ways in which the students respond to this class and this teacher all come together to show another facet of high-achiever culture: good students, yes, but good students in a "good" class, with a "good" teacher.

A Good Teacher

If the students of AP US History have a particular culture, and if this culture is shaped and defined by AP US History, then it is essential to focus for a bit on their teacher, what he does, and why he does it. The students' schooling experience, as seen by me, was seen through the lens of one class, a class run forcefully and deliberately by Eric Elliot, a social studies teacher for a dozen years, and an AP US History teacher for seven. Thus, I aim here to have a look at the structure and workings of Mr. Elliot's class, and what these mean for the high-achievers of AP US History.

I begin with a bit about Mr. Elliot as a teacher. Mr. Elliot lectures most days in AP US History, and he is an animated lecturer. He moves around the room, dances, sings, yells, makes jokes, and adds a great many details as he goes along. He is enthusiastic and

energetic in class, and his lectures are funny and full of anecdotes historical and personal.

His presentations are not dry and boring:

8:31 – Mr. Elliot illustrates [the post-Civil War campaign practice of] “waving the bloody shirt,” picking up Helen’s pink and white winter jacket, waving it around, yelling “Don’t vote for the democrats! They’re traitors!” At this moment, Laura walks in, looks stunned. Mr. Elliot is ranting. The class, watching Laura come in at this particular moment, swivel their heads back and forth from Mr. Elliot to Laura. They laugh. Mr. Elliot is into it. Laura says “this is weird” and takes her seat. (Fieldnotes, 2-13-07)

8:44 – As Mr. Elliot lectures on the specie circular, all pens are now rolling. Mr. Elliot gives an example with Emma running one of [Andrew] Jackson’s “pet banks,” and Reilly and Helen laugh. Mr. Elliot says “boom!” and “crash!” in a loud voice as he lectures on the results of monetary policy at the time, in his enthusiastic style. Emma is grinning. Connor is brought in as a debtor to Emma’s pet bank, and he smiles too. Reilly and Helen laugh again. (Fieldnotes, 1-8-07)

The enthusiasm Mr. Elliot brings to his class, combined with an encyclopedic knowledge of history, gives his lectures a richness to go along with their bounce. In giving his lectures, he seldom uses notes. He had none even on the night he gave his AP US History students a two-and-a-half hour review session before their fall-semester final exam, filling a classroom whiteboard three times over with timelines and details. Several students praised him as knowing a lot about history. He is constantly making connections between historical events and between history and modern times, and emphasizing different interpretations of events, especially interpretations his students have not encountered before.

Mr. Elliot is not afraid to provide alternative interpretations of history, even radical ones, nor is he loath to express his own opinions. He claims that Abraham Lincoln never wanted equality for African-Americans. He chides Guided Age politicians for doing nothing in office, but notes the advantages of the political machines that once ran

big American cities like New York and Chicago. He compares the Masons to the Kiwanis Club. Of the assassinations of Lincoln and Kennedy, he states that both were good for America, historically-speaking. He uses John Brown, the oft-maligned leader of a failed slave revolt and a major figure in the bloody battles over the establishment of the state of Kansas, as an example of the way America scorns radicals and makes them out as crazy.

His class is also full of connections between the “then” and the “now.” He compared the end of the international slave trade in the 1800’s to the restriction of the drug trade in America today. The Barbary Wars of the early 1800’s, undeclared wars, are held up as early examples of something like the Iraq War. Speaking on presidential power, he links Andrew Jackson’s views on the executive to those of George W. Bush. Again tearing into the politicians of the Gilded Age, he points out how they were able to invent non-issues to distract the public and to create meaningless debate, and compares these tactics to modern politicians use of gay-marriage and flag-burning. He links Calvinist religious ideas in early America to debates over the Gay-Straight Alliance student group at Fairlawn High School.

Mr. Elliot himself finds joy in history, and he wants his students to feel this same joy. Certainly, one of his objectives for AP US History is “college preparatory,”

...to continue to develop both their reading, writing, ah, listening skills and interpretive skills...in history, ah, both in working with documents and occasionally developing their own original interpretations. Um, I’d love to see more of that. (Interview with Mr. Elliot, 2-23-07)

Yet the other objective is much more about history as something to appreciate:

...it’s difficult because there are so many different criteria and so many different objectives that I have which sometimes conflict with each other....one of those is a genuine enthusiasm of, of history...I guess I kind of approach it with sort of a humorous appreciation for, a genuine love of the past. I really love it all from start to finish and the weirdest topics...I

find them intriguing on...the level of like intellectual puzzle...One of my big objectives is to get students to appreciate it on that same level.
(Interview with Mr. Elliot, 2-23-07)

The students pick up on Mr. Elliot's enjoyment of his subject, and they value it.

For the most part, they believe that they are in a good class, and at times a great one. Less enthusiastic characterizations included "fair," "pretty far up there" and "good" but "needs work," but most were positive, with characterizations like "excellent," "great," "the best," and "I absolutely love it."

I think Mr. Elliot does a good job being inspiring...he's into it. And it's like, you feel bad if you're not into it because he's so into it...that's how I think an AP teacher should be. Like, they should love it and want to be doing it. (Interview with Rachel Early)

...he's a good teacher, his lectures are great, they're very engaging and he makes history really interesting. I thought I hated history. It's always been one of my least favorite classes and this year, it's just been, it's been fascinating. I love it...I took the class because it was an AP class, and it's become like my favorite, one of my favorite classes of the day. (Interview with Emma Armistead, 2-2-07)

I get the sense in Elliot's class right now that it is more, sort of, it's presented in a way that's genuinely interesting, and I think, I think there is a level of, you know, I think kids are genuinely, they are engaged, I mean, they still wanna do well, but it's not exclusively for the sake of doing well.
(Interview with Adam Braff, 2-2-07)

I think a large part of it is Mr. Elliot's, you know, interest for the subject. Like, how he, you know, how he delves into it. It's not just like he's being there for the sake of being there. He really enjoys US history and so he gives very interesting lectures and, it's just a very very lively atmosphere.
(Helen Wei, 3-6-07)

It is not only his students who praise him. Mr. Elliot is renowned throughout the Fairlawn High School, praised by every individual I ran into – the principal, the principal's secretary, the director of guidance, other teachers - had good things to say about Mr. Elliot. In Dr. Riveli's words, anything he could tell me about Mr. Elliot would be "all

superlative,” and he also added that he has received consistently good reports about Mr. Elliot from students, parents, and colleagues (Interview with Dr. Riveli, 1-8-07). Having sat through more than a few of Mr. Elliot’s lectures myself, I also have an appreciation for his work. I was a history major, and a history teacher, and I find the lectures to be informative and interesting. And, frankly, I marvel at the man’s output of energy.

All of this contributes to Mr. Elliot’s identity as a “good” teacher, but there is more to this story. For when the students speak of Mr. Elliot, and praise him and his class, much of their praise is phrased comparatively. It is not only that Mr. Elliot’s class is good in and of itself, but that it is good when held up against their previous history classes in high-school and even before:

I found other history classes to be bland and boring. (Interview with Jim Schurz, 1-24-07)

It just seems like we’re getting, I don’t know, compared to, like, my 9th grade class and like my 10th grade history class, which were so boring. It just seems like we’re getting more, it’s more in depth and...it’s just way more interesting than my other history classes. (Interview with Reilly Howard, 3-1-07)

Um, well, it’s not always enjoyable. But...I find that it’s interesting because this class in particular is pushing me to always kind of take it one step further and try and read into or find insight on a lot of the things, um, which is different from most of my other classes where you really do learn a lot of the information and then just give it back to the teachers. (Interview with Pete Reynolds, 2-2-07)

As to what the difference was between Mr. Elliot’s class and previous classes, Pete’s comment taps into a productive vein: previous classes were just facts, memorizing, and regurgitating. AP US History is something more:

SW: What exactly is it that makes [AP US History] more challenging?

PETE: ...the content that you’re required to know and the way you have to know it...Like, you can’t just know the facts...you have to know the

facts. Then you have to know how to apply the facts to, like, questions, and concepts and, like, themes, and all that stuff...That's much different. Like, from, US History regular and world history, that was just like, know these facts...the questions were...very easy. (Interview Allie Meredith, 3-2-07)

... I just like the stuff we're learning about. I just think it's interesting, like, 'cause we had like our previous like US History class, but it didn't really go into depth at all, so you're like, just learning like the basic stuff. And this is, like, you're learning like why things happened and that kinda stuff. ...even in middle school we had like our US History, where you go through, like, the basic, like, timeline...the people, like memorize it. But, you actually have to...know it for this class...go more in-depth than just...the basic, like surface level. (Interview with Margi Doubleday, 3-7-07)

...it's not, just memorize everything. It's definitely like, cause and effect, you see this, and you can see how it leads up to this...I'd say this is the first year where we really learned it like that...Everything else, it was more like, read it, memorize what happened, take the test, let's move on. (Interview with Laura Pender, 2-5-07)

Every student I interviewed in AP US History, all twenty of them, made some reference to the difference between the knowledge and approach in their previous History classes and the knowledge and approach in AP US History. The term that was used most often, in nearly every case, was "in-depth." Mr. Elliot's class provides them with "in-depth" knowledge, or previous classes did not provide "in-depth" knowledge, or both. As it happens, this is not an accident. Mr. Elliot is aiming to provide a different sort of class when he teaches AP US History. Furthermore, he regularly tells his students so. Their responses are shaped by how AP US History is set up and positioned within the schools, how the class is run, what the students have experienced in their time in class, and Mr. Elliot's own opinions toward it

An Advanced Class

I did not observe any other history classes at Fairlawn High School, did not spend any time in US History or World History, the classes that Fairlawn students take as Freshman and Sophomores. I cannot verify the students' claims on the superiority of AP US History to previous classes, though I must note that complaints about previous classes' fact-based, memorize-and-reply style were widespread among the students of AP US. And though I did not observe any of the regular history classes, I did get some insight into how they work from Mr. Elliot himself. In the Social Studies Department at Fairlawn, teaching responsibilities are spread around, and the teachers that teach AP classes also teach regular classes. Mr. Elliot teaches and has taught regular US History and World History sections as well as AP US History. His descriptions of the differences between the required history classes and AP US History provide corroboration, and some explanation, of the students' comments. The idea of the advanced class is central to the identity of AP US History as a good class, and so I take some time here to lay out just what an "advanced" class is in the Fairlawn Social Studies Department, and how this positions high-achievers as special and different within the school.

As an advanced class, AP US History is something different. Advanced classes do not have to work with mixed students. All three of the AP teachers that I interviewed, both of the AP US History teachers and one of the AP Government teachers, expressed the idea that working with AP students meant working with the best, separated out from the herd of the average. Mr. Elliot referred to his students, in an interview and in class, as the "top 10%." He believes that his own class is made up of the best students around. Mr. Schlieffen, teaching AP Government (as well as government and "studies in world

history,” an “adaptive class for low-level learners”), spoke of AP students in similar terms:

...there’s the normal distribution...the difference with the AP class is that there isn’t a normal distribution of kids, whereas my government class, the required class, there is the normal distribution. There’s the high-achievers, you know, the top 3rd of the class, and maybe that’s higher, a higher percentage here than at a lot of other places. And they worry about grades a ton, and they’re very driven, and they know what it takes to work hard, they have good family backgrounds, they’re willing to work hard, they expect a lot of their teachers...they’re here to learn. Then there’s the kids who are kind of in-between. They can do well, and they do well most of the time. Grades don’t matter, having that top grade isn’t as important. Having a decent grade is important, but not as much. And, then there’s the, the kids who struggle at school, or their, their performance is at least not as good and that can be for a variety of reasons. Maybe school’s hard, or maybe that they just don’t care for a variety of reasons. But with the AP classes it’s like all the extreme high end. (Interview with Mr. Schlieffen, 1-27-07)

All of this is enhanced by students’ going through an extensive application process to get into AP US. This process includes a written application, a thorough review of their records, a pre-test, and a meeting between Mr. Elliot and Mr. Brown to hand-pick their next year’s students. A little more than half of those who applied last year were accepted. The newly selected classes meet in the spring, work over the summer, prepare intensively together and with their teachers, and use their own money to make class t-shirts that demonstrate their membership. They wear their shirts to take the AP test. They know, as Mr. Brown claimed, that they are getting more time and attention from their teachers than the regular students:

Um, and at a school that has a, you know, a very academic culture, I think they, I think they feed off that. And Eric [Elliot] and I contribute to it, which probably isn’t healthy for the rest of the students in the school. The rest of the students in the school know that Eric and I aren’t going to stay until 10 o’clock at night just to help our regular kids study for their exam. (Interview with Mr. Brown, 1-27-07)

Mr. Elliot's attitude toward his class as an "elite" comes out occasionally in comments he makes to his class, as is shown in this classroom snippet:

Mr. Elliot says that, in this district, parents believe that every kid can get an A. But, he notes, "some people are better at certain types of academic pursuits." He notes that they, the AP students, could get "one-hundred plus" percent in a regular history class, that they've taken on the "challenge" of AP history, working "outside their comfort zones." They are in the top 10%. What happens, he asks them, if you take the top 10% and stop giving them tests for the middle? Start giving them work that is more "interpretive". Gives an example of a "middle" tests: "George Washington was, a) a farmer, b) a soldier, c) a clown," in a mocking voice. (Fieldnotes, 3-6-07)

AP US History, as an "advanced" history class, works differently than the required "survey" courses of World History and US History that students must take when they are in the 9th and 10th grades. This difference goes right down to the structure of the curricula for the regular and AP History classes:

... I approach AP very differently than I do all of my other classes. Both regular US History, which is a survey course, and world history, as a teacher we have to, we are required to I would even say and even morally and intellectually I think we've chosen to do so, to approach them from that sort of survey standpoint, that there is a body of knowledge that we think is culturally important for students to remember and know, and then building on skills is important in those classes, but interpretive skills tend to be less emphasized. (Interview with Mr. Elliot, 1-30-07)

The reason for this "survey" approach comes from the mixed student population of the regular, required classes:

I think that the structure of that is created partly by the reality of who our population is in that survey course, it's every course is required to pass these courses. And so, we have to provide them at a level that is both challenging enough for our upper level students that we're trying to prepare eventually for advanced placement, and then, easy enough for students who are of limited ability, I wouldn't say low ability, but limited ability, in some cases even low ability, to at least pass. (Interview with Mr. Elliot, 1-30-07)

This “survey” approach, where all students must be met in the middle, is contrasted, negatively it seems, with just the sort of tracking that Oakes (1986) and Oakes et. al. (1997) write about attempting to *un-do* and which Fairlawn will be implementing next year.

...rather than creating different tracks, which is something we’re going to be doing next year, ah, rather than creating different tracks we’ve had to try to meet students, a huge variety of students, in the middle. And the problem has come where, if I then create a class where you can get a C with, um, doing basically completion, right, then followed by some understanding. And where, where I would put like, you know, some-most-all, like some will understand this, most will understand this, all will understand this, and you really only, you have to make sure that the tests are balanced enough so that you’re rewarding enough of those “all” people that, it’s very difficult to challenge the “some,” and it also means that the “some’s” grades tend to be very, very inflated. (Interview with Mr. Elliot, 1-30-07)

The need for these advanced students to first get through the survey courses in history sometimes creates problems when they arrive in AP US. The grade inflation and lack of challenge which Mr. Elliot says his advanced students experience in their survey courses create difficulties for him, as an AP history teacher, because his students come in unready for the rigors of AP US History, yet with the idea that they are ready. “They sometimes come in with false expectations of their own abilities, false expectations of what the course is going to entail, the challenges they’re going to face. And, um, we spend a lot of our time and energy kind of dealing with that” (Interview with Mr. Elliot, 1-30-07).

...one thing that happens is that the kids that we are getting right now, are, and I think [Mr. Brown] would back me up on this, there, there in an essence they’re underprepared. It’s not that they haven’t been pushed, at all, they’ve been pushed some. But I think, in some cases that they have, they have both inflated expectations, that’s one problem, one barrier, and you...it’s always a struggle, because a lot of what I do in AP ends up being cheerleader, coping, helping them to realize where they’re at

intellectually, how they're developing, progress, looks very different.
(Interview with Mr. Elliot, 1-30-07)

Both Mr. Elliot and Mr. Brown, the other AP US History teacher, described the problems that students often have when they start this "advanced" class, a class which demands far more from them than they are used to. Compared to previous classes, AP US History is far more work, for one thing. For another, Mr. Elliot's AP class uses an open structure in class discipline as well as homework and assessment, giving AP students more flexibility and freedom than regular students. Finally, as Mr. Elliot tells it, AP classes make great demands on students' abilities to synthesize and to analyze information, and not just to take it in and spit it back out, demands not made on students in survey classes.

I think students, especially at this level they, they have certain patterns of learning that they have followed that have been very successful for them, and if you ask them about those, I think, and they may come up in your interviews, I don't know, but I think that they'll say, yeah this is traditionally what I do and that usually works really well. But that hasn't worked very well here or maybe it is working well for them but for most of them it's not. The old systems and structures, patterns of study, patterns of learning, some of those have really proven to be disastrous for them in the first part of the course. Then they were, and that's, that's actually quite typical. That's, that's perfectly normal. I never even worry about it, yeah that's normal, that's first quarter, and that's very normal. That, and I'm willing to deal with hundreds of parents in my line during a, ah, during a parent-teacher conferences, I deal with that too. And you know, and I'm willing to deal with that, that that's okay 'cause I know, I'm confident of where they're going to be or they should be within another month or two. Um, that they'll have developed enough strategies and, and have become more successful. (Interview with Mr. Elliot, 2-23-07)

Mr. Elliot's ideas and purposes relating to the different structuring of AP US History comes also out in the way he runs his class. Mr. Elliot does not always mark his students tardy, and often he seems to not notice when they walk in after class has begun.

If they come in late for a quiz, he will chide them, and they are allowed no extra time, so they suffer for their lateness. These consequences, however, are phrased in the context of responsibility – if you show up late, you have to accept what occurs, and it is your own fault. This idea fits in with Mr. Elliot’s overall flexibility of approach with his AP students. He likes to think of himself as more of a “coach,” offering guidance and encouragement rather than control.

Some of his students, however, do not do well with this flexibility. If it can be said that there is an area of discipline in which the students of Mr. Elliot’s class are lacking, it is in their ability to come to class on time. This particular class is, according to Mr. Elliot, one of his most frustrating in this regard. He likes to give his AP students a little flexibility, in this area and others, but several of them, a couple of seniors in particular, have gone too far and are too late too often. This is not a problem particular to Mr. Elliot’s class. Mr. Schleiffen, who teaches the AP government class that contains a lot of seniors, and a lot of Mr. Elliot’s former students, puts a particular spin on it, stating that in terms of “attendance and tardies,” the students’ attitude is “haven’t I proved myself, I’m doing well.” He adds “I think a lot of them feel like they’re beyond that” (Interview with Mr. Schlieffen, 1-27-07).

Mr. Elliot’s approaches to academics work in somewhat the same ways as his approaches toward behavior. He works with his AP US students to develop their own personalized methods of note-taking, offers them optional review activities, provides leeway on due dates, and even allows the class to negotiate on dates for assessments. The notes they take are taken in their own individual styles, developed with help by Mr. Elliot, who believes that such things should be tailored to the needs of the individual.

Some notes pages look like outlines, others look like concept maps, one student did her notes on a series of cards. His class also works differently in regards to homework. Instead of having assignments every day, the class has weekly chapter notes which are due as students read along with the progress of the course. Unlike classes with regular homework, these notes are not due every day - another small bit of autonomy. Overall, he wants them to participate in his class:

...part of what I try to do, and you've seen me do this many times, is limited flexibility to the students to try to give them some sense – and it's not meant to be a trick – but some sense of ownership over their own schedule, within reason, always keeping in mind big goals, big objective, you know, limitations that are really there...It's almost like a new part of the hidden curriculum that I'm trying to teach them...(Interview with Mr. Elliot, 1-30-07)

This sort of thing does not sit well with all of Mr. Elliot's students, which also says something about their other classroom experiences:

CANDICE: I would make the notes that we do, I would have them have a due date. Because, often times I'll say, yeah, I have to do history notes, but I can just do that this weekend since they're not really do, whereas I have this other homework that I have to have done by tomorrow. So, history is always my last priority because, it's, the notes are never due. So, I would have them due, I would have them due, like the other class, they always have them due on Thursdays, and so they're always, they're always on task and everything. (Interview with Laura Pender, 2-5-07)

SW: What makes that work more challenging?

CANDICE: Um, I think it's just different than what I've been used to. It's not the same kind of, like, do your homework and you'll get a good grade kind of class. It's more like, the homework isn't really assigned, you kind of just have to do it. And then, like, you have to figure out how it works for you, and then, if it doesn't, you have to change it. It's more like self-learning, rather than like the teacher telling you what you need to know to be able to, like pass the class.

SW: Has, have you had to change your strategies, as a student?

CANDICE: Oh, yes, oh like five times. I still don't think I have the right strategy. (Interview with Candice Andueza, 3-1-07)

All of this is done in the service of moving students beyond the level of their previous "survey" courses, to get them to do work that is more demanding, not just in sense of amount, but also in terms of intellectual challenge and engagement. Along with relying on students to gather historical information on their own, Mr. Elliot purposely misaligns his tests with class lectures. He is always lecturing a bit behind where the students are reading, and where they are being tested. This has several effects. Students must study on their own, and cannot rely on one of their old class strategies, which is to just listen to a teacher's lecture and then see what will be on the test. It is designed to enrich the lectures and class activities so that students will have a base of factual knowledge when they get to class, a base from which they can move on to higher-level work. Mr. Elliot, in this regard, is rather a fan of Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom, 1984), and he states that one of his priorities in AP US History is:

Creating both assessments and activities that involve...escalating levels of developmental thought, that are required, for example, maybe some deeper inferential skills in history, the interpretation of documents, synthesis is very important for them to try to get eventually. I have to say, in terms of like pedagogical theory and educational philosophies and stuff like that I am a big believer in Bloom's taxonomy. I do...I refer to it in different ways, and it's not like a hobby horse that I ride or anything like that, but I do always try to keep in mind, like, what level is this, at what level am I challenging them, at what level am I asking them to recreate, or to reconstruct, some of what they're learning. And that's difficult, because, when...I think, in that respect, I tend to be my own hardest judge. (Interview with Mr. Elliot, 1-30-07)

To use the language of Bloom (1984), AP US History should demand analysis, synthesis, and at times even evaluation. Not only does the AP US History class promote such things, but so does the AP test itself:

...I think it's a good exam, I think it's a really challenging exam, and I think it does a good job of testing where they students' individual ability is in regards to both, not just knowledge acquisition, but interpretation, analysis, and ultimately synthesis, where is where the essay writing does such a good job. (Interview with Mr. Elliot, 3-6-07)

In this pursuit of higher levels of historical engagement, the students play an essential role. In order for Mr. Elliot to get to the higher levels of history and historical work, the students must be able to gather the information on their own, in their largely unscheduled and personally tailored taking of reading notes. The flexibility he gives them is meant to promote this.

And I think that creating independent learners is always a big part of this course. How to build sort of independent learners, putting more onto their shoulders so that they can both feel strong and powerful about their knowing their knowledge acquisition but what they can do with that and then, um, helping to provide them with skills and sometimes sort of insights into process and procedures in history. (Interview with Mr. Elliot, 2-23-07)

The problem with flexibility and with demands that the students do work of a sort that they have not previously been called upon to do is that they may resist such demands, and so one of the effects of Mr. Elliot's methods in AP US History is that they get some of his students a bit cheesed off at him. In their critiques of Mr. Elliot's "great" teaching, his being "behind" on lectures came up more than once:

...there's certain things I don't like about him, how he's, ah, behind on his lecture notes, most of the time. And, so, that can be like, when we're like preparing for the test, I wish he had, like, gone over, like, all the content that we're gonna be tested on, you know. And he's only gone through, like, a quarter of it or half of it. But I mean I, I've kinda gotten used to that. (Interview with Reilly Howard, 3-1-07)

I don't like the fact that he's always behind what we're reading. Like our notes in class are about a chapter behind where we are in our reading...So, like, the, reconstruction stuff, we didn't do all of that, we didn't get to all of the effects of reconstruction in class, and yet that was what we were tested on... (Interview with Jim Schurz, 1-24-07)

Maybe it's just like me being privileged in having, like, teachers baby me through my classes, but like, I really enjoyed actually knowing what would be like on the test before I took it, you know, like sort of thing. At least, like, a sort of review before we got up to, like, a certain, like, to the test...I feel, like it's just like we, we lecture and then, it's just like, oh! Test! And then we keep lecturing, and then, oh! Here's another test! And like, it's not really, like, going along with the lectures, and so, it's like, after you've taken the test, you get the lecture notes for what you've taken the test on. So, it's like, how is this supposed to help me? Like, I know it's like all for the AP, like the final AP, but it's just a weird way of, like, you, you teach yourself. You're supposed to teach yourself the material, and then you take the test, and then you kind of learn it after, in class. And it, I don't know, it's kind of backwards for me. (Interview with Candice Andueza, 3-1-07)

As with his students' trouble with his flexibility toward tardies, Mr. Elliot feels that this class has been particularly challenging in regards to their academic preparation. Mr.

Elliot, the good teacher, would like to do more than what he's been able to do in AP US History this year.

As an advanced class, then, AP US History is designed to take the best history students and push them to higher levels of work than were present, or possible, in survey classes. Working with the best of the best, AP teachers, Mr. Elliot included, are able to do more in these classes than they are with their survey students. Mr. Elliot aims for a higher-level class, and pushes his students to work to this level, even in ways to which they are not accustomed, which sometimes creates problems. Yet, for all his wishes that he could do more with his AP US History class, Mr. Elliot still sees them as something special. "I admire them as an entire group, for taking on such a challenge. For grappling with it, and growing" (Interview with Mr. Elliot, 3-7-07).

The Hierarchy of Knowledge

Playing off the idea of the good teacher and of the advanced class, several interesting results come out for the culture of high-achievement. The first of these I will attend to is a view of classes, school work, and even of knowledge which is particularly hierarchical and exclusive, and which I refer to as the *hierarchy of knowledge*. The pervasive presence of hierarchical notions, at a variety of levels and in a number of ways, neither begins nor ends with AP US History – the class itself sits in a certain place, yet membership in the class, the achievement of getting into AP US, does not bring an end to the need to continue moving up the ladder. The ways in which these various hierarchical notions manifest themselves in AP US History, and what they might mean for the students in terms of what they do and what it means to them, are thus my focus here.

There is a clear hierarchy set up in the structure of the classes in the social studies department at Fairlawn High School. There are the regular, or “survey” courses which all students must take, and the AP courses, AP US History and AP Government, accessible to only a few. This is not “tracking” in the sense that different student tracks are set up from the beginning, but it is a winnowing, a selective process by which some go on while others do not. As characterized by Mr. Elliot, the mixed, survey classes, which must serve all the students, have to be kept at a lower, fact-based level, so that everybody can at least pass them.

The hierarchy in the class structure is obvious, but it can also be seen that this hierarchical organization goes beyond a designation between “AP” classes and their “survey” level brethren and into the realm of knowledge itself. AP and survey classes address knowledge differently, a fact that is acknowledged by Mr. Elliot as a matter of

deliberate planning. Further, this difference in knowledge comes out in several ways. First off, AP US History aims for a more information-intensive version of history. There are more facts and more links between facts, knowledge that itself is more in-depth and more connected. Second, students in AP US History are supposed to have more opportunities for analysis and synthesis and other “higher” thinking. The students of AP US History, too, recognize these differences, and they claim that the knowledge they are learning in AP US History is “in-depth,” by which they mean more rich, more connected, more detailed, and even more interesting than the knowledge they have encountered in their previous history classes. Third, this hierarchy of knowledge also manifests itself in the different nature of the work, and the different demands placed on the students, in AP US History. In AP US History, students are given far more responsibility for gathering information on their own. The intent is that they are then asked to use this information, on their tests and in assignments, in ways that are less focused on completion or on reporting of factual knowledge and more focused on “use” of that knowledge.

These hierarchical notions then play out in several ways. Both the students and their teacher do not merely speak of differences between classes, but of divisions that exist within knowledge itself, divisions akin to good old Bloom’s Taxonomy. The very act of knowing is separated into types and levels. Facts are at the bottom, and real thinking is at the top. The hierarchy of knowledge says that one must learn the facts first, before one gets the opportunity to do the work of thinking. Combining this idea with the class structure of survey and advanced classes, a division of labor emerges where some students get the opportunity to think about knowledge while others only address it at the lower, factual level. This division of labor also comes out in the sort of labor demanded

of AP students – they must gather information on their own, and they must apply it. More is expected of them in terms of autonomy from direct guidance and in their level of dedication to the purposes of the class.

All of this comes out in students' attitudes toward their classes, their work, and knowledge. As already emphasized, students' characterizations of Mr. Elliot's class, while full of praise, also tend toward the comparative. AP US History is a "better" class, and this is due in great part to the different sort of knowledge stressed at the AP level. Students also, in their descriptions of knowledge and learning, tend to denigrate facts and tasks which involve the gathering and reporting of facts:

I think it comes from the different history classes I've taken before, like you said, OK, these are the basic facts, and, like, on the essay questions there you just have to list the facts. And then, I came in, OK, that's how a history class goes. And then you get to this history class, and you realize OK this history class was just, facts, there was nothing to the history class. (Interview with Jim Schurz, 1-24-07)

They use the term "boring" to describe this work, but their favorite term is "busywork." Busywork was frequently and at times vehemently denounced, often in terms which directly associated it with the sort of basic learning associated with survey-level classes as described by Mr. Elliot. Of Mr. Elliot's class, Eric said that:

I like it better. One reason, because there's less busywork. There's less worksheets. It's more like, you know the material, or you don't, I guess. Instead of, you get all these little poo poo points on stupid worksheets that don't matter.

When I asked him to describe "busywork," he gave a description and some examples:

ERIC: Worksheets that are just, like...something that is obvious, that you could just say outright, that a teacher knows, you know, material, but decide that they want you to put it down on paper. Filling in blanks, multiple choice questions, writing short answers.

SW: Why do you think teachers assign work like that?

ERIC: To see if you know the material, I guess. (Interview with Eric Morris, 3-6-07)

And when Reilly characterized her 9th and 10th grade history classes as having too much “busywork,” I also asked her for a definition:

Like, were not learning anything new, it’s kind of usually just like review stuff, it’s kind of just like...I usually feel like the teacher just doesn’t feel like teaching us....let’s give them a packet to fill out...look for the answer in the book and then like copy it down (Interview with Reilly Howard, 3-1-07).

Fact-gathering activity, then, is boring activity, and perhaps not even “learning.” Helen had a similar and revealing take on this sort of work: “I think if you can, like, self-learn it, then I think just pretty much taking the class is kind of pointless” (Interview with Helen Wei. 3-6-07).

The feel that runs through the descriptions given by the students is that factual learning, the sort of work where the tasks amount to reporting of information given through lecture or reading, is either boring or, in some cases, not really learning at all. Furthermore, the sort of work that is associated with gathering facts, when assigned in class, is perceived as a waste of time, a bunch of “poo-poo points.” The descriptions of better knowledge do not, in the students terms, come out as analysis and synthesis, but rather as a characterization of “use” rather than mere “gathering,” or, as one might put it, working, in-class, on a different part of the process of knowing. This is consistent with Mr. Elliot’s description of survey classes, and it leads to the idea that one of the big differences between AP US History and the survey classes is that the students of AP US History do not do information-gathering tasks in class, or at least not as many. Another,

of course, is that they must then do these tasks outside of class and on their own, something they have trouble with, since they haven't had to do it before, but something they are willing to do.

Of course, the idea that the students of AP US History are not doing information-gathering tasks in class seems to conflict, just a bit, with the fact that they spend quite a bit of their time listening to lectures and – when the lectures are written on the board – taking notes. But lectures, at least Mr. Elliot's lectures, do not seem to inspire the bored and fed-up response that students attribute to their other history classes. Part of this may be attributable to Mr. Elliot's skill and enthusiasm as a lecturer. Another part may have to do with the little details and interpretations that Mr. Elliot throws into his lectures, keeping them from being mere repetition of what they have read. More of this, though, may have to do with their past reliance on lectures, noted both by Mr. Elliot and by the students themselves. They are accustomed to lecture, and they are comfortable using it as a primary resource. Seen this way, lectures fit nicely into the hierarchical idea. Finding facts by themselves may be a waste of time, but Mr. Elliot knows more than they do, he is higher up in the hierarchy, and is thus worth listening to.

In all this, the social studies department at Fairlawn High School, AP US History, and even knowledge itself are shot through with various hierarchical notions. They come in through the position of the class in the school and the department, the position of the students in the class, the ways that work and knowledge are treated, and student and teacher attitudes. There is no getting around hierarchies, and even within AP US History one does not leave them behind, since, as Mr. Elliot's views on his class and higher-level

thinking show, the students must show that they have mastered the facts and can be trusted before other ways of working with historical knowledge can be attempted.

Interlude - The Sub

It is a Friday, and the students of AP US History have just spent three days taking whole-school standardized tests. Today, Mr. Elliot is away, and his class is being run by a substitute teacher. She is a retired high-school AP English teacher from the Fairlawn District, and her long classroom experience shows right away. She has a way of talking to the students as a group that inspires them to respond chorally in the same high-tone to low-tone phrasing that always accompanies such responses. Her name is Mrs. Wilson, and if she asks them a question, they respond “Yes-Mis-es-Willlllll-suuun.” She refers to them as “boys” and “girls.”

She gives them their group work and suggests that they get into mixed groups of boys and girls because, in her experience, mixed groups are more efficient. Near where I am sitting, Connor and Thomas, who often work together, immediately begin doing so again. They do not try to include a “girl” in their group. The sub remarks on this. Thomas looks around, says to Connor, “Should we find a girl?”

Connor shakes his head. “Nah. Let’s be inefficient.”

Already, I can sense that the students of AP US History are not treating their sub with quite the same respect and admiration that they reserve for Mr. Elliot. Still, they are working away. On one side of their worksheet is a political cartoon about the Panama Canal, on the other, a poem by Pablo Neruda. Some conversations around the classroom reflect these students’ usual involvement with their work. Bill turns to Helen and Sara,

with whom he is working, and says “You can tell this is Pablo Neruda, ‘cause it’s kinda weird.” Helen and Sara give this a good laugh.

I sit in a student desk, watching the kids write. I’ve gone to sit by Bill, Sara, and Helen, drawn by the Neruda comment. As I watch them work, Reilly calls to me from the middle of the room, where she is working in a group with Laura and Emma. “Hey Mr. Wojo!” Reilly calls out, “remember when you asked me what busywork is?”

“Yeah,” I reply, thinking back to our interview.

She holds up her paper. “This is busywork.” Laura and Emma hold their papers at the same moment, making for an amusingly coordinated gesture. They are wearing expressions that people wear when they sigh resignedly, expressions seem to say “can you believe this stuff?” The sight of all three of them holding up their papers almost cracks me up. They slap the papers on their desks, still in unison, and go back to work.

I walk over, ask them why it’s busywork. “Because it’s not even, like, analysis. It’s like, what happened in the poem,” Reilly explains. Laura complains that the poem isn’t even a primary source, that it was written a hundred years after the canal was finished, and by a Chilean yet. Rachel, in the next group, weighs in and asks if Chileans aren’t allowed to have opinions, but the group just shakes their heads.

Changing the subject, the group then launches into a litany of complaints about the standardized tests that they just spent three days taking, reserving special mockery for the vocational sections of the test. Disbelief is expressed at questions requiring that you make change, “with a calculator,” and another set of question that tested comprehension of instructions for basic factory tasks. Laura explains how there was a memo telling them to put the fan in the welder for 12 seconds, then a question about how many seconds to

put the fan in the welder.

Thinking that Rachel might have a different view of the assignment, after her question about the opinions of Chileans, I walk around the desk to where she and Janice are working away. Rachel and Janice explain that this is just a fill-in-the-blank assignment. Rachel also notes, however, that you've got to expect busywork with a sub. How could this not be busywork? I ask. Rachel responds that she'd like to see them read and discuss it.

I work my way back over to Bill, Helen, and Sara eager for another point of view. I ask them what they think about the assignment, and their impression is negative. Helen answers that it is a learning opportunity, but says this in a mocking voice that tells me that sarcasm is more her intention. Bill frowns, "I kind of feel stupid for complaining that this it's not harder," yet this seems to be just the problem. "It's just reading and answering."

This group then turns to impassioned complaining about their standardized test experiences, focusing especially on the "work keys" section, the vocational questions. "If you want to be a pig farmer, this will test your skills," Helen says. I ask if there was a section on pig farming, and they describe a question that used a farming situation to ask what was a simple arithmetic problem. The presence of a calculator for these questions is, once again, pointed out. The three of them chat for a minute about how easy most of the test was, insultingly so. Bill also complains that the history piece hit on times that they hadn't gotten to in AP history. And the science part had no chemistry!

I move across the room and squat next to Matt's desk. "What do you think of this assignment?" I ask him.

“It’s stupid,” he says.

I grin in spite of myself. “Don’t hold back, Matt,” I say, “tell me what you really think.”

He says that they already know this stuff, holding up his thick AP US History book. There’s no need to do it again.

I move again, this time to Jim. When I ask him what he thinks, he responds “it’s boring.” When I ask why it’s boring, he responds “It’s a poem.” I recall that Jim loves math and science and being a smart-ass, so I press for a better answer. “There is no thought that is required in the question,” he tells me. “Read the poem, write down what the poem says.”

I sit by Jim for a couple more minutes, then stand and take a few steps over to another group – a large one, made up of Candice, Adam, LeAnn, Allie, and Andy. I watch them work for a bit, work that is liberally sprinkled with chatting about this and that. Candice does not like the assignment, and looks rather exasperated with it, but Adam is full of enthusiasm. Two times he raises his hand and calls Mrs. Wilson over with a question, while Candice hisses “Adam! Don’t encourage her!” Adam’s tone seems overly friendly to me, and I am fairly certain that he is acting cooperative and interesting mainly to annoy the other members of his group.

Mrs. Wilson calls for the students’ attention and attempts to lead a brief discussion on the political cartoon on the back of the worksheet. I sit down in the desk next to Jim, and as the sub holds up the worksheet and asks for comments, Jim rants about the futility of the assignment and packs his bags. Matt is turned around and talking

to Eric, and when he turns back to face the front of the room, it is only to read the newspaper that is open and spread across his desk.

Mrs. Wilson asks about different features of the cartoon, a picture of a gigantic Teddy Roosevelt in a policeman's uniform, striding across the world, surrounded by smaller men of other nations. Bill gives her an answer that seems to draw from information that is not in the cartoon, and when the sub asks where his answer came from, he admits that he read it in the book. Focus on the cartoon, she tells him. Emma, sitting on the floor, rolls her eyes and tells the sub that the instructions on the sheet say to use outside sources, like the book, in their answers. The eye-roll surprises me; Emma is usually so polite. Mrs. Wilson asks them to focus on the cartoon only.

Andy begins talking about the light around Roosevelt's head, how it shows that TR was blessed by God. Also mentions the little Mexican figures, in sombreros, in the picture. Mrs. Wilson seems pleased. She asks what people can tell her about the TR figure.

"He's fat!" Adam calls out.

"I know," the sub responds, "but what is that telling you?"

"Powerful!" someone yells.

"Gluttony!" another calls out.

In my corner, Jim fidgets while Matt continues to read his paper. Some students have completely withdrawn from the discussion, and I have the uncomfortable sensation that the students who are participating are toying with the sub, throwing out answers which they know will be acceptable, yet doing it a spirit, not of cooperative participation, but of hidden mockery of their easy assignment. The discussion winds down, and the last

few minutes of the class are spent in student chatter, waiting for the tone. (Fieldnotes, 3-16-07)

Good Students, Better Students

Of the effects of the hierarchy of knowledge, one of the most telling is the ways that these hierarchical notions shape students' work, their attitudes toward it and, on top of that, their attitude toward other students and even toward their teachers. The students of AP US History, as members of an "advanced" class, are not just good students, but they are "better" students, working at a higher-level, with different work, and different knowledge, than students in regular classes. My particular focus here is on the ways that their identity as "better" students, the cultural meanings which surround their work and their position, foster certain attitudes toward what they do as well as towards others who do different work and who occupy different positions within the school.

After watching the students with their substitute teacher, I was quite curious about the behaviors I'd observed, which were so far outside of those to which I'd become accustomed. So the next time I observed Mr. Elliot's class, I took a moment before class started to share my observations on the students' response to their substitute with Mr. Elliot. I explained that his AP students, normally quite well-behaved and compliant, were unfocused, rather snotty, frustrated, and even mocking toward their sub. Mr. Elliot claimed that kids at this level can be "really, really aggressive" if they feel like they're being "talked down to." When they feel this, the AP kids tend to respond in one of three ways: they shut down and just sit with their arms crossed, they behave aggressively, or they toy with the teachers (Fieldnotes, 3-20-07). Indeed, I had noticed responses much

like these when I'd sat in with the substitute teacher. This set me to thinking about frustration.

There was a certain connection between frustration, busywork, standardized test-questions that seemed "beneath" the AP students. The complaints about the in-class assignment centered around its fact-based nature, as did complaints about the standardized test that they'd taken, and when the sub was asking strictly information-checking questions, even excluding facts outside the worksheet, the students reacted by becoming exasperated or mocking, or by simply refusing to participate. The striking thing about all of this was the quick connection between "easy" work and anger, the instant turn by which the well-behaved and even at times enthusiastic students I'd been watching for over three months became disconnected or hostile. It was also interesting that this hostility was directed at a person, the sub, as well as at the assignment. The sub, after all, did not come up with the assignment – it was Mr. Elliot's plan that she was following - yet it was she, and not Mr. Elliot, who bore the students' reaction.

My read of this class and the issues surrounding it emphasizes that, when AP students were asked to work farther down on the hierarchy of knowledge, they were none too pleased by doing so. One way of looking at this is to begin with the idea that, just as AP US History can be seen as a "better" class, the students position as learners of more than "facts," of working higher-up on the hierarchy of knowledge, positions them as "better" students. The work they do is something more than most are able to do, in at least two ways: they are "able" to do this work because they are in AP US History, and they got into AP US History in the first place precisely because they are "able" to do this work. As the elite students, they are seen as personally more talented and ready for work

on a new level. It has already been seen how this all comes out in their teacher's, and other teachers', attitudes toward them. In some ways it has also been seen to come out in students' attitudes toward AP US History, as they characterized AP as a "better" class often in terms of the type of knowledge pursued there. The above slice of classroom life, however, shows a bit more the students' attitude coming out: as "better" students, they are not only capable of better work, but also set above lower level work.

The way that the students interacted with the sub shows that this attitude is not limited to a dismissal of certain types of work, but also to a negative attitude toward certain people. The sub was the obvious target. Less obvious, perhaps, were those students for whom the standardized tests might prove difficult, particularly the students for whom the vocational questions were meant to apply. In interviews, this hierarchical view of work manifests itself also in students' attitudes toward other students. The very structuring of knowledge in a hierarchical fashion seems to feed into a hierarchical social structuring. This sort of attitude toward other students was manifest in the reasons that AP US History students gave for taking AP US History. Several of them claimed "better students" as a top reason. Half of them expressed some desire to be with "better" students, or disappointment with students in their regular classes. Indeed, a certain frustration with fellow students comes through:

I like that I would be able to work with better students. Sometimes I get annoyed with having to go over the same things over and over again with weaker students that didn't grasp the concept at the beginning. (Interview with Jim Schurz, 1-24-07)

...there's like, the really smart people who don't try, you know ...I don't wanna like judge them...But, I think that...it wasn't really doing it for me, like, in my classes....I was tired of just, like, having people be like, you know, "wait, what's the book about?" like after we've read it....I was just like, it's not really worth it...to

just sit in a class where...I understand everything, and...I'm not really getting enough out of it. (Interview with Candice Andueza, 3-1-07)

...there's always people that, like, work really hard to be where they are, like, academically...And then there's the people that kind of just do it and it comes naturally...And then, some people are like in-between. Like I think I'm kind of in-between, I guess. And then, in normal classes, there's people that just don't care at all, and don't work hard. (Interview with Cathy Kilpatrick, 3-2-07)

I was kinda hoping AP classes would, kind of, concentrate it, like, the more ambitious students. Or...if there's people who are...really focused on a sport, say, and then they just like wanna maintain their C average to stay in the sport. Like, that's great for them, if they're really interested in sport but, I'm not, so I'd rather surround myself with other students that are really academically focused. (Interview with Rachel Early, 2-28-07)

Part of this view of other students likely comes from Mr. Elliot's own characterizations of this class, and the students in it, as "better," yet there may be more to it. Indeed, as some of the above quotes show, the high-achievers responses to the "other" students that they have encountered - especially those in regular, non-AP classes, and those portrayed as uninterested, unmotivated, or slow - show a tendency to qualify those criticisms. In general, the high-achievers' responses were not only criticism, but also a mix of intolerance, kindness, frustration, understanding, explanation, and justification, sometimes tinged with guilt. At times they spoke of differences, of their own achievement, with an underlying sense that their higher position was not entirely something to brag about, and that perhaps something was not right.

This complexity might bear further exploration. Just as (in Chapter 4) modesty or a reluctance to brag may be present in the high-achievers' claims that they are not high-achievers, so too might their comments on other students support readings which differ from the one I propose here. The high-achievers' disclaimers about high-achievement and

their response to “other” students may even fit together. Their widespread insistence that they themselves are not high-achievers might be seen, not just as an indicator that they are “never done,” but also as a desire to minimize their achievements so as to discount the differences between themselves and the other students, students which are at the same time portrayed as different nonetheless. If there is some guilt or justification in their references to other students, or a sense that the hierarchical differences are not alright, such ideas and feelings might show more about high-achievement, as high-achievers perceive it, than has come out in my particular treatment.

That being said, and while acknowledging the complexity present here and the possibility of further interesting explorations of it, my focus in this study is on the frustration and intolerance that came out, and not necessarily students’ deeper feelings about it. And I think this is a warranted place to focus, not the least because the identity of high-achievers as “better” students came out in more than ways than merely the students’ own words. Their actions in class, already described, support my reading. Also, the hints of frustration, even of intolerance, that came through in the way AP US History students spoke about other students at Fairlawn come out in other ways as well. The other two AP social studies teachers I interviewed both provided interesting pictures of their students’ behaviors that support what I saw in Mr. Elliot’s class. Mr. Brown, who teaches the other AP US History class, spoke of his the special nature that students in AP US History get from being selected, and of his students’ reaction when they come to class for the first time:

...we know in February who our kids are gonna be the next year, they’re excited about it, we’re excited about it. It’s a kind of a big deal, you know, to the kids when they get in, they’re like, wow...I’m gonna do this. The first day of class they walk in and they’re high-fiving each other saying

things like, it's a class with all smart people, I can't wait. There's no stupid people in this class. I've heard that all three years. On the first day of school they walk in ...if I'm standing out in the hall listening to what they're saying in here, this is gonna be awesome. There's no stupid people in this class. (Interview with Mr. Brown, 1-27-07)

Mr. Schleiffen, one of the AP Government teachers, is a first-year teacher who is working high-achievers in the social studies department, many of whom were Mr. Elliot's students last year. When I asked Mr. Schleiffen if there were any downsides to the high-achiever experience, he described his students' intolerant attitude as he'd seen it come out in his class:

I think...and again, it's my first year, and so my experience could kinda taint what I see as problems...what I've seen is they lose a little of the, I don't know if you wanna call it social aspects, or the humanity-type...being tracked with similar kids like this...intellectual arrogance is what I've seen, a lot of times. And they place a high values, on, it seems very important to a lot of these kids to point out when they see stupidity, or mistakes, or intellectual blunders, and to, like berate it. And, and in some way, um, showing that they're smarter than that, or...and maybe it's a, just proving that they're intelligent. But there seems to be this greater importance and value on, like, looking down on others, as far as ...illogical things or mistakes, stupidity, whatever you want to call it....they jump on it, more so, and it seems very important for them to point out these, these things. They're more critical, I guess. Overly critical, at times, of others. (Interview with Mr. Schleiffen, 1-27-07)

Mr. Brown and Mr. Schleiffen also both expressed concern that their AP students were being, in some ways, isolated from the other students.

Of course, the teachers themselves are positioned within the hierarchy of knowledge and classes in the Fairlawn Social Studies Department, and the students' reaction to the sub has something to say about this as well. As mentioned, the assignment was Mr. Elliot's, and I have seen his students work on similar fact-finding assignments on a couple of occasions, though these were not common in the classes I observed. As they did one such assignment, a computer-lab-based fact-finding sheet which required

them to go to several websites covering the Progressive Era in US History, I walked around the room and gauged their reactions. Some thought it was busywork, others viewed it more positively, but none of them displayed the sorts of behaviors they showed towards their sub. Mr. Schlieffen, a first-year teacher of AP Government, and Mrs. Wilson, their sub, see these students act in one way, but Mr. Elliot, a well-known, very knowledgeable teacher and a forceful lecturer, does not, even in the midst of a worksheet assignment similar to that carried out under Mrs. Wilson's supervision.

The arrogance and frustration that seems to come out at times in AP students, and the snatches of this that I saw and heard in Mr. Elliot's students in particular becomes more interesting when it is connected to the hierarchical nature of class organization and knowledge, especially of knowledge, that runs through AP US History and the AP program. As students have been successful on tasks which fall lower on the hierarchy, and indeed as students who have – if their interview responses are any measure – been bored or frustrated in other history classes, it is perhaps understandable that such work would draw a negative reaction. This is certainly eloquent commentary on the nature and usefulness of the survey approach. Yet there may be more going on here than residual anger over other classes. Their negative characterizations of other students, and the variations in their responses to different teachers, add another angle. Perhaps, having proven themselves by doing the work demanded of them, and having shown themselves capable of completing work at the lower levels, they expect a payoff in the form of status. And perhaps, seeing others who do not measure up, or work that is below them, they feel compelled to approach this work and these students with a certain arrogance, to justify the investment they have made in their own success. Or maybe, having been told that

they are better, they after a while begin to believe it, and to believe it in a way that goes beyond their grades and accolades as high-achievers.

Interlude - Reading from an Old Textbook

It's 8:25 am. Mr. Elliot has been giving a rather feisty lecture on Theodore Roosevelt, and now he switches gears, passing out a section from an old 1800's textbook, two facing pages photocopied onto a sheet of yellow paper. He does not give an exact date for the textbook, but the lesson titles "The Races of Men" and "Manner of Living" certainly indicate a less than contemporary approach. The lessons are divided into numbered sections, and Mr. Elliot has the students read aloud, each students reading a section. After each section, Mr. Elliot asks "do you agree?" The sections begin somewhat innocuously:

70. You may wonder why anyone should care to live where it is very hot or very cold, but such is the case. There are a great many millions of men, and they dwell in almost all parts of the earth.

"Do you agree?" he asks. Hesitant "yes" answers. As the lessons progress, however, the students begin to become skeptical of them:

72. Men of the same color and appearance are said to belong to the same race. There are five races. You are familiar with two of them – the white and the black. The others are called the red, the yellow, and the brown.

This time the "do you agree" is answered with hesitant looks, shaking of heads.

Mr. Elliot stops the students' reading and asks some of the discussion questions at the bottom of the lesson, questions like "What is to be said of the white race?" and "What has become of the Indians?" and notes that the "right" answers are the racist answers drawn from the chapter. "That's the correct answer. If you put anything else, I'd mark it wrong." This gets a good laugh from the class.

The students read on. Mike reads lesson 75, on the “red race:”

75. Before the white and the black races came to America, it was inhabited by the red race, or Indians. Once in a while you may see an Indian in our towns and cities, but the white people have driven most of them so far away that they seldom visit the settled parts of our country.

At the words “red race” and “driven most of them away,” the students chuckle. Seth reads from section 76, on the “yellow or Mongolian race,” and Mr. Elliot points out that the section uses the word “brought” to describe how members of this race came to America, a vague passive voice usage that implies that they come over “as if they were slaves, or an item, or a trade item,” adding that this vagueness is a reason to avoid passive voice in their papers. He then points out the pictures in the middle of the page, where five people are drawn, representing an example from each race. In the middle is a “beautiful white woman,” while the others are portrayed with “very stereotypical, racist images.”

Cathy reads next, from section 80:

80. The greater portion of the world’s people live in Europe and America, and belong to the white race. They know more than other nations. This is the reason that they are more powerful, and live more comfortably.

“Have you ever wondered that?” Mr. Elliot asks as she finishes reading. “That’s why.”

Again, laughter from the students. Mr. Elliot in quite clearly mocking the ignorant, racist, textbook of earlier days. Students read on:

81. Half-civilized people have no railroads nor steamboats, and not many books or schools. Some of them live in houses, and have towns and cities; others have no fixed homes, but live in tents and wander about from one part of their country to another...

“They tend to wander, they like to wander,” adds Mr. Elliot. Laughs follow. Mr. Elliot himself reads the next section:

82...The Japanese and Chinese are the most advanced of the half-civilized nations. They are excellent gardeners and farmers; they have many books, and are very skillful in some manufactures.

He places special emphasis on the word “excellent,” and, as he finishes, he continues, “They make nice pottery. We like their pottery.” More laughter.

Students read the next to sections, which describe the “savage” or “non-civilized” peoples of the world. When Andy reads a passage that claims “they clothe themselves in the skins of wild beasts,” laughter runs across the class once more. Mr. Elliot has them finish reading the sections, drawing chuckles along the way. At the end, he asks Thomas “How does this make you feel?”

“I’m not surprised,” Thomas answers.

Mr. Elliot then swings into a lecture on this textbook and the attitudes exemplified by it. He notes that, thanks to the Dawes Act, which provided for the education of Native American children, little Indian kids would be reading textbooks like this. Describing how this sort of thing led Americans to develop “attitudes towards immigrants, attitudes toward others,” he finishes off by reminds students that President McKinley referred to the people of the Philippines as “our little brown brothers.” Americans, looking at the world, thought that everyone was “uncivilized,” and so “it’s out job to fix them, because we are superior to all” (Fieldnotes, 3-20-07).

Just the Facts, Ma’am

Here I shift my focus, staying within the context of the hierarchy of knowledge, yet moving back to Mr. Elliot, his identity as a “good” teacher, the ways his students define his class as interesting and worthwhile, and his own goals of creating a higher-level, advanced class. A part of what makes these students high-achievers is their

presence in this class, and as an AP class, a better class, it has certain features which make it stand out from the regular classes which the students have taken. AP US History is an information-intensive class, a class with lots of work and lots of lecture, and it is also an “advanced” class and a “better” class. All of this is framed in certain ways by Mr. Elliot and by the students, and the ways that the class meets, exceeds, or contradicts its portrayal by those who participate in it form another facet of the culture of high-achievement. In particular, here I look at the “facts” of AP US History, how they are supposed to be different from regular classes, how they turned out to be different as I saw them, and the outcomes of these differences for the experiences of the students. This view touches upon the purposes of AP US History as well as the purposes of social studies classes in general, and gets at the meanings of descriptors such as good, advanced, higher-level, and interesting. It also gets at how defining the “good” class as a better class, with better facts, defines the “higher-level” education of high-achievers in ways which contradict the picture of the critical, analytical nature of an advanced class.

Mr. Elliot defines AP US History as an advanced history class, different in scope and in type from the “survey” courses that 9th and 10th graders take at Fairlawn High School. He is looking for his students to engage history at a different level, not just to memorize facts, but to analyze and synthesize information, to bring it together and to re-apply it to new situations, and to use it creatively. In aiming for this, he feels that he has not done as much as he would wish. Indeed, he does not fully trust that his students will get the necessary information on their own, information which would allow higher-level class work. He wants them to work at a higher level on the knowledge hierarchy, but wants them to get the “facts” first.

The facts play a complex and contradictory role in Mr. Elliot's classroom. As seen above, in-class work that involves fact-gathering is scorned by the students as "busywork," and indeed the very structure of the social studies classes at Fairlawn suggests that factual knowledge is a "survey" sort of thing. Yet there are many facts in Mr. Elliot's class, many more than in the survey courses, and these facts are seen as a necessary ingredient to higher levels of thought, so much so that they seem to operate in a gate-keeping fashion. Complexifying this picture is Mr. Elliot's own students' attitudes toward his class, which are in the main quite positive, and which are connected to the "interesting" sort of information they are getting. They cite the in-depth knowledge, their interest in the class, and even their ability to better remember the information presented as positives.

The view of facts as elementary, and slightly or more than slightly negative, has already been established through a review of students' and teachers' attitudes and in the context of the survey vs. advanced structure of the history classes at Fairlawn. The positive side of the facts, has been seen as well – they are a necessary step toward "higher" thinking. The facts cannot be dispensed with:

I hate the word "fact," we challenged that in my grad classes, things like that, and I know all the criticisms of it but there are still some sort of basic knowledge things that are required before you can go further. (Interview with Mr. Elliot, 2-23-07)

I've seen far too many, especially AP classes actually, where very little actually gets accomplished in terms of content. And the kids are very passionate, and they love it, and they'll be lots of discussion and they have lots of opinions, but the opinions are often based on stuff that is kind of shallow, and, and not, um, I, you know that sounds so judgmental to say shallow, but I think that, not based on a lot of factual knowledge and background, and I guess I personally have more respect for people who have an opinion based upon, and can connect it to some factual defense. (Interview with Mr. Elliot, 3-6-07)

From Mr. Elliot's point of view, they are getting a better brand of facts than they have seen before. The above class, where the students re-read an old text, shows Mr. Elliot leading his class, not so much through a critical reading of a text, but through an "improved" reading, one in which the facts, as we have them now, are better than the ones they used to be working from. Mr. Elliot's already mentioned emphasis on the strange and the different in history, his taking of different readings on historical events, and his enjoyment of different and even shocking knowledge, can also be seen in this light. One student even mentioned Mr. Elliot's love of the shocking:

He told us that, like, the sharks migration has changed because of the slave boats coming across from Africa because they've been dumped over and I'm like, I don't believe that. (laugh)...And like, I was talking to Cathy Kilpatrick about this. And we just like think that, like, he wants to have an effect on the class, so he just, like, chooses really outrageous things to like...because after he tells us something, like really intense, like that like shark thing, like, everybody's like silent, and like, wow, that's really interesting. (Interview with Allie Meredith, 3-2-07)

When he claims that Abraham Lincoln never wanted equality for African-Americans, tells students that their middle-class mothers would have been addicted to laudanum in the 1800's, or reveals how many immigrants to America returned to their home countries, he is giving them facts they've never seen before, better facts:

Mr. Elliot is at the board, lecturing on Teddy Roosevelt and the Treaty of Portsmouth. He describes the "Gentlemen's Agreement," as it is known, between the US and Japan. "Gentlemen my ass," he tells the class. "This is ugly. If you kinda scrape the veneer of Roosevelt's presidency, you see a lot of this." Gives the example of Roosevelt's inviting Booker T. Washington to lunch, then denying it when there was an uproar. He then criticizes the 9th grade textbook version of Teddy Roosevelt. "It doesn't give you the rest of the story." (Fieldnotes, 3-20-07)

As this example shows, this emphasis on the strange and the different seems to exist in a relationship to what has gone before. The facts in AP US History are more

detailed, and less in line with the simple and accepted mainstream version of history, than what they have previously learned. Indeed, Mr. Elliot often criticizes previous treatments of history:

This is what separates the real AP kids from the ones who just took eighth grade history. (Fieldnotes, 12-15-06)

7:56 – Mr. Elliot emphasizes the difference between [AP] scores 1 – 5 and compares them to the difference between “freshman and sophomore” stuff and stuff they’re working on now...

8:10 – Mr. Elliot mocks the “unit” approach that divides the [Civil] war and Reconstruction along a hard line, calling it “middle school” stuff...

8:28 – “Wade-Davis Bill” is the subject... “you didn’t learn this in middle school” (Fieldnotes, 12-19-07)

As with his lectures, Mr. Elliot’s comments in this regard were at times pretty funny:

I don’t know a 5th grader alive who doesn’t know the cotton gin. It’s like it’s the only thing we teach. (Field notes, 1-23-07)

The students, too, claim that they are getting better facts. They do not claim that AP US History is a better class than their previous class because it is not fact-based. Instead, they claim that the facts in AP US History are connected, interesting, detailed and meaningful. Part of this comes from their enjoyment of the class, their interest in it, and their own evaluation of the class as a good one. Undoubtedly, however, their views of the facts of history are heavily influenced by Mr. Elliot’s own views which, as I noted above, he shares with them. AP US History is portrayed as a higher-level, advanced class, and Mr. Elliot is not afraid to emphasize this, to call on students to work at the AP level, to point out to them that they are the top, and, going along with all this, to let them know that the version of history they are getting is a superior one.

Rachel, describing her study strategies, hits upon how the facts in AP US History

fit into a context:

I tend to think in that sense, in like the big trends that, like, Elliot covers in history. Just like cause and effect type stuff...I mean, I study for history, but...there's some people, they'll just like drill the facts, or like the, just like the names and places and dates. And, I think that that, I mean, even if it works and you're, like if you spend like three hours doing that, and then you wind up with an A on the test, it doesn't seem like you really learned the material...I think if you get like the basic ideas and like the causes and effects and the big trends, you can tend to like, infer the little facts more so. (Interview with Rachel Early, 2-28-07)

When Mr. Elliot teaches, Rachel says, he hits the "big trends," the "cause and effect type stuff." This jibes with my own observations, and it even jibes with a complaint of two of Mr. Elliot's students, Adam and Candice, both of whom thought Mr. Elliot spent too much time on connections and not enough on the events that are being connected.

I have noticed in his class that I sort of, he'll stress something as very important, as like critical, I mean there's a sense of extreme sort of, like, the most important event is like this compromise. If it wasn't for this, the constitution wouldn't have been written, if it wasn't for, this rebellion...there would not be the constitution...And I remember the significance of an event, but I usually don't remember what the event is...Shay's Rebellion is critical. But if someone said, like, what is Shay's Rebellion, I'd have no idea. (Interview with Adam Braff, 2-2-07)

It is the connections that students stress when they talk about the difference between AP US History and previous classes, and they emphasize that what they are learning is more than discrete facts memorized and regurgitated. Of the facts in her previous classes, Janice says:

...there's no meaning behind them. It's just, you know like, know this country, and, you know, the, some random person or, you know, there's no, like, face to go with the name, kind of.

And when I asked her, "And how does Mr. Elliot give it meaning or put a face on it?"

She explained,

Well, he, I think he uses humor a lot of times and, you know, just, little phrases that he, like, calls people. Or, you know, with presidents he'll, he'll have some little story behind it, and, you know, it's entertaining at the same time. (Interview with Janice Warren, 3-5-07)

Reilly, too, complained about her previous classes and praised AP US:

It just seems like we're getting, I don't know, compared to, like, my 9th grade class and like my 10th grade history class, which were so boring. It just seems like we're getting more, it's more in depth and...it's just way more interesting than my other history classes...

I asked her to expand upon this: "Where do you think that comes from? What makes it more interesting than other classes?" Her answer was telling: "Um, I think because it's like a story" (Interview with Reilly Howard, 3-1-07).

These comments add yet another level of complexity to the position of facts within AP US History. On one hand, as mentioned above, they represent what students think, and what Mr. Elliot has told them, about the facts of AP US History. But at the same time, given what I've seen in observing this class, and what students have told me about their learning in AP US History, it seems that Mr. Elliot's lectures are interesting and his facts are connected and more "in-depth" because Mr. Elliot is telling *good stories*. This is the reason that the facts and dates in AP US History are not the disconnected, boring, simply memorized facts of AP students' previous classes. These facts rest within a structure that links them together and gives each a place, a structure which makes the whole picture more interesting and which even helps the students of AP US History to remember the wealth of information that Mr. Elliot bestows upon them.

This would mean that Mr. Elliot's class is "good," that the knowledge in it is better than in other classes, because Mr. Elliot's teaching taps into the power of narrative, a fundamental way that humans come to know the world. Jerome Bruner, who has written

extensively the narrative mode of knowing, suggests that “narrative organizes the structure of human experience” (1991, p. 21) and that “we organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative” (p.4). Others take similarly strong positions regarding the place of narrative in the human experience, and in the study of people. Randal and Furlong (2005) call narrative the “primary mode in which we operate each day” and contrasts it to the mode that “science espouses” (p. 15). Connelly and Clandinin (1990), writing about why we ought to use narrative in educational research, tell us that:

the main intellectual claim for the use of narrative in educational research is that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world. (p. 2)

This is not quite how Mr. Elliot talks about his class. Indeed, he seems to believe that factual knowledge is proof *against* narrative:

Mr. Elliot goes into the film “Birth of a Nation” calling it both “funny” and “racist,” says it was Woodrow Wilson’s favorite movie and the first shown in the White House. He describes the movie, talking about its portrayals of black legislators and black women, laying out a scene where the legislators are laying around plotting to get at white women, an idea that he says was a big source of fear in the south. Then he says that a lot of people believe movies because of the “power of narrative,” but claims that you won’t believe all that movies have to say if you “know your history.” (Fieldnotes, 2-22-07)

It is possible that Mr. Elliot believes that the facts will save people from perfidious narratives. He certainly does attempt to equip his students with a detailed picture of history, including facts that are outside of the mainstream of the usual story. And he definitely believes, as seen above, that the facts are necessary before one can get into higher levels of analysis and synthesis. Still, if this is what he believes, what he acts like is a person who finds history fascinating and who wants to share that with his students,

and he is that, too. And he does share it, by telling them the stories of history, including the unusual and touching and shocking ones, and the ones they wouldn't have heard anywhere else.

This, in turn, may connect to the fact that the AP students are the sort of students who find such facts interesting, or, at the very least, are willing to sit and listen and do the readings and pay attention. In other words, on top of all this, audience is also a consideration. When Mr. Elliot describes the flexibility he uses with his AP students, he also mentions that it isn't something he tries with his regular students. Mr. Brown notes that his AP students show "automatic engagement" in their classes, and Mr. Schleiffen notes that AP students are "driven." One student even mentioned the relationship between the teachers' perception of AP students as "good," the comparative nature of this perception, and teachers' attitude toward their classes:

I feel kind of like the teachers like their AP classes more than regular classes, because then they feel like, even if it's not true, they're getting the brightest and the best, the cream of the crop, these kids want to be here. So if they, appreciate the fact that you are interested in their subject, and you want them to teach you, and so, if a teacher is told, I want to learn about this, they're gonna, they're gonna put their best foot forward and, and try and do their best. So I think that has a big impact. I mean, you know, look at Mr. Elliot, how he gets so, you know, energized and emotional about history. (Interview with Andy Meade, 3-8-07)

Even though I have heard from Mr. Elliot that his survey classes are different, and have heard from Dr. Riveli that Mr. Elliot is a good teacher in *all* of his classes at *all* levels, I have not seen any of this firsthand and so I cannot say. What I can say is that his AP students get a set of facts that is portrayed and conveyed as "better," and that much of this seems to be due to Mr. Elliot's skill as a lecturer and his passion for the subject. It has to be said, again, that Mr. Elliot is indeed a good lecturer. To watch Mr. Elliot lecture

is to watch a teacher who really *gives lectures*, a teacher in whose hands a lecture is less a recitation of information that could be just as easily read – such lectures occur far too often, in schools - and more of a performance.

What these lectures cannot be called is participatory. Certainly, Mr. Elliot asks questions, calls on students, and gives them a chance to speak. But this only goes so far. A raised-hand is no guarantee of attention in Mr. Elliot's class. Candice, who had Mr. Elliot for a humanities class last year, shared her view of this:

...Elliot is more like a, dictator-ish lecturer, so he's very, like...you can't really ask questions, unless you raise your hand for, like, ten minutes. Which was like the same last year, which was really hard because when you're talking about art, and you have...an opinion about it, it's really hard to...not be able to say it. (Interview with Candice Andueza, 3-1-07)

The questions he asks to the class often require short answers which seem only to be small additions to the ongoing flow of the lecture rather than substantive comments. He will occasionally cut off or talk over a student, and it is difficult to tell at times whether the questions he asks the class are rhetorical, since he often answers them himself if nobody jumps in. When he asks a direct question to one student, he may quickly move on if the answer is not immediate. Either that, or he will ask progressively more narrow versions of the same question until the student supplies an answer, at which point he will jump back into the lecture.

Now, this is not to say that all Mr. Elliot does is lecture, and that he ignores his students. This is to say that most of what I saw him do was lecture, and that when he lectures, he does not like to slow down or interrupt once he's gotten going. Part of his tendency toward use of frequent and non-participatory lecture even as his priorities include analysis and synthesis has to do no doubt with this particular class and its own

strengths and weaknesses. Still, though I have never watched him teaching any of his other AP classes, it is hard to believe that he does not interact with other classes in a similar way, as Candice claimed. He admits his tendency to move too fast for questions:

...my biggest I think weakness is being patient enough I think with kids to give them time to process and think. And I think as an educator if there's any one thing I'd love to become better at, it's probably that...Asking them certain types of questions I feel pretty confident, I know what I'm doing when I'm asking different levels and different kinds of things I'm able to rephrase and reword things to try to help them, but, um, I tend to be too impatient. And so, allowing them the time to think, process, and, and I think that my patience is both just personal and also it's, it's, partly schedule based. It's because of other pressures...curriculum time, AP, things like that. (Interview with Mr. Elliot, 2-23-07)

The need to get to the AP, it seems, plays a part in all this as well. Mr. Elliot always feels like he's running out of time.

Not only are the lectures not overly participatory, but Mr. Elliot's students don't seem to spend a terrible lot of time analyzing and synthesizing in class. Sure, they have their tests, and they occasionally write answers to AP-style document-based questions – they did six of these, during the fall semester – but this is not what I saw them spend most of their time doing, and it is certainly arguable as to what sort of thinking is really required by such tests as the AP. Even granting that the AP does test analysis and synthesis, knowledge not as separate bits but in some sort of context, when do Mr. Elliot's students practice dealing with knowledge in this way? Even when Mr. Elliot engages in analysis with his students, or speculates about alternative interpretations of historical ideas, they don't write any of it down. They only write down what he writes on the whiteboard.

This adds one more layer to this cake. The knowledge in AP US History is portrayed as analytical, but much of it is factual. Students spend a lot of time in acquiring

this factual knowledge in class. This factual knowledge is not the factual knowledge of earlier classes, however, but is of a better sort. Much of the better nature of this knowledge seems to do with its narrative form, its detailed, contextualized, and even interesting nature, rather than to practice which students get in analyzing or synthesizing on a daily basis. The different and better nature of the facts in AP US History seem to be related to the students who are taking it, their interest and their willingness to listen. They have bought into the priorities of the school, doing well in classes, and putting in the time and effort required to take AP US History. The students of AP US History don't just get a progression of names-and-dates, a lowest-common-denominator approach that leaves them bored, as they claim to have gotten in previous classes. They get a glimpse of history in a more raw and powerful way, as a story.

Great. How does this all fit into the hierarchy of knowledge? One way has already been hinted at: as the trustworthy, dedicated students that they are, AP US History students get a "better" version of history, one that is not only more detailed and in-depth, but also one that is contextualized and fun to listen to. Still, there is another way. By his emphasis on "better" facts, Mr. Elliot is setting up a hierarchical view of a different sort, one which emphasizes that better knowledge is a matter of knowing more facts, more details, more inside information, and more of the "real" story than students know or have learned in their previous history classes. This places Mr. Elliot – or, indeed, anyone who knows "more" facts – at the top of the hierarchical structure, and leaves those who know less behind. The students of AP US History are superior because they know "more" than others, but they are inferior to Mr. Elliot who, after all, knows more than they do.

There is more. Mr. Elliot's passionate and interesting teaching is at once a great and a questionable thing. Surely, getting a narrative view of history, an interesting, connected view, is far, far preferable to the survey approach, the boring approach, the way of doing history that is all too common in schools. Then again, a narrative view of history is neither a critical view of history, questioning the story and the purposes it serves, nor a disciplinary view of history, doing the work of historians by looking at sources and figuring out where history came from (Seixas, 2000; Segall, 2005). If anything, a narrative view of history is a more interesting and detailed version of the same old story, a version of history teaching called by Seixas and Segall the "collective memory" approach, one which is geared toward producing a shared account of history, rather than assessing the reliability of historical accounts or attempting to understand their rhetorical or political uses.

Of course, such a narrative may be of a different story, may bring up new or unusual facts which students have not seen before, and may even lead students to question previous facts and stories. These are certainly parts of AP US History. And Mr. Elliot, in bringing to light different versions of history, does teach in what at times in ways which could be seen as disciplinary or critical. It is up for question, however, whether learning a different or "better" story really leaves the students able to perform critical or disciplinary analyses, to take on the role that Mr. Elliot performs for them. Like Wineburg's (1991) high-achieving history students, who viewed textual analysis as a matter of fact rather than subtext and interpretation, the students of AP US History may know a lot about history, but very little about doing history. While listening to good stories about history is a better approach than listening to boring lectures or filling out

worksheets, it is not what Parker (2003) has in mind when he calls for participatory, discussion-based, critical, and engaged pedagogy to foster the democratic citizenry.

The “best of the best,” then, are getting a better version of history when they take AP US History, one with better “facts.” They are getting a narrative version, one in which the previously disconnected knowledge of history is contextualized and made vibrant. They will know more history, and know it better, than the students who never had a chance to take AP US History. They may be engaged in it. They may enjoy it. But for all this, they are still getting history as a practice of listening, of taking what happened, remembering it, and using it to do well on exams. They may be analyzing and synthesizing, examining history, taking it apart, bringing it together. But they are getting little practice at questioning the history itself, where it comes from, whom or what it serves. As a teacher and a researcher, I am torn by what I have seen in Mr. Elliot’s class. For to see history taught well, in the traditional lecture style, is a fine thing, and hard enough to find. But I also wonder, as I watch, if this is enough, or if these students are being educated in a way that will inspire them to ask questions, or one which will inspire them to believe any good stories which come along.

CHAPTER 6: A GOOD SCHOOL

A Lesson on American Social Philosophy

First hour, Mr. Elliot's class. The topic today is social ideas from late 19th century America. In particular, on this day, Mr. Elliot is teaching the "Rags to Riches" ideal, the notion that any poor person in America, a person in "rags," can make their way to the top, to "riches."

Half an hour into class, Mr. Elliot stops a movie he has been showing and begins a lecture. As he goes to the board, the notebook shuffle begins. Mr. Elliot asks a question – do you get ahead by hard work or by advantage? Helen says it's "part hard work and part where you start out." In response, Mr. Elliot asks the class if it would be alright to take away Helen's college spot and give it to a poor kid with a GPA half hers. The room wakes up, and hands begin to rise. He asks about the role of natural talent, of hard work vs. genetics, something they should be thinking about "especially being AP students." Is it your hard work, or is it "the socio-cultural environment" that gets you ahead, he asks?

He gives an example, telling them that, if they grew up in Capital City instead of Fairlawn, they might just be average. Andy takes issue with this and speaks out, saying that he knows people in Capital City who've done well. Mr. Elliot responds that Capital City is just a stereotype, an example, that the point is one of background.

Andy is clearly becoming more agitated. "I think that's bull," he replies. "I think that we're just driven more. It's not genetics." He is completely against the idea that poor people can't get ahead. "The problem is that they don't want it bad enough."

Around the room, people are sitting up, paying attention. Occasionally, hands go up. Mr. Elliot says a bit about the socio-cultural view. To illustrate this view, he asks Connor, “no offense,” if he will ever be a good basketball player.

“Maybe someday,” Connor says, false dreamyness in his voice.

Mr. Elliot makes his point anyway, that natural talent plays some part. Then he links Andy’s ideas to the Horatio Alger myth, the belief that anyone can make it if they try hard enough, and to Andrew Carnegie’s idea that poor people are poor for a reason. Then he goes back to NBA basketball. Mr. Elliot, who is about 5’10” and more of an intellectual than an athlete, asks “Will I ever be a star?”

Andy won’t give up. “If you practice every day, every day,” he says.

Mr. Elliot disagrees, and asks what part talent plays. He goes back to the “Rags to Riches” myth and its usefulness in keeping the poor down, allowing the rich to blame the poor for their poverty. If the only thing that separates rich from poor is hard work, “who’s fault is it, then, for being poor?”

“Poor people’s fault,” Bill says, analyzing the answer rather than agreeing.

Mr. Elliot throws this idea at them. If you agree that hard work is the only difference, you are also saying that being poor is poor people’s fault. I think a lot of you agree with Andy, Mr. Elliot tells them, more of you than you are willing to admit.

“I agree with Andy,” Allie willingly admits. She has been, as others talked, turned around, animatedly expressing her views to Mary.

Andy gives a little, but mainly holds his ground. “I think there are certain situations where they have the ability to improve themselves,” he says. He admits that there are some places, other countries, where there’s nothing people can do to work

toward things that are “better”. Environment does play a part, though not the deciding part. “But I feel like they have the opportunity to do the same thing if they really want it and they apply themselves.”

Emma, hand up, is called on. She begins to say that, for the average person, such a climb is difficult. Mr. Elliot seizes on the idea of the “average person.” Think of famous people who’ve worked their way up, he says. Why do we know their names? Think about that. How many are their, really? He says he’s not talking about people who worked their way up from poverty to near-poverty. Besides, such success may reflect a change in government, in programs, in society, or in the economy. He wants to know about people who’ve made it to the top. Then, he asks, “Why do we make that rule, that everyone is capable of it, when we have so few examples of that?”

He goes back to Emma, apologizing for cutting her off. She makes her point. The average person, she believes, can go up. But the “super-glorified American dream” is “not possible by ethic alone,” by which she means “work ethic.”

Matt is called on next. He believes that it is a matter of genetic capability, and he actually does use the word “genetic.” Some people can’t achieve even if they do apply themselves, others achieve without really applying themselves.

Mr. Elliot says that, in this district, parents believe that every kid can get an A. But, he notes, “some people are better at certain types of academic pursuits.” He notes that they, the AP students, could get “one-hundred plus” percent in a regular history class, that they’ve taken on the “challenge” of AP history, working “outside their comfort zones.” They are in the top 10%. What happens, he asks them, if you take the top 10% and stop giving them tests for the middle? Start giving them work that is more

“interpretive”. Gives an example of a “middle” tests: “George Washington was, a) a farmer, b) a soldier, c) a clown,” in a mocking voice.

He then goes back to the NBA, and uses this as a transition to ask, again, if parents really believe that all students are capable of getting A’s. We’re OK with differences in physical talent, he notes, but not mental talent. Are there people who are “naturally superior” at certain things, he asks? He notes that he shies away from “genetically superior” because it seems too close to Nazi eugenics, a statement that draws chuckles from the class (Fieldnotes, 3-6-07).

High-Achieving Students in a Good School

“When, in the course of ages, American liberty has become a fiction of the past – as it is to some extent a fiction of the present – the poets of the world will be inspired by American mythology.”

Henry David Thoreau

Much could be made of this slice of classroom life. This one discussion of the “rags to riches” ideal is a commentary on American society on multiple levels, and not merely as a history lesson on them. Andy favors hard work as an explanation for getting ahead, and Carrie agrees. Emma mentions the “average” person, Matt cites “genetics.” Mr. Elliot tries to show his students that hard work does not count as much as class advantage, or perhaps that they believe that hard work is most important and that this reflects their narrow experiences. But in doing so, he himself brings in ideas of talent and genetics, and the whole thing got mixed up in a swirl of hard work, social background, and natural talent. There is a feel of irony about it, the way that Mr. Elliot uses the “rags to riches” idea in American history to probe this same feeling in his students, bringing it into the open and challenging it, then takes an opportunity to make a point about natural

talent and the elite nature of his AP US History students that sounds like another variation on the “rags to riches” idea, one emphasizing intelligence instead hard work. By the end of the discussion, the question of what makes for “getting ahead” remains unanswered, and the mix of talent, environment, and hard work that swirled through the discussion has no chance to settle out. Mr. Elliot had to cut the discussion off before it was really over in order to get back to the business of the class, which is, after all, learning history and preparing for the AP test.

This chapter follows, after a fashion, the multi-layered, at times confusing, progress of that particular classroom discussion. Having looked at high-achievers as good students in school, and as students in a good, and advanced, class, I now step back another level to view them as students in a “good” school, itself immersed in larger social and cultural contexts. Fairlawn High is a middle-class, suburban high-school with excellent facilities and an excellent reputation, a “high-achieving” school (as in Carlone, 2003). Fairlawn’s identity as such has a lot to add to my take on the culture of high-achievement. Again, the point is to view the “best of the best,” the high-achieving students, the good teacher, and, now, the good school. Yet this chapter is about more than the school, just as Mr. Elliot’s rags-to-riches discussion was about more than his own students. Fairlawn High School is an American school, immersed in American ideas and cultural values, and its very definition as a “good” school shows influences wide and varied. The culture of high-achievement is studied here in one classroom, but it neither limited to, or formed solely within, that classroom, or even the school. Thus I look here for high-achiever culture, for the lives and views of the students, but I also look more

broadly, from the school and society on down, in an attempt to get at a third vital aspect of high-achiever culture, that is, its larger context.

The Fairlawn Bubble

Probably the mix of ideas in the above classroom scene would not have settled out if the discussion had gone on for the entire class period, or even for the rest of the week. This class may show many things, but it can certainly be read as an example of meritocratic ideology manifesting itself in the classroom, and not only on the part of some of the students. The emphasis on getting ahead by “merit,” in the form of hard work on the one hand, or natural talent or intelligence, on the other, runs through the entire discussion. It is hardly startling to see such ideas appearing in a class discussion at an American high school. Indeed, the role and presence of meritocratic accounts and ideology has been documented and discussed in a host of works on American schools and school culture (e.g., Apple, 1982; Applebaum, 2005; Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Brantlinger, 1993; Nicholson, 2003; Oakes, 1986; Oakes, Wells, Jones, and Datnow, 1997; Parker, 2003; Yu, 2004). Furthermore, Fairlawn is not just any American High School. As Dr. Riveli put it:

I recognize that I’m living here, Steve, in the bubble. And you have to recognize that as you’re doing your research. You’re not in just the typical American high-school, if you haven’t figured that one out yet. (Interview with Dr. Riveli, 3-7-07)

In a way, one might have guessed that these very ideas would manifest themselves at this particular school since, if meritocratic ideals were going to show up anywhere, then Fairlawn High School, a suburban school serving mostly white, college-bound children of professionals, would be the place. These students, in this school, represent the “mainstream” or “middle class” (Heath, 1983) that researchers write about when they

write about tracking, hidden curricula, model student images, academic culture, and cultural reproduction (e.g., Eckhart, 1989; Hemmings, 1996; Lareau, 2003; Mehan, Hubbard, Lintz, and Villanueva, 1994; Vallance, 1983). As Dr. Riveli told me when I brought up ideas of social class and reproduction in one of our conversations, “We teach to this strong, professional, upper-middle class community. We talk their language” (Interview, 3-7-07).

When Dr. Riveli refers to “the bubble,” he is touching upon a vein of feeling in his school, one which says that Fairlawn is exceptional, an example of what happens when education works as it should work, with a good school, hardworking students, and parental support. Indeed, the “Fairlawn Bubble” is a familiar phrase among students and faculty. The students certainly seem, at times, to be living in a bubble, as the “rags to riches” discussion might demonstrate, and as the following exchange in history class certainly shows:

[Mr. Elliot asks] “What do you guys think is a good salary? What does a teacher make?”

Matt responds. “Seventy?” [thousand dollars per year]

“I like how you think, Matt,” says Mr. Elliot. Then Mr. Elliot reveals that a teacher starts at thirty [thousand dollars per year]. Matt looks genuinely shocked. The class rumbles. (Fieldnotes, 2-23-07)

In filling in their view of the Fairlawn environment, or bubble, Students mentioned or alluded to the high-expectations that “everyone” has at Fairlawn, and several also noted that, at Fairlawn, and unlike other places, it’s “cool to be smart.” Emma started our interview by telling me “it’s an interesting school.” When I asked her what she meant, she explained:

EMMA: There's just...there's really high expectations, and everyone...has been raised to...well I don't wanna say everyone, but a lot of people have been raised, you know, like, upper middle class...everyone wants to go to college...everyone needs all the credits and all the AP classes to get where they wanna go.

SW: Do you feel like you were raised like that too?

EMMA: Yeah. I mean, but, it's always been kinda natural. (Interview with Emma Armistead, 2-2-07)

References to upbringing, class, and expectations in this comment point out an important part of the Fairlawn community, and the Fairlawn Bubble. Fairlawn is not just a good school, but it is also a good school in a good place.

I think, a, a lot of people here take AP's. It's not, um, it's not like the select few, because we're like, middle of suburbia with like (chuckle) two working parents. Like, it's kind of the scene...the stereotypical, what'd you'd expect. (Interview with Rachel Early, 2-28-07)

Dr. Riveli praised the students of Fairlawn and noted that "students are first and foremost a product of the home." The "formula that works" at Fairlawn starts with parents and continues onto the good school. The parents "nurture, they support their child, they have high expectations" and "then, they [students] get put into the hands of some very able teachers" (Interview with Dr. Riveli, 1-8-07).

The strong, middle-class community is seen as a part of what makes Fairlawn High School work, and what makes students into high-achievers. The idea of a good community, or a good background and home life, also mixes with notions of intelligence. When I asked Dr. Riveli, the principal of Fairlawn, what distinguishes AP students, what sets them apart, he said there were "two things." He described these as: "native ability, and, and seeing yourself there...and the latter comes from your environment. Of the first, he claimed:

They're bright...They've mastered the fundamentals...To me, one of the obvious answers to your question is that they have the intelligence to pursue these disciplines at the most challenging levels that the high school can offer, and so they do.

But intelligence is not the only factor:

The second factor is motivation, encouragement, nurturing from the home...Sometimes, for a bright kid but not brilliant, that piece is the difference for whether or not they end up in AP.

Students with the right sort of home environment will have:

High standards at home, parents who are successful, who are professionals, who have advanced degrees. And they simply see themselves there. (Interview with Dr. Riveli, 3-7-07)

Mr. Schlieffen, of AP Government, expressed views similar to those held by Dr.

Riveli, citing a mix of talent and background:

...the biological, the genetics of intelligence is there. But I think the culture of high achievement, I think it really starts at home. It's got to, that's what I see. (Interview with Mr. Schlieffen, 1-27-07)

Some additional words on background and intelligence flesh out these views a bit further. It is important to note that, when "background" is spoken of at Fairlawn High School, there is a mix of cultural explanations and explanations that seem to shade into the moral, since background is equated with the notion of "encouragement." This is not the cultural matching sort of explanation put forth by scholars for success in school (e.g. Lareau, 2003; Mehan et. al., 1994), but something that emphasizes responsibility and worthiness – students who do well are those who are pushed, who believe they can do well, who try, and parents are where all this begins. As for intelligence, it seems to be related, in the words of both students and faculty, to the idea of "getting it" or learning quickly, on one hand, and on one's ability to carry on a good conversation, on the other. Mr. Schlieffen's views show this handily:

...their natural IQ, just based on what you think would be their IQ...their eloquence in speaking, and their efficiency in picking up new material, I guess, you know, that's probably what most people would agree on as intelligence. That, they're just working at a faster pace. (Interview with Mr. Schlieffen, 1-27-07)

The moral tone of viewing "background" in this way is interesting. So, too, is the idea that intelligence can be measured easily through seeing how quick someone is on the uptake and how well-spoken they are. Both are consistent with explanations supporting tracking, and connecting to a meritocratic ideology, as found in Oakes et. al. (1997), but the connections between a certain set of values, certain shared experiences and ways of speaking, and intelligence as perceived at Fairlawn contribute to the overall direction of this work in identifying high-achiever culture as something different from mainstream perceptions.

Mr. Elliot seems to fall somewhere near, but not in the same spot, as his principal and his colleague. When asked about views that attribute high-achievement to issues of "background," he notes that they are common at Fairlawn High School. When I asked him how he felt about it, he replied, "I have mixed feelings about that. You know, I think motivation is a controversial topic, that, um, is loaded with racial class bias." Expanding upon this, he claimed that people believe that "the reason that they're [high-achievers] working harder is because these classes [the middle classes] have a greater educational ethic." He calls this "the apologist's defense" and muses, "You here that a lot here, I think" (Interview with Mr. Elliot, 3-7-07).

Yet, while Mr. Elliot claims to recognize race and class bias in explanations of background, his view on intelligence, or natural talent, seems rather close to that of Dr. Riveli and Mr. Schlieffen. When Mr. Elliot is structuring his AP History class, you may

remember, he is building it for students who are more talented than the rest, who are ready for, and able to do, the advanced work he will demand of them. Indeed, this is true for all the AP classes – Mr. Schlieffen referred to his AP Government students as the ones at the top end of the “normal distribution” (Interview with Mr. Schlieffen, 1-27-07). They are, as Mr. Elliot mentioned, the “top 10%” and not “the middle.” While he acknowledges that working hard and playing the school game can get his students into AP US History, once they get there, he believes, their natural talents begin to show through. Or not. Speaking of his students, the “top 10%,” he says:

...when you're in the 10%, that means that there is a bottom of that percentile and there's a top of that percentile, and what happens, then, is that I think that as you skim off that 10%, and that's the group that you're working with, ability starts to make a big difference, and work ethic becomes less of a factor. (Interview with Mr. Elliot, 3-6-07)

As Mr. Elliot, and the rags-to-riches discussion, reminds us, intelligence and a good background is not all that is required for achievement. Hard work, too, is a necessity. Indeed, students' accounts of achievement, as will be seen below, seemed to focus on hard work as the main feature in school success. This valuation of hard work also came out in one of my interviews with Dr. Riveli. When I brought up the centrality of hard work in students' accounts, and proposed that this idea might have some unfavorable implications – much like Mr. Elliot's point in the “rags to riches” discussion – Dr. Riveli responded in this way:

I don't know if I'm going to surprise you, shock you, or whatever. (pause) Hard work is the central feature, in my view... I don't know any formula for success that doesn't include hard work... I'm rather proud of the fact that you would report that our kids see hard work as an important ingredient in success. As opposed to, ah, you know, my dad's rich and I expect to be rich. (Interview with Dr. Riveli, 3-7-07)

Adding to this mix of community, values, background, hard work, and intelligence is the school itself, and the sort of education that Fairlawn aims to provide. It is rather telling that Dr. Riveli, in describing the sort of education one gets at Fairlawn, compared Fairlawn to Riverton Central Catholic High School, a private, all-boys prep school in the state's largest city. Riverton Central Catholic is, as it happens, the very high school Dr. Riveli attended. Mr. Elliot, also a Riverton Central Catholic grad, made this same comparison, but made it even more strongly, noting that people sometimes call Fairlawn High School "Fairlawn Central Catholic," as a bit of a joke. This nickname seems to show the attitude that, at Fairlawn, students are getting an education that, in terms of quality and of mission, comes close to a private school. As Mr. Elliot put it, "As a public school, we offer the best private school education a public school can offer, is kind of like the school motto, unofficially" (Interview with Mr. Elliot, 3-7-07).

Mr. Brown, in describing his enthusiasm for the AP program and what they are accomplishing, also expressed his view that Fairlawn is a model school, and that the AP history program at Fairlawn can be seen as the pinnacle, the best at the good school:

I always tell people I wish they could...look at our AP classes, and, I think most people get a kick out of watching them. And I think they're an example of what can happen, and I really do...I feel a lot of optimism working in this department and teaching that class, because, part of you, when you go into teaching, is you kinda picture yourself in this teacher-as-hero movie, where you're in the inner city, and you're raising all these poor little black kids up to go to college and believe in themselves. And, and often I've thought about, what am I doing, what am I really doing at Fairlawn, like...this is basically just like any other job. You know, I go, I work hard, am I really doing what I set out to be a teacher for? Am I...making an impact? Am I helping people become better and so forth? But then at the same time I think there's, and this has kind of always been my justification for it, is that I think there is something to be said for showing, for showing the best of something that can be done. And I think, you know, and that's what I put a lot of pride in, is that like at this high school should show the best that it can be done, and provide a model for

all the other schools, and say like, listen, if you wanna do it, do it our way. So, I guess those are kinda my closing thoughts on our whole AP US History program that we have. (Interview with Mr. Brown, 1-27-07)

Putting all of this together, we have a good school, in a good community, providing a good education, and a college-prep education too. Students and faculty cite intelligence and hard work and game-playing as pieces of success. The already emphasized idea of the “advanced” class fits into all this as well, related to the notion of individual rights in the sense that it is the right of the individual to rise as high as they are able is cherished, and the notion of status, defined by attendance at one’s chosen college and an eventual professional career, is an important goal. the high-achievers in Mr. Elliot’s AP US History class, as students at Fairlawn, thus hold a special place, not just as good students, but as good students at a good school. As high-achievers, they are talented and intelligent, they work hard, and they have the family support, the proper background, that positions them to do well.

It must be mentioned, however, that amid all this talk of meritocracy, its features, and its apparent presence at Fairlawn High School, that the folks at Fairlawn are not unidimensional ideologues. Certainly, they work at a school, and live within a community, which can be connected with values associated with the meritocracy, the values of the middle-class. Yet, as Mr. Brown’s comment reflects, with its questions of work and purpose teaching at such as school, and as the idea of “the bubble” itself shows, there is an awareness of Fairlawn as a certain sort of place, and it is a conflicted awareness. Mr. Elliot himself expressed this awareness on several occasions, even relating to the “rags to riches” discussion. “It was very interesting to hear Andy argue so strongly about work ethic being the only thing that mattered. And I think that that’s very

much a cultural value in this community” (Interview with Mr. Elliot, 3-6-07). From his academic training, Mr. Elliot is familiar with theories of inequality and reproduction, and he takes it upon himself to attempt to provide other points of view to his students, and to question their beliefs. “What am I doing to challenge this social reproduction that’s going on?” he asked. Going on, he said:

Cause I’m a man in the machine, I’m part of the machine, and it’s like, I don’t know. It’s interesting because, as much as I can complain about those social structures, I guess, I see my role as, within, within this context, within teaching some of the most advanced students that we have, ah, to try to make them more cognizant, to try to make them more aware and more critical. (Interview with Mr. Elliot, 3-7-07)

Mr. Elliot’s own conflicted views led him, on the occasion that he described Fairlawn as “Fairlawn Central Catholic,” to bring out some of the negative aspects of the college prep environment as it plays out at Fairlawn:

Now, how do you bring that into a public school context? Well, one way you do that is by offering college preparatory classes, and making sure that those students are protected enough so that the quality of their education is on par with any other private school. So that means that you have to exclude, or limit access to that environment, for students who might take away from that environment, either because of lower ability, they don’t share the same work ethic, they don’t have the same cultural or family background, or racial background, perhaps even too. Although I don’t think that that’s deliberate. (Interview with Mr. Elliot, 3-7-07)

The “Hardworking” Students

The questions that drive this study, of course, are focused on the students of AP US History, and their particular culture as high-achievers, and so this lofty discussion of class, society, and school must also come back down to how they see and experience this setting. Already, it has been shown how the students of AP US History, as students in an “advanced” history class, are positioned as students who have proven themselves, who are “trustworthy” in terms of their academic performance, behaviors, and attitudes toward

school and achievement. They are also, as high-achievers, “competent” students, a fine line to walk. Here, I explore how meritocratic ideas, in particular those of “hard work” and “intelligence,” play out in students’ views of high-achievement, what it takes to do well, and what it means to do well, in school and in AP US History.

When the “good” students of AP US History told me what high-achievement meant to them, much of what I heard was similar to the definition of high-achieving that I had gleaned from educational research (Eckhart, 1989; Gayles, 2005; Pope, 2001; Rizza, 1999; Wineburg, 1991). Some of them spoke of high-achievers as doing well in class, participating in extra-curricular activities, and taking “challenging” classes, including the college courses available to some Fairlawn students. High-achievement was, at times, cast in a negative light, a matter of getting good grades and filling-up transcripts to the detriment of interest and learning, but this part was not surprising, seeing as how this interpretation, too, had made an appearance in the literature (Pope, 2001).

What was surprising, or at least unanticipated, was what *else* they said about high-achieving students, and what else I heard as I listened to them talk about their experiences. At times, it seemed, the students of AP US History were not providing me with a “definition” of a high-achieving student as much as they were telling me about the ways in which someone *becomes* a high-achieving student. The strongest theme to emerge from student definitions of high-achievement was not an attribute, such as intelligence, but more of a disposition, namely, the willingness to work hard. When I asked what makes someone high-achieving, I got answers like:

If they work hard. Like they push themselves to get that A or A+. That they, and that they’re really into the subject that they’re doing, that they’re willing to go that extra mile to do something. (Interview with Sara Pleasanton, 1-26-07)

I think it's very, it's very relative. It depends on the student. Like, each student has...different standards and like different abilities and stuff, and as long as you're working hard, you're high achieving. (Interview with Helen Wei, 3-6-07)

One might think that some notion of intelligence would play a part in high-achievement, and it did make its way into the conversations, though always in some connection with hard work, drive, and the like.

...you have to have that hard work...you have the basic smarts and then hard work just gets you to that next level. And I think that there are kids that aren't taking advanced classes that have the smarts to be, they just don't want to work as hard, and they just...are OK with being, OK I'm just gonna take the normal classes, we're at Fairlawn High School, it's a pretty good school, and that will get me where I wanna go in life. (Interview with Jim Schurz, 1-24-07)

And intelligence did not always play a part. In one student's words, high-achievers are, "Not necessarily smarter, just more motivated" (Interview with Laura Pender, 2-5-07).

Another explained high achievement in a way that clearly separated achievement from intelligence, but not from hard work:

ERIC: I know some very, very smart people, who don't work very hard at all. And, so because of it, don't really do that well in school. And I know that if they applied themselves, they would probably be getting a four-point. Um, and I also know some very, very, very not so smart people, who I have difficulty carrying on a conversation with, who do very well, who get A's and A-'s, B's.

SW: How do they do it?

ERIC: Lots and lots of hard work. I mean, like, studying three hours for each test, asking a lot of questions. (Interview with Eric Morris, 3-6-07)

As it happened, several students seemed to know people who were smart but unwilling to put in the work necessary to be high-achievers.

I would say high-achieving is also, you have to have drive. Because, I know many people who are very intelligent, and they could be in as many

honors classes as they wanted, as they want to be. But they're just not drive, but it. So, like, they don't like school, but they could, you know, and so I would say high-achieving, to be driven. (Interview with Allie Meredith, 3-2-07)

I guess someone that's, like, not just like good at school, because like that's kinda easy to do, but...who...can learn stuff really well, better than just, like, doing the assignments, getting it done...Someone who's like smart, and...takes advantage of it...I know there's a lot of...smart people who...don't do their work or anything. So they...don't, like, get good grades or anything even though they could. (Interview with Margi Doubleday, 3-7-07)

It should be added that students' explanations of how one comes to be a high-achiever are roughly paralleled in their explanations of what makes an AP student. "Hard work" and "drive" are, once more, frequent explanations, though Reilly Howard, a junior, did feel it was important to state for the record that not all AP kids were "workaholics." Several students did mention intelligence or talent as important to being an AP student, though one flatly denied this connection. Again, though, hard work seems to be even more important.

The centrality of hard work in students' conception of achievement, and the secondary position of intelligence, touches upon my earlier point about "becoming." A smart kid is smart whether they work or not, but a high-achiever is only a high-achiever as long as they are working hard. Presumably, intelligence is an attribute that sticks around- at least this would be true given the fixed definitions of intelligence and talent that seem to carry some weight at Fairlawn High School – but hard work, by definition, is not. One could always just stop working hard. This means that high-achievement requires, not just personal attributes, but personal commitment:

...if you're not gonna challenge yourself, you're not gonna try and take an AP and you're...getting like a "C" average, then, you know, that's definitely not high-achieving. But...part of it would be more like how

much the student themselves is putting in outside of class and how, like, their personal interest and...personal goals for them. Because...there's a lot of people that...the end of what they want is to get the A on their transcript. And, I don't think that's high-achieving. That's, like, doing the bare minimum... (Interview with Rachel Early, 2-28-07)

If high-achieving is a matter of hard work, it also is a matter of students' willingness to continue to work, to achieve, and to push themselves without stopping. The idea of high-achievement thus appears to be carrying around a hefty load of irony, since it is something which is never quite achieved.

This idea suggests that part of high-achievement is having to keep moving, all the time. As it happens, some of these students do appear to be pretty high-speed. Connor Imboden, a senior, has a 3.945, and is taking AP US History, AP statistics, and AP English. He is also taking the AP exams for government, comparative politics, and physics (B) on his own. Connor had been playing the guitar for 12 years, and wants to study classical guitar in college. He is also in the school jazz band. During a class where Mr. Elliot was showing part of an educational film, I saw a light out of the corner of my eye, and when I looked over it was Connor, using the movie time to study his notes. The light was from his cell-phone, which he'd opened and was shining on his desktop (Fieldnotes, 1-12-07). Laziness, Connor says as he reflects back on his early high school career, is when you only work on things you like in school, and then just get by on the rest:

I mean, ah, when it came down, it like, I did the classes I was interested in...for the most part, I would just kinda let things fall where they were. I'd study for the tests I really felt like studying for. If I didn't wanna study for it, you know, I would maybe study a little bit. Enough that I could get, something I was happy with. (Interview with Connor Imboden, 2-13-07)

This quote is more meaningful when one takes into account that Connor's lowest grade in school has been his B+ in Algebra III. The connection between laziness and doing what one likes was made more strongly as he said more about that time, earlier in his school career, when he'd taken a lazy approach toward school:

I was a lazy freshman. I was really lazy my first two years...I mean, I got good grades, but...if I had the motivation I did now...I believe I could be a valedictorian person. You know, but...school wasn't my focus I was really into, I was in a band, I was really focused on that. So, you know, I spent a little more time practicing my guitar, writing songs, etc...etc...than, you know, the music...not the school. (Interview with Connor Imboden, 2-13-07)

He also characterized this "lazy" time as very enjoyable and rewarding, and claimed that he "loved" being in the band. I was struck by Ian's seemingly conflicted attitude toward his time in the band and his approach to school at that time.

Laura Pender, a junior, has a 3.9, is taking one AP class, and is in the orchestra, the Spanish Club and the French Club and the Key Club. She plays the piano and the violin, for 11 and 7 years respectively. She characterizes herself as having a poor "work ethic" because she prefers working on school work she enjoys and puts off classes which she does not care for. Some of her frustration with school also comes out in this exchange:

LAURA: Well, what it should be, is I should be working more towards math and chem because it's my weakness level. But instead it's more like, yeah, I'm bad at those, I don't really want to go do that, so I'm gonna go do my lit homework and put off chem. And then, so that just kinda digs me further into the hole, but, I don't know, I don't have a very good work ethic.

SW: I see, and so you should have a better work ethic.

LAURA: It's ever...everything is what I should have done. (Interview with Laura Pender, 2-5-07)

Helen Wei, a junior, has a 4.0 GPA. Her schedule, this semester, includes AP US History, AP Biology, AP Chemistry, British Literature (advanced, for a junior), French IV, and Orchestra. She has a full plate of extra-curricular activities, including quiz bowl, science Olympiad, cello and piano lessons, and tennis. While I was observing the study session for the fall semester AP US History final exam, which took place in a school computer lab, I observe two students, Helen chatting with Bill Newton, another junior. Bill was teasing Helen because she is using the time that her computer is booting up, no more than a few minutes, to study for her AP Biology test. As I watch this exchange, Bill turns to me:

[Bill] tells me that, when they [Bill and Helen] went to the school play, she was studying during the intermission. "She goes two minutes without studying and she starts shaking," he says. "This is 23 chapters of information!" she cries, clutching a notebook. Bill tells her that he must break her habit of constant studying. (Fieldnotes, 1-23-07)

And while most people have a positive opinion toward Mr. Elliot's engaging lectures and his willing to negotiate on deadlines and such, Helen is not as enamored of these features:

I like Mr. Elliot's teaching...it's very engaging, but...a lot of times, you know, he'll fudge deadlines and it's really loose and free for all, and that's fine but, there's an AP exam that we should take...it's important in that case to just, be a bit more orderly just to make sure we cover all the information so that we're prepared for that exam. (Interview with Helen Wei, 3-6-07)

Bill himself spent the time after this review session complaining superlatively about his AP Spanish class, which he perceived as too easy. "We have parties, all day long." When I asked him what this meant, he added:

I know we have done a lot of speaking in class, for example. And, uh, like, for example, our teacher is the only native speaker in the department cause she's from Mexico, and so we get a lot of actually listening practice just listening to her but we haven't even gone over any grammar structures any

new vocabulary we've had like one vocabulary quiz up until this point.
(Interview with Bill Newton, 2-1-07)

Helen and Bill are on the quiz bowl team with Emma Armistead, another junior, a friend of theirs although she sits with a different group in AP US History. Emma is also a pretty busy kid, taking honors math and science classes, taking viola lessons and playing in the orchestra, and showing her horse competitively. She can be found most mornings before school in the cafeteria, studying, and when Mr. Elliot gives tests or quizzes she will be one of the first people in the room when he unlocks it. She has a 3.8. She gets all this done by staying constantly busy:

Um...I really do think it just comes down, as far as getting stuff done, to managing your time. You know, I have an hour this morning, you know, usually, and I get stuff done then. I...you know, like, I take advantage of every minute that I have. And, as long as you are always filling your blank time with stuff, you know, you'll get it done. (Interview with Emma Armistead, 2-2-07)

Emma also told me about a friend of hers who has free time, an account that implied the negative aspects of such a thing:

I have a friend this year, um, this semester she has, um, studio art and photo I, and she's doing absolutely nothing in her spare time. I mean, not...she has tons of spare time. You know, she has, she has basically throw-away classes. You know. She can do whatever she wants, you know, and she's not confined to anything. Which would be nice, in a sense, but... (Interview with Emma Armistead, 2-2-07)

Indeed, the AP US History students who spoke of free-time and laziness, a quarter of the ones I interviewed, spoke of them together. Several students mentioned that they liked to "relax," to take time to hang out with friends or pursue hobbies, but relaxing, or taking time off, was in each given a negative connotation, connected with "laziness". The connection between free time and the things one wishes to do, and between free time and

laziness, seems to imply that students feel that their own chosen activities carry less value than those assigned to them by their teachers, an interesting possibility.

The prevalence of hard work in AP US History students' definition of high-achievement provides a frame for responses such as these and for the observations, answers, and themes laid out above. One gets a feeling of constant activity from such accounts, a sense that high-achievers, in Laura Pender's words, are "never done" (Interview with Laura Pender, 2-5-07). This theme continued into students attitudes toward achievement in relation to themselves. When asked to give a definition for a "high-achieving student," Thomas, a junior with a 3.8 who is taking multiple AP classes and whom Mr. Elliot calls "an extremely impressive kid," spoke in a way that seems to recognize something of the unachievable nature of high-achievement:

I think every, for most people a high-achieving student is better than what they're doing... Like, I mean, I know, I've had a lot of people tell me I'm a very high-achieving student, I'm in all of these AP classes and getting really good grades, but then again you see, other people who are doing this and are balancing a job and NHS and a ton of other stuff and are like amazing at a certain instrument or something and, that's, I guess that's what I imagine as high-achieving, when you can just take all these aspects and balance them all together and you know you're not sitting there, you're not stressed out about everything. (Interview with Thomas Ames 2-13-07)

The idea of high-achievement as an unapproachable ideal is quite interesting, and becomes even more so in light of the way the students of AP US History talked about themselves as high-achievers. Remember, all of these students fit the definition of high-achievement that I started with, in that they have good grades, they participate in extracurricular activities, and they are all taking at least one honors or AP class. That being said, many of the students of Mr. Elliot's AP US History class do not consider themselves to be high-achievers.

The question of their own high-achievement, when it came up in interviews, was always something like “do you consider yourself to be a high-achieving student?” or “are you a high-achieving student.” Only one student gave a straight out “yes,” but he qualified his answer:

Yes. But I don't like the self-promotion, like 'I'm the best I'm smarter than you.' I don't go around like promoting myself like that. I like to have this feeling that, to myself I'm a smart guy, and I know a lot of stuff...and I do well in school, but I don't go around like saying 'oh, you're really stupid, you're not taking this class and this class, and try and be a little humble I guess. (Interview with Jim Schurz, 1-24-07)

Several other students of AP US History who talked about their status as high-achievers gave answers that fell, not into a “yes” or “no” category, but rather more into a “sort of” category:

Um, I guess so (chuckle) I don't know. I know they're, they're, especially in this school there are a lot of people who, you know, are involved in everything and still, you know, take like every AP class and, so, I don't really like to compare myself to everyone else, but, yeah. (Interview with Janice Warren, 3-5-07)

I'd like, I'd like to think of myself as one. But I wouldn't go so far as to say that...For me, things don't always come easily...I find that I really do have to put in a lot of time and effort for some things...but I'm willing to do so. So...I'd like to think of myself as one, yes. (Interview with Pete Reynolds, 2-27-07)

Many AP US History students, almost half of those I interviewed, gave answers that indicated that they did not, in fact, consider themselves to be high-achievers

Ah...not really (laugh)...I mean, I, ah, I like to challenge myself...I don't know...I guess, yeah, I don't...I like to be challenged intellectually and emotionally, but, I don't know...It's like, my parents want me to be...the ultimate like high-achieving student, but, it's not really, like, what I'm into...(Interview with Candice Andueza, 3-1-07)

I push myself as far as I want to, and not really past that. So, I mean, if I push myself past that I guess I would consider myself high achieving. (Interview with Cathy Kilpatrick, 3-2-07)

At times, I found these denials a little hard to believe, and even slightly humorous. Helen Wei, one of the students already mentioned above, gave one such answer. It should be re-emphasized that, aside from her three AP classes, she is participating in quiz bowl, science Olympiad, the school service group, and the tennis team. She takes private cello and tennis lessons. Also, she speaks three languages, two fluently. When I asked her if considered herself to be a high achieving student, the following exchange occurred:

SW: Ok. Um, do you consider yourself to be a high-achieving student?

HELEN: Somewhat (chuckle).

SW: Somewhat. But not totally.

HELEN: No.

SW: Why not?

HELEN: Well, I guess I could be doing better. Um, I guess I could be taking, well, yeah, I guess I could be taking harder classes or something, I don't really feel like I have, have to apply myself that hard yet, so I guess I could achieve higher, so I'm not high-achieving yet.

SW: Ok, um, what's your GPA?

HELEN: Four-point.

SW: (laugh) OK. So, you've never gotten anything but an "A"?

HELEN: No.

(Interview with Helen Wei, 3-6-07)

To a great extent, then, these students do not seem to believe that they are high-achievers, at least not totally, and Thomas' notion of the unapproachability of high-achievement seems to represent a real possibility. The idea that high-achievement is a

matter of becoming, of always moving, is reinforced when high-achievers deny that they are high-achievers. Achievement becomes an end which lies beyond, always just ahead, and students take on an asymptotic relationship to it, always approaching it but never quite getting there. As with hard work, high-achievement provides demands that can be addressed but not satisfied.

Of course, these “good” students’ doubtful statements about their own high-achievement invite multiple readings. The fact that the high-achievers of AP US History won’t come out and tell an interviewer that they are high-achievers may simply indicate modesty, or at least a desire to appear humble to outsiders. Several responses to this reading are possible. First, when denials of high-achievement are seen in relation to the centrality of hard work, they take on a meaning that suggests that more than modesty is at work. This does not entirely rule out the possibility of modesty or reluctance in student accounts, and I do not believe that such things can be ruled out in any case, since it cannot be known in any definite way if modesty or reluctance played a role. It can, however suggest that such modesty, if present, is more than a matter of a response to an interviewer, and may be seen as a necessary feature of high-achievers’ views. A prevailing feeling of modesty may mean shyness, or it may mean that students are modest in a larger sense, which is to say that modesty is a useful attitude when one must constantly strive to achieve. Therefore, rather than denying the idea that modesty played a role in these answers, I will propose that other readings of the students’ responses, and even of modesty, are possible, and that the reading that sets high-achievement up as “never done” is warranted if not exclusive.

Further warrant for this “unapproachable” interpretation, and its connection to the idea of high-achievement as “unfinished,” comes from the importance of “challenge” in students ideas about work, classes, motivation, school, and grades. Challenge is very much something desired by many of the students of AP US history, something shown in part by Bill’s complaints about his Spanish class. They spoke of liking challenge, of taking more AP classes because of feeling “underchallenged”, of seeking the challenge of AP classes if you can succeed in regular ones, of taking AP US history for the challenge of it and of liking that class precisely because Mr. Elliot “challenges” them.

Students frequent and angry mentions of “busywork,” a phenomenon I deal with more extensively elsewhere, also indicate strong feelings about doing work that is useful and meaningful, which is to say, it seems, work which is challenging. A lack of challenge in classes was seen as a negative thing, as can be seen in one student’s explanation for why she doesn’t like her math class:

Ah, now, well like it’s just really easy this year, so it just, it doesn’t take me, I feel like it’s a waste of a class. Because, I like have, probably like a hundred. I have a very high percentage, ‘cause like, it’s very easy concept, I think. (Interview with Allie Meredith, 3-2-07)

Other students called easy classes a “waste of time” (Interview with Janice Warren, 3-5-07), or a “joke” (Interview with Rachel Early, 2-28-07). Helen spoke approvingly of the workload of AP US:

Um, I guess that, I actually kind of like the amount of homework, ‘cause, I feel that it makes the class like, yeah, really worthwhile to be taking and not just some like blow off class. (Interview with Helen Wei, 3-6-07)

This seeking of challenge which manifests itself in attitudes toward classes also extends to larger ideas about life and meaning:

Well, if something doesn't challenge you, you're not really progressing, or like, making yourself any better. I think a lot of it is, if I didn't take anything, like any class that challenged me, I would feel guilty. (Interview with Cathy Kilpatrick, 3-2-07)

Just as the meaning of a class seems to be tied in to amount of challenge in that class, so, too, can the meaning of work be defined in this way. Easy work, to the students, just does not mean as much.

I myself always like to find the source of whatever it is or kind of work through it as opposed to somebody just handing it to me, 'cause, I don't know. And it's a, it's a goofy line, but I've heard coaches say it, and it's kind of rubbed off on me a little bit. That, if it's really easy, then it doesn't mean that much. Um, whereas, if you can work something, and it's a challenge for you, and you can explore and uncover it yourself, not to say that you don't get help from other people, or they don't help you get there, then it's worth something. (Interview with Pete Reynolds, 2-27-07)

This is an important and valid view to take into account. It must be understood that the point here is not to criticize challenge-seeking, or working hard, but rather to put rather to put it into the larger context of achievement, and especially in relation to the importance of hard work and high-achievers attitudes toward themselves and what these attitudes might mean for the lives they live and the work they do. Mr. Elliot, for example, sees his students as willing to work very hard for success, but also sees how this can handicap them in his class. AP US History demands different study skills than previous survey courses, yet some students continue to use their old methods, doing more and more without success. The students believe that "As long as they're moving, they're moving forward. Which isn't always the case" (Interview with Mr. Elliot, 3-22-07).

In adopting a critical view, and in approaching these "good" students thought the lens of their "hardworking" nature, I am going beyond specific class outcomes. A look at "good" students as "hardworking" encompasses the possibilities revealed thus far, the

idea that high-achieving is a matter of “becoming” rather than being, that hard work is both central to students’ ideas of achievement and also never done, that high-achievement itself can be defined as something that is elusive and beyond, and that challenge contributes to this sense that there is always more. When one looks at this as a whole picture, trying to grasp some idea of what high-achievement might mean, then good grades, extracurricular activities, and advanced classes, the static defining features of high-achievement, become fluid, and even transitory - one is only a high-achiever as long as one continues to get good grades, take advanced classes, and participate in extracurricular activities. In this way, high-achievement overflows the banks of the static definition that emphasizes characteristics and washes over into to an active definition of what they *do*, at times flowing further into the more personal realm of who they *are*. The connection between achievement, activity, and identity is, in and of itself, rather interesting, in that it suggests something about the relationship between achievement and the self that might be both frightening and familiar to a graduate student. That being said, the tidbit of wisdom contained in taking the definition of high-achievement as active and changeable reveals an aspect of high-achiever culture that has, in my observations, interviews, and analyses, emerged as central: that high-achievement is essentially, perhaps eternally, unfinished.

Addendum: Hard Work isn’t Quite Enough Either

Hard work is a central part of the high-achiever student existence, and trumps intelligence, in the minds of the students, as an explanation for achievement. For all this, however, intelligence is still piece of the story of high-achievement as it is told at Fairlawn High School. In this section, I look at some of the ways that intelligence makes

its appearance at Fairlawn, the functions it serves, how it defines and sorts high-achievers, and the effects it may have on how they live out their lives. The idea that high-achievement is something never quite done, introduced in the notion of the trustworthy students and continued in their portrayal as hardworking and challenge-seeking, does not quite fit with notions of innate intelligence, but rather than contradicting this unstable definition, intelligence instead gives it a particular spin.

The way intelligence is talked about at Fairlawn is quite interesting. As already mentioned, intelligence is associated with “getting it,” with quick understanding of school topics, the need to be told things only once. In addition, intelligence is also equated with conversation, with a certain eloquence, the ability to make points or express oneself. Intelligence also came up, in speaking with students, in the form of “multiple intelligences,” by which students meant that people are good at different classes – like math vs. English – or that they have different interests, such as academic vs. non-academic pursuits. The example of being good at school vs. being a good auto mechanic, for example, came up in three of the conversations in which multiple intelligences made an appearance.

What “getting it” and multiple intelligences seem to have in common is that both are ways of talking about being smart, quick, or talented in terms that attribute intelligence to something that lies within the person and makes it into a natural, unchanging element. This idea fits well with the meritocratic ideology as described above. Where it does not seem to fit, however, is with the above description, based on the importance of hard work in achievement, of achievement as something that is never done. If one is smart, or intelligent, or talented, and this is an innate feature, it is not a matter of

something earned. And yet, it still is, because, as students' comments about "hard work" show, there are "smart" kids who don't work hard, and thus they do not do well.

Intelligence, even when thought of as fixed, is more of a potential than a thing-in-being, and this potential can only be unlocked by the sort of hard work and dedication that the students of AP US History talk about. In this way, the idea that hard work is a primary factor in being a high-achiever comes to make more sense.

The idea of intelligence or talent as potential also means something else for the lives of the high-achievers of AP US History. To get at it, I go back to the comment made by Mr. Elliot, far above, on the part that hard work and talent play in AP US History as a class full of "top" students. I repeat the quote here for the readers' convenience:

...when you're in the 10%, that means that there is a bottom of that percentile and there's a top of that percentile, and what happens, then, is that I think that as you skim off that 10%, and that's the group that you're working with, ability starts to make a big difference, and work ethic becomes less of a factor. (Interview with Mr. Elliot, 3-6-07)

AP US History is a class where, unlike other history classes, hard work is just not enough. Those who have been getting by through hard work, but do not have the real talent or potential needed to do the advanced work of AP US History, will be revealed. This revelation will come, of course, when they fail to keep up or do well in the class.

Keeping in mind that high-achievement as a matter of hard work never seems to end, we see here that there may, perhaps, be an end to the hard work. That end, however, is not success, but failure. Like the military pilots working their way up the "Ziggurat" of flying achievement in Wolfe's (1979) *The Right Stuff*, high-achievers have two choices: move forward, or step off and be "left behind." Hard work will either earn a student advancement – and thus the right to continue working hard – or will finally show the

students' intellectual limitations. In this way, achievement is still a never-ending process, because the only end is not a satisfactory one. Furthermore, it is rather fear-laden process, as achievers, if they buy-in to all this, are left waiting to get to that point where their limitations are finally revealed.

Such an idea, while grim, is not all that far-fetched. Certainly, my own experiences in graduate school, and with graduate students, reveal similar ideas at work, the notion of a never-ending climb up the academic ladder and the fear that the next hurdle – a particular class, or the practicum, or comps, or even the dissertation – will be the one that cannot be cleared. Personal experience aside, such ideas are supported by research findings that propose an “imposter phenomenon” among high-achieving men and women (Clance and O’Toole, 1987). As “imposters,” they feel that their work up to that point has been a matter of luck, a fluke, or some other factor that has allowed them to become successful without anyone discovering how little they know or how unqualified they are. While this phenomenon is spoken of in the realm of psychotherapy, and is connected with notions like perfectionism, it can also be connected to cultural features related to high-achievement itself, at least in the interpretation used here.

CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION

Introduction and Recapitulation

This study has told a story about the culture of high-achievement. The story began with the high-achieving students as competent and trustworthy, good at school and reliable, yet subject to the contradictions of competence and the need to maintain their trustworthiness. Next the story moved to the good class, taught with passion, and at an advanced level, by Mr. Elliot. The good class, better than previous survey history classes, formed a context within which high-achievers were portrayed as living within a structure of hierarchies, of class types, schoolwork, and knowledge; hierarchies which shaped their views of themselves and of others. The good class, where history is a story well told by Mr. Elliot, is also put forth as a place where these high-achievers get “good” teaching, which is interesting, detailed, challenging, though perhaps not so analytical as it is described or so critical as some educators might wish. The view was then expanded to the school, where the high-achievers of AP US History are placed within the context of the meritocratic assumptions of their middle-class, college-prep school environment. Here a mix of intelligence and talent, hard work and drive, and encouragement and environment are brought together to position and to explain high-achievers. The students themselves place great stock in hard work and challenge, view free-time with suspicion, and do not seem to feel that they are high-achievers. By their position, they are confronted with the choice of forward motion or failure.

My story is not the only possible one, and this is to be expected. The critical qualitative frame I have adopted acknowledges the researcher’s role in creating a study, and the goal here is not to produce a single, authoritative account but rather one that is

warranted yet unique for the purposes and frames that I bring to it. That being said, a different person doing this same study would do it differently. So, too, might the subjects in this study, educators and students, tell this story in a way that does not follow my account, and my use of a critical stance toward the status quo of high-achievement even puts this study in a position of questioning some commonly held ideas about high-achievement, what it is, how it works, and what it means for students. My work is meant to reveal one way that the culture of high-achievement can be interpreted, a way that may demand some attention and action even as it does not discount or displace other readings of the same setting.

An alternative narrative of the culture of high-achievement might follow the lines of the meritocratic ideology, and indeed this narrative seems to be present and in-use at Fairlawn and in AP US History. The way that high-achievers are talked about and portrayed includes the ideas of talent, intelligence, background, and dedication, of readiness and willingness to work at an advanced level. High-achievers are naturally gifted, they were raised in a way that allows them to take advantage of these gifts, and they have the driven personalities that will keep them working hard and challenging themselves. The high-achievers of AP US History, with the possible exception of a few who do not live up to expectations, are success stories at Fairlawn High, students with potential who live up to it, and they are well-prepared for what the future will bring - the future meaning, in this case, college. As they move up in the hierarchies of school, work, and knowledge, this movement is treated as a natural sorting process, where those with talent and drive, the cream, rise to the top, leaving the less-intelligent and less-invested

behind along the way. This, in turn, means that the best students will get the best opportunities, which is, given the natural order of things, only right.

These opportunities include an advanced class with an excellent teacher who, in an AP class, teaches in a way that goes beyond what is done in standard history classes. AP US History, in this alternate story, is a higher-level class both in terms of workload and in terms of the level of intellectual challenge, a class open only to those who can handle it, and a class which allows those students to work to their potential, rather than being stuck at an average level. It is an example of the best of what can be done, dedicated and knowledgeable teachers with smart and hardworking students, all pulling together to create a difficult and rewarding class experience. Here, the best are pushed to achieve, and this represents an ideal, what we all wish could happen in schools all the time.

The AP US History version of the story of high-achievement is not a new one. The culture of high-achievement, as I have seen it in AP US History at Fairlawn High School, seems to share much with the culture of schooling as it has been written about time and again. From the level of knowledge up to the class structure and right up to the meritocratic and middle-class ideals that pervade the class and the school, much of what I saw seems familiar. High-achievers are dedicated to succeeding within the structure of schooling, though their success is attributed to their intelligence, their backgrounds, and their hard work. As an institutional structure, the school fosters compliance, game-playing (in the particular sense of the “school game”) competence at school success. The structure is hierarchical, from the work the students do and the way they do it to the ways that the regular and advanced history classes work to the way knowledge is treated in AP

US History itself. All of this is framed in talk of merit, of the best students rising to the top in the classic liberal manner, freeing their innate abilities to do the best work and leaving the others, less intelligent or less driven, behind. The corporate division of labor, where the management does the thinking, the workers do the work, comes out here, yet the concept of alienated labor does as well, as high-achievers sometimes struggle to find meaning even in their advanced class.

Not only is this story familiar, it is itself much-questioned. Previous work on school culture and school as an institution, on tracking and reproduction and the connections between school and the market, has done much to open up new possibilities in questioning the purposes of school and the meaning of success in education. The idea that it is the most intelligent and talented who emerge at the top of the school system has been reframed, with success equated with culture, class, and race. The very concept of intelligence is questioned, as is the working of the meritocratic system, with assertions that it is not the smartest and best who rise to the top, but those who are positioned to be good at schooling. On a side note, the pervasive presence of these already-critiqued attitudes and ideas in AP US History at Fairlawn High is not only interesting for its own sake, but as a commentary on how work on school culture, the hidden curriculum, and social reproduction, some of it three- or four-decades old, has affected the structures and attitudes of schooling in America. Or, rather, how it has not affected them, since there seems to be little acknowledgement of alternative views of schooling, or high-achievement, at Fairlawn High School and in AP US History.

Yet my focus has not been so much on how the culture of high-achievement matches up with previous studies, not least because the culture of high-achievement has

not been much studied, but instead has looked, in a Deweyian collateral learning sense, on what the culture of high-achievement means for the students who live it out. I did this from a critical perspective, one which viewed the commonly accepted view of high-achievement with a questioning eye and which inspired me to write a different story of what I saw. A return to the aspects of high-achievement which I picked out shows the particular areas of emphasis in my approach, and so I go back to these aspects here, focusing on my interpretations of them in a collateral learning sense.

High-achievers' competence at schooling is seen as a necessary aspect of high-achievement, and at the same time a threat to the idea that school is about learning. This leaves high-achievers treading a difficult line between that which must be done and that which feels wrong, is frowned upon, or will bring down punishment. In this manner, high-achievement can be seen as unstable, a culture of contradiction. Trustworthiness, too, is unstable, demonstrated to get into AP US History, yet requiring ongoing proof. It is not a matter of the disappearance of control and the granting of freedom, but something more like the removal of overt control in favor of a system of class work and discipline that operates because the high-achievers themselves buy into it.

Mr. Elliot's good class, while interesting, lively, and acclaimed as "better" than survey history class, is itself fraught with meaning and complication for high-achievers. The high-achievers of AP US History are seen as ready for a higher level of work, for greater control over their participation in class, for less overt behavioral control, and indeed the "advanced" class can be seen as matching the "trustworthy" student of earlier. And, as with trustworthiness, high-achievers must keep moving forward. The various hierarchies in which they participate are described as relating to frustration, intolerance,

and separation come out in their views and actions relating to AP US History, other classes, other students, and themselves. The hierarchical structure of class, work, and knowledge does leave them at the top, in an advanced class, and yet the “better” nature of this class seems to reside, not so much in analysis, nor criticality, but in better facts, a more detailed story, told with passion, to students who are willing to listen and to put in the time necessary to make sense of the story.

The high-achievers of AP US History are the intelligent, the hardworking, the encouraged students, but these seem to equate with their ability to pick things up quickly, and their desire to do what is demanded of them – to some extent, competence and trustworthiness again. The ways that high-achievers are portrayed show quite a bit about Fairlawn High School and the community within which it operates, and shape what it is to be a high-achiever. As with trustworthiness and “advanced” work, hard work, a key piece of high-achievement, is something which is never done. Intelligence, which is innate, may someday fail, making high-achievement as unstable and contradictory as it seems when looking at competence, and perhaps for similar reasons: as competence must be limited to maintain the idea that school is about learning, so intelligence must be portrayed as existing in varied amounts in different students, so as to justify different student outcomes, yet as still being important, so that school is not just about hard work but also about some sort of intellectual attainment. In the end, high-achievers are left as unfinished as the culture which creates them, at once deserving of their position and always called upon to do more, not quite high-achievers in the end.

The above at once exemplifies my focus and summarizes, very briefly, the ideas which were brought forth in chapters 4, 5, and 6. For the students, the culture of high-

achievement makes for a difficult position. The contradictions of high-achievement, coming out in the maintenance of the discourse of learning and intelligence combined with and set against the demands of doing well, play out in the culture in which these students are immersed. They must be smart, dedicated, and willing, but they must also continue to achieve, playing a role that at times is opposed to intelligence, and a commitment to higher intellectual pursuits, which has brought them to where they are. There is a confusion inherent in all this, and some questions about what school and learning are all about, and high-achievers must struggle with an ever-shifting sense of identity because they must fit all of these roles, even as the roles conflict. They seem to feel this confusion, knowing that they are high-achievers, gazing from this position at the workings of school and their fellow students, yet at times looking for something more, something they have yet to see, or have perhaps glimpsed in AP US History and expect to see more of in later days.

This is the culture of high-achievement as I have portrayed it, but still, in this final chapter, there is a bit more to do. I intend to find links between these ideas, give a broader and more integrated picture of high-achiever culture, and speculate further on what the culture of high-achievement means to the students who live within it. I aim to find a few key frames which touch upon all that has come before yet capture some essential bits of the culture of high-achievement, the schooling experience, the collateral learning present for the students of AP US History. I also will take a step back, working on the philosophical level to talk about the culture of high-achievement as something created and sustained by the practice of schooling. Finally, I will consider some possible responses and recommendations that could come from this study. While this is a critical,

qualitative, ethnographic work, and is as such not wedded to the idea of “proving” anything or of creating specified, research-based practices, it is also a study based on the Deweyian notion that educators are bound to consider their whole school environment and to act accordingly. That being said, it is only fitting that I should take a few moments to consider how this work might inform the ways educators might think about their role in the particular institution of schooling.

High-Achievement and the Disciplining of Advanced Students

In re-examining and re-combining the facets of high-achiever culture as I have studied them, I begin with a return to two of the frames which have informed, though not always explicitly, much of the way this study has been carried out, interpreted, and written, namely, the Deweyian account of the features and purposes of education, and the postmodern ideas of discourse and discipline and the creation and control of the individual as subject. I use these frames to bring out several themes in high-achievement, both in the ways that the culture of high-achievement shapes students and what this may mean for their learning in the collateral sense, or, at least, what sorts of learning are present in the culture of high-achievement itself. Some of this has come out in previous chapters, but here I take that which has come before into new directions, delving more deeply into what the culture of high-achievement may mean for those who live it.

Trustworthy and hardworking, having earned the opportunity to take AP US History and working to adapt to the new demands of that class, the high-achievers of AP US History participate in a bargain. They are given a more open structure in class work and discipline, and are expected to make use of that openness in approved-of ways. The self-monitoring demanded of high-achievers is echoed in their position as hard-workers,

as kids who will put in the time and effort necessary. It comes out also in the structure of the advanced class, where more responsibility is put on their shoulders in terms of notes and reading, and a higher level of engagement with the class and the material is expected. Their bargain, as I portray it, is not the bargain of concern in educational literature, doing what is required so as to be left alone. It is rather the bargain of those who buy-in to the achievement structure of the school, doing well in exchange for greater freedom and responsibility. The bargain comes with expectations, however, and that which they have earned is constrained by that which they must now do to live up to their position as students of AP US History. There is pressure in high-achievement, but the expectations come, it seems, much from the students themselves.

Going beyond the bargain, the students of AP US History can be seen as “advanced” students, and the term advanced, as it happens, is not just one which I have borrowed from the Fairlawn social studies department and descriptions of AP US History as a class. It also finds use in Rose’s description of “advanced” liberal democracies, which operate, not by governing in the sense of exercising power of society, but rather in the disciplinary sense of governing the priorities and choices of autonomous, empowered citizens. Of “advanced” liberalism, Rose writes:

The regulation of conduct becomes a matter of each individual’s desire to govern their own conduct freely in the service of the maximization of a version of their happiness and fulfillment that they take to be their own, but such lifestyle maximalization entails a relation to authority in the very moment as it pronounces itself the outcome of free choice. (Rose, 1996a, p. 59)

The idea that students discipline themselves, in a sense, fits Rose’s (1996b) account of subjectification at work in democratic rule:

To rule citizens democratically means to rule them through their freedoms, their choices, and their solidarities rather than despite these. It means turning subjects, their motivations and interrelations, form potential sites of resistance to rule into allies of rule. It means replacing arbitrary authority with that permitting rational justification. (Rose, 1996b, p. 20)

This additional stress on these advanced students' role in their own regulation, or discipline, opens up a different way of looking at "good" students, one that goes beyond a simple trade-off of compliance for freedom-and-learning. As members of an advanced class, high-achievers are governed in a new and different way from that employed in more structured regular history classes. Foucault (1982) uses the term "government" to describe, not political systems, but rather "the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed" (p. 788). He noted that "to govern," in the sense implied by this broader definition of government, "is to structure the possible field of action of others (p. 789)." As Rose (1996b) puts it, democratic rule governs by this very structuring, allowing freedom to citizens who are constrained by their own wants and desires and thus who will do what the government wishes.

In AP US History, students are given more responsibility, are supposed to take ownership over their work and learning strategies, are expected to go beyond fulfillment of assignments and take an active role in their class. Mr. Elliot's AP students, from the way they quiet down when he begins lecturing to their general good behavior to their impressive records, show that they are on board. They have proven that they are dedicated to school work, and thus arrive in AP US History, but at this new level dedication and compliance are not enough. The students themselves must be active subjects, and, of course, subjectification occurs through activity, and regulation through empowerment (Foucault, 1979; Usher and Edwards, 1994).

As advanced students, then, they are empowered in that they gain additional freedoms and opportunities, different instruction and different work, and chances to continue to advance. Taking control of their own work, high-achievers can create themselves as good students. They are free to work in ways that work best for them, to do their reading when they wish, to go beyond factual work in their assignments and class time. They are constrained, however, in that requirements and expectations have not disappeared. They have, instead, taken on a different form, one which is in fact more controlling for it relies less on overt discipline and guidance and more on the students' own desire to take on the role of high-achiever, of motivated and on-the-ball AP US History student. From an institutional point of view, the result of this is rather interesting. Those who are given more freedom and responsibility are those for whom such freedoms will be used for institutionally-approved ends, and such responsibilities met. They are, it seems, no more free than if they had stopped at the level of their regular US History class, with its facts and worksheets, though their work is different, more varied and more interesting by their accounts.

All this suggests that high-achievers, students who are seen as capable of advanced work, thinking, and analysis, and who are describes as being given opportunities to take advantage of their talents by moving up within the school hierarchy, are also moving up within a hierarchy of regulation, one which controls them more effectively by harnessing their own purposes. They do have the opportunity for more advanced work, analysis and synthesis and even evaluation, as Mr. Elliot puts it, and in this sense they do make use of their empowerment. But they must earn this, must prove that they can be trusted to do this analysis in the ways Mr. Elliot wants. They have to

justify their teacher's faith in them, do their readings, and come to class ready to participate in new and more demanding ways. They are given leeway in when they arrive for class, as long as they do not really push this. They are given control over when they do their work, as long as they get it done. They have some say in when their tests and assignments take place, but there are boundaries on this control, as shown by Mr. Elliot's reaction to their attempt to use a later test to answer fewer questions per chapter. Overall, they are high-achievers as long as they continue to show the high-achievement is something they are invested in, something that is a priority of theirs – they work hard, they seek out challenge in the classroom setting, they define themselves according to an idea of achievement that is based in schooling, and they align their notion of drive with the doing of schoolwork.

Bringing in the idea that high-achievers are students with the potential go on to college and the professions, the high-achievers of AP US History are not only advanced students in their school, but are positioned to take on advanced roles in society, and this must be addressed. If the meritocratic ideal extends beyond the walls of the school, if high-achievers continue to participate in a bargain where they gain greater power by disciplining themselves, they will earn the freedom to do ever more interesting and creative work, but always with the caveat that this work must fall within the parameters of the discipline. The same apparent freedoms, I speculate, may thus be a feature of achievement far beyond high-school.

Educational researchers could, in one example, be looked at through this lens. They advance by “buying in” to the structure of academia and the field, earning the freedom and openness of academic positions. Yet, if they are to keep those positions, to

advance, to get tenure, must use their time and opportunities to meet the expectations put upon them. The same could be said of those in business who have the chance to work creatively, to plan and to control their jobs, always with the understanding that they will do so according to the purposes of the company. For government, one might see the process of advancement as one where a person acquired greater power and prestige, yet must focus much effort and energy on the maintenance of that power and prestige, acting in ways demanded by the position. In each case, freedom, control, creativity, choice, and opportunity are available as long as they are put to use in approved of ways, rather like the culture of high-achievement writ large. In each case, the point of doing the work becomes continuing to do the work, rather than an end beyond it. While this is admittedly speculation, it is certainly an interesting idea, and one which calls into question the amount of freedom and control that is “earned” by those who have achieved management, professional, academic, and governmental positions.

Back to the idea that high-achievers are actually more, or more effectively, controlled within schooling by their apparent freedoms, it is also important to remember that the empowering and controlling notion of discipline applies broadly. Indeed, anything we learn to do, see, or think could be seen as at once opening us up and limiting us. Illich (1973) warns that the tools used by humans carry with them the danger that the tools will themselves structure the purposes and practices of life, and the idea shares some parallels: that which gives also takes away. One cannot make a critique of the disciplinary function of high-achievement without realizing that the same disciplining is at work all around. The same could be said of “playing the school game,” of doing what needs to be done to succeed. Game-playing, using the system, knowing how to get ahead,

conforming to the practices of one's discipline; these things are not absent in any pursuit, job, or career. The idea that disciplining is not a process specific to high-achievement, and that the structuring of life embodied in game-playing is also ever-present, raises doubt as to why one should question this disciplining, the making of advanced students, since it is bound to happen, in some sense, one way or the other.

Reasons to question this process may come in several forms. From a postmodern perspective, the idea is to realize the disciplinary nature of subjectivity, and thus to attempt to stand always in a position of criticality towards it. As Blake, writing from a Foucaultian perspective, (1998) puts it:

Education should support a refusal to restrict ethnic-political choices to the dictates of scientifically regulated norms and a regimen of cost-benefit calculations, and foster the courage, skills and patience to shape creative and liberating alternatives. Freedom is practiced by interrogating our games of truth. Through the exercise of freedom, a refusal to identify in a deep ontological way with fabricated subject categories, one learns and is led to rely on oneself alone to make sense of one's experience. Freedom requires one to be critically pragmatic. (pg. 70)

Disciplining and subjectivity cannot be escaped, and in fact, as the above reference to Illich is used in an educational sense, may be seen as the natural consequence of learning anything at all. For advanced students, however, the advanced nature of discipline brings in questions not only of learning, but of purpose and intention, of shaping desires and priorities so that learning goes deeper than meeting requirements and takes on the workings of subjectivity. When priorities and intentions are derived from the discipline which also provides openings and opportunities, the possibility arises that that discipline will be approached uncritically, hence Blake's call for a critical effort.

The notion of criticality towards disciplines applies, in a way specific to AP US History itself, to the discipline of history. Knowledge and knowing of history are thus

constructed as hierarchical and limiting. “Advanced” students, having gotten “the facts,” get to do history in ways that are more demanding, interesting, and analytical than students in survey classes. In this structure of history, “better” historical accounts, and the opportunity to “think,” dependent on one’s position in the hierarchy of classes and knowledge. Also, knowing history is very much a matter of familiarity with what happened in a detailed way, with analysis directed at telling what happened – the “collective memory” approach (Segal, 2005; Seixas, 2000). Thus learning history is not learning to create or to critique historical accounts, or view the workings and purposes of such accounts, but a matter of getting the story down. The better story gives the person who knows it advantages over others whose knowledge is not so complete, connected, and in-depth, and thus those who “know” their history are positioned above, and approach learning differently than, those who do not. Instead of fostering a critical view either of history or of their places within the hierarchy of history classes, the discipline of history as practiced in this AP class shapes students, and even history itself, into a hierarchical system of advancement and advantage.

One could go further. Putting history into the context of schooling, and especially in an AP class with a huge test waiting at the end of it, history itself is something which is engaged in for purposes which are not necessarily related to using history for anything but proving that one knows it for testing purposes. The use of history, in AP US History, is “performative” in the sense that it resolves around demonstration of knowledge and skills. This connects back to the hierarchical notions surrounding history, since those who know “more” are higher up on it, but it also connects to the “why” of history. Learning is a matter of demonstration to those in charge that one knows, rather than a matter of the

use of knowledge to other ends, chosen by individuals or related to other uses to which history could be put, discovery of something about the past or the present, social analysis and critique, and such. This way of leaning, the discipline of schooled, AP-level history remains largely unquestioned, which is a cause of concern for what these advanced students are taking with them regarding the ways to do history, the reasons to do it, and the ways it can be put to use.

Going in another direction, I now turn to the Deweyian perspective, which focuses on the purposes and consequences of learning and doing. Rather than recommending a critical stance toward discourses and their disciplinary functions, Dewey prods us to ask about the source of purpose, the “why” of what is done. A Deweyian look at the culture of high-achievement then takes a different view of the subject, putting forth the possibility of intelligent or aesthetic activity that, while it does not work outside of either a medium or a social context, is carried out with an awareness of what one wishes to do, and why, and how (Bernstein, 1966; Dewey, 1916; 1934; 1938/1997; Feffer, 1993). As already discussed, Dewey does not posit a pre-existing subject in the classic liberal sense, and puts forth an account of the social nature of the self that makes questioning of collateral learning necessary. That being said, his analysis, indeed his vision of school and of democracy, centers around a certain vision of full and fulfilling individual activity. In using Dewey, then, the focus shifts somewhat from discourses to individual purposes, from the disciplining function to what this function means for the quality of life and learning. Thus the postmodern view of subjectivity, of governance through the control of desires and intentions, raises questions as to whether, from a Deweyian perspective, the action of the disciplined subject is intelligent action, that is,

whether it is carried out with an awareness of purpose and consequence, or according to purposes pre-determined and according to consequences assessed by others.

For the culture of high-achievement, then, we may be tempted to ask two questions. The first, from the postmodern perspective, is whether in the culture of high-achievement these advanced students are learning a questioning stance toward the discipline which is forming them as subjects and pulling them into the world of achievement. The second, from the Deweyian perspective, asks where the purposes and meanings of work and activity come from, why the students do what they do, or what they are learning about such “why” questions as they participate in their high-achiever culture. This study, having put forth the idea that high-achievers can be seen as “advanced” students in their position as trustworthy, hardworking, AP-level, intelligent, higher-level students, did not gaze deeply into the purposes and intentions that lay behind the students’ work, focusing instead on high-achievement as a cultural phenomenon. That being said, questions of purpose can still be address through this cultural lens, by asking what sort of purposes and reasons are present in the culture of high-achievement itself, why and how work is done, how it is perceived and talked about, by high-achievers and their teachers.

Thus I will take a new direction here, drifting away from the idea that high-achievers are advanced students in the sense of how they are governed, but keeping with the emphasis on purpose and “why” questions in the culture of high-achievement. In pursuit of these questions, I will return to more of the ideas which came out in chapters 4, 5, and 6, addressing them in and of themselves and in relation to the themes established here. I will start by taking a step back to the broader view of the culture of high-

achievement, briefly recapitulating some of what has come before, and then re-focusing my analysis on one particular feature of the culture of high-achievement, one which has arisen before, namely, its inherently unfinished nature. In pursuit of questions of purpose, then, I am heading off to have a look at how high-achievers are, in some ways derived from their cultural milieu, never done.

No Child Ever Gets There³

In stepping back to address the culture high-achievement as a whole, I must begin with a bit about which points I am *not* going to be making here. First, in spite of my critical view of ideas such as achievement, hard work, challenge, drive and the like, I am not claiming that such things are without value, nor that they are, in and of themselves, automatically and entirely negative. This is important to keep in mind. The question is not one of whether individuals should work hard or push themselves, or whether they should achieve anything. Nor is the question whether students should “play the game” of school since, in line with the point about the inevitability of the workings of disciplinary processes, there are always games we must play. Rather, the question concerns what this all means, which is to say, to what ends such efforts are directed.

As already seen, both Deweyian and postmodern analyses raise such questions. The postmodern account puts forth the notion of a critical view toward the disciplines which shape high-achievers even as they make possible new ways of engaging in schooling. Dewey’s notion of intelligent, esthetic, fulfilling activity is bound up with purpose and consequence. Dewey does not believe in a lack of discipline, as some would no doubt claim, but instead portrays discipline as the natural consequence of engagement

³ I thank Dr. Avner Segall for the inspiration for this section title.

in meaningful activity (1916, 1934). The question for the culture of high-achievement, then, is what it has to say of purpose and of the nature of learning.

That being said, I can now turn to the theme which I wish to address, namely, that high-achievement is not something which can be achieved. High-achievers are “good” students, in the sense that they are competent and trustworthy, but their competence forever teeters on the edge of scheming, and their trustworthiness must be continually proven. They have access to a “better” class, yet even within this class they must prove themselves in order to continue on to the real work of higher-order thinking, analysis, and the like. They are seen as intelligent, talented, of good backgrounds, but they are called upon to take on greater levels of challenge, to work hard and demonstrate dedication, and any faltering in this will mean that they will fall behind in the achievement process, or the achievement race. One can always stop working hard, stop acting in a trustworthy fashion, and if this happens the high-achiever status is endangered.

As mentioned in Chapter 6, the “never done” phenomenon puts a different spin on the “imposter phenomenon,” where high-achieving individuals attribute their achievement to luck or to the failure of those in charge to realize that the high-achiever is, in fact, not really all that bright, smart, or talented (Clance & O’Toole, 1987). In the greater scheme of things, the options available to the high-achiever include 1) doing well, which earns one the right to move on to the next level where they must continue their striving to do well or, 2) failure. The position of a high-achiever can thus be that of a person waiting for the insurmountable challenge, waiting for the moment, or the class, or the assignment, that will finally be too much to handle. Aside from the pressure this puts on high-achievers, noted especially in Pope (2001), this also carries with it the idea that

people who stop at the lower rungs of the achievement ladder are themselves failing. The smart kid who could do better, a familiar character in the high-achiever story, is an example of this, as is Mr. Elliot's insistence that AP US History is the place where hard work finally gives out as a strategy, leaving some revealed as less talented.

Yet, even if they never do reach that point of failure, even if it is more of an idea of a reality, it is a powerful and defining idea in the culture of high-achievement. The high-achievers of AP US History do not feel that they are themselves high-achievers. There is always more one can do, it seems. This treadmill-like piece of high-achiever culture puts high-achievers on a endless quest, one which might be called "No Child Ever Gets There," though it is still quite possible to be left behind. High-achievement is thus something that is always in-process, always becoming, and there is no arrival at a place of stability, or of rest.

This, in turn, reconnects back to the disciplining of high-achievers, their regulation according to their freedoms, desires, priorities, and actions. Since one can never "arrive," there is never a point where high-achievers can step back from the demands of the discipline. They have taken achievement as a goal. It is a goal that is never reached, however, and thus they have taken upon themselves to continue striving for that which always stays ahead. Perhaps it can be said that failure is not the only option, since one could simply opt out of the continual pursuit of achievement, yet this, too, would be failure, since the achievement lies in the continual striving. If students wish to achieve, they must keep going, and thus they are controlled by their own desire to achieve, a never-ending desire which can only be fulfilled within the parameters provided by the discipline.

Perhaps this is not such an odd thing, though. Really, everyone makes progress, in school, at work, even in hobbies people grow in skill and knowledge and advance in position. Again, just as ideas like hard work are not inherently negative, neither, one might argue, is advancement. The question, then, is not one of advancement itself, but of why one advances. The suggestion that there is no end to advancement, no goal beyond moving forward to the next stage, implies that advancement, or rather achievement, is itself a goal. This fits in with the idea that students are controlled through the disciplinary function of achievement, as laid out above. Such an idea is further supported by the moral overtones that suffuse the culture of high-achievement, and so it is to these that I now turn.

High-Achievement and Morality

Moral overtones are not hard to detect in the discourse of high-achievement and in high-achiever culture. Descriptors such as hardworking, challenge-seeking, dedicated, and trustworthy are not neutral terms. Even reading them, one forms a picture of a student who deserves approbation and advancement, who is taking advantage of their talents and opportunities, just the sort of student one would want in one's class. High-achievers are indeed "good" students, and not only because they comply with institutional requirements – though this is also a telling reading of what they do – but because they are good people, willing to put in the time and effort necessary to be the best. When the students and faculty I studied talked about high-achievers, there was an overwhelming feeling that they had earned the right to be advanced, that they had been tested and found worthy, though, of course, this means worthy of more testing.

The idea that high-achievement is not just a good thing, but is also a right and proper one, dovetails with the myth of meritocracy, the American Dream and the materialistic myth in American culture, and the Protestant Work Ethic. Meritocracy works on the idea that those who are at the top have earned the right to be there, by their natural talents and by using those talents well. Pursuit of the American Dream, and the materialistic myth in American culture, also tie in personal worth, a sort of pioneer-spirit of self-reliance and gumption that brings success to those who deserve it. The Protestant work ethic (Weber, 1905/1952), a part of the materialistic myth in Fisher's (1973) account of it, brings a spiritual aspect, as ascetic dedication to working hard for the sake of working hard, because it is the morally correct thing to do. The Protestant work ethic additionally brings its own emphasis on salvation, a notion that the work one does is done, not for the present moment, but for eventual eternal reward. While high-achievers may not be working for an eternal reward – or at least, we didn't talk about it – they are working for eventual rewards such as the right college and the good job, and before they arrived in AP US History, they were working to get there too.

The moral, Protestant Work Ethic feel to high-achievement also manifests itself in the students dissatisfaction with their regular classes and other students, there sometimes dissatisfaction with their AP US History class, and their desire for “something more.” It also comes out in the never-done felt that accompanies high-achievement. The idea which brings these together in the notion of “salvation,” the promise of reward for the worthy, who have proven their worth by their ascetic dedication to their schoolwork. The idea is that, some day, they will get “there,” whether “there” is an AP class, the college of their choice, the professional career. As Pope (2001) puts it, high-achievers operate with

“deferred” goals, working hard now with the notion that they will get there some day.

The high-achievers of AP US History, too, are pushing for goals which lay ahead, sometimes over the horizon. And, as the dissatisfaction that some students show with the class hints at, seeking the “end” of the achievement ladder may be something like trying to get to the end of the rainbow; it always stays ahead. Competence, trustworthiness, hard work are unstable, never done, and the eventually rewards are invitations to demonstrate more dedication and to work ever harder. The choices are to keep moving or fail, and, as with the imposter phenomenon, this leaves high-achievers constantly working toward an unreachable goal. The manifestation of this even at my level of work – once I finish my dissertation, once I get tenure, etc... - certainly lends to my thinking on this.

The link that brings together these varied views of the value of work and achievement is that work and achievement, in all these cases, are seen as things good in and of themselves, and as things which imbue those who do them with a certain inherent value. Challenge and hard work provide meaning. Taken to its extreme, one who works hard, who looks for challenge, who uses their talents to their greatest extent, and who seeks advantage and advancement at every level, is to be commended regardless of the ends to which their efforts are directed. In simpler terms, it does not much matter what you are doing, as long as you are doing your best. Achievement becomes its own justification. Such ideas can be seen in the high-achievers of AP US History, for whom challenge and hard work provide purpose and make classes worthwhile. Even if the work of AP US History can be seen to have a purpose beyond working hard, such as the AP test itself, achievement on a standardized test for college-credit is as deferred and self-justifying a goal as any.

Thus the moral overtone of high-achiever culture puts high-achievement makes high-achievement good for its own sake. This suggests some potentially unfortunate and rather disturbing consequences. First off, as mentioned above, *what* one achieves is not a matter of question. This means that high-achievers are, being immersed in the culture of high-achievement, learning to put their shoulders to the wheel without necessarily asking where it's rolling. From a critical standpoint, and a Deweyian one, there is little or no impetus to question, on the part of the students or their teachers, *why* they are doing all the things that they do. Purpose and meaning rest, in research terms, in method. This is not just a question of the way that AP US History is taught, with little critical examination of the purposes and uses of the story of history, though this comes into it. Mr. Elliot is not blind to the uses of history, but for all that, and even for his efforts to provide alternative and at times critical perspectives, his class is about learning history, not learning to question it. The culture of high-achievement goes beyond this, however. One does well. Asking why, or to what end, are not supported endeavors, beyond climbing to the next level on the achievement ladder.

This is not to say that students and teachers do not ask themselves why, do not struggle with their roles, or leave all unquestioned. As this study shows, Mr. Elliot and his students, and Mr. Brown and Mr. Schlieffen as well, are not blind followers. The idea is not to posit that those who participate in the culture of high-achievement are mere automatons. The question, instead, is one of meaning, and the meaning of high-achievement is shot through with a moral sense that seems to overwhelm questions and conflicts and leave, at the most basic level, the idea that achievement is good and that those who achieve are also good. And this, I repeat, has a tendency to make high-

achievement, challenge, hard work, drive, and the like goals to be aimed for, rather than pieces of activity for which purpose is something considered and chosen, something beyond the means which can be used to achieve it.

The moral overtones of high-achievement, and the notion that work is its own justification, have effects that exceed the boundaries of work and meaning. First, there is the already mentioned “never done” aspect of achievement, alluded to in the results chapters as well as above. The moral overtone of high-achievement leaves high-achievers in a position of needing to avoid failure, because failing is cast not only in an intellectual sense but also in a moral one. The results for learning are of interest. If learning occurs through the making of errors, through trying new things and seeing how they work, there is little support for this in the culture of high-achievement. There is not much room for mistakes, embodied as they are in poor grades, in a system which requires constant forward motion. Indeed, as Mr. Elliot put it, his students come to his class with the idea that putting in the time will be what is needed to succeed. They may get past this idea, seeing that different sorts of work are necessary for success in AP US History, but in a larger sense they remain within a culture where work, effort, drive, and challenge are placed on a pedestal, separate from ends.

This brings up additional critiques from Dewey’s perspective. If learning requires mistakes or, from Dewey’s perspective, if the process of learning and activity require not only *doing* but *undergoing* (Wong, Packard, Girod, & Pugh, 2000), a certain reflective piece is included which could be absent in the ever-moving high-achiever view of learning. People have a certain potential, a certain talent, as the story goes, and one is duty bound to live up to that potential and to use, one might say fully exploit, that talent.

Those who do not live up to their potential are not merely making a choice, they are doing wrong. This leaves little time, to put it in familiar terms, for stopping to smell the roses. In Dewey's terms, the action piece of learning is brought to the fore, the reflection, which also may include reflection on ends and purposes, is shuffled off to the rear. This goes beyond the role of reflection in learning and activity in a philosophical sense. Free-time, taking breaks, even pursuit of fulfilling activities of personal interest are marginalized in the face of the need to keep going.

The implications of these moral overtones for students who are not high-achievers can be equally troubling. If high-achievement is a moral matter, then students who are not high-achievers are obviously lacking in moral fiber. The smart kid who does not care, a popular figure in the high-achiever story, is lacking, not in the sense of natural intelligence, but in values, discipline, motivation, or gumption. As for the students who just don't "get it," who may not be driven but aren't all that bright either, placing high-achievement within a moral framework puts these students, too, into a morally inferior category. This is not something plainly stated, and indeed there are efforts, using ideas like different intelligences, or talents, to reduce the stigma of non-achievement. Yet the attitudes revealed by high-achievers, who consider fact-based work beneath them and openly mock easy work (and by extension, those for whom easy work is hard), demonstrate that there is something to the idea that the less-academically inclined, if placed into the moral hierarchy that is associated with achievement, are on the low side of this curve the same way that they are on the low side of the intelligence curve.

This, in turn, brings back the specter of intolerance and frustration that can be demonstrated by high-achievers toward teachers, students, or work that they feel are in

some way beneath them. Again, this is a phenomenon given context by a look at the moral overtones in the culture of high-achievement. High-achieving students, in being placed within a moral framework, are naturally separated from others, and not just in matters of objectively determined intelligence, even if there were such a thing. They are more worthy, and for these students destined for college and the professions, perhaps even for leadership roles in business, society, and academia, such positions are not just achievements, but of entitlement. They are equipped to lead, to make policy, to be managers and professors and doctors and lawyers and such because they have proven their worth. With worth, it seems, comes the potential for authority, and in viewing themselves as above certain pursuits and certain people, high-achievers can be seen as well-prepared to give orders to those who have not, in the ladder of achievement, been able by their own talent and work ethic to climb so high.

Taking such speculation even farther, we can combine the position of high-achievers at the top of the school hierarchy with the idea that achievement itself is rather self-justifying to paint a picture that, for its speculative nature, still demands our attention as educators. Getting to the top does not, it seems, require one to ask those pesky “why” questions, whether these take the form of the purpose of achievement or of one’s own interest or intentions in regards to that which is being achieved. Thus, the culture of high-achievement is one which prepares individuals, as well as potential leaders and professionals, trained to take an inherently conservative, unreflective stance toward their work, doing what is required, and doing it very well, without necessarily wondering about the nature, purpose, or effects of that work. The critiques of schooling as producing willing consumers and cogs for the economic system fall into this category, but I wish to

approach this from a slightly different direction. On the societal side, I believe that there is little question as to whether high-achievers are going to participate in the economic system of this country and the world, unless they move to mountain cabins and live off deer meat and berries. As to whether they will occupy influential positions, one cannot say, but they are positioned to do so. The question, then, is on what terms they will participate in the economy, and in government and business and academia. A look at high-achiever culture seems to suggest that, taking high-achievement as a self-justifying, moral goal leaves high-achievers shaped into inherently unreflective and uncritical stance toward school, work, and society. On the personal side, this may mean a similar stance toward the choosing of what one does, how one spends one's time, and who decides what is worth doing and when.

Purpose, High-Achievement, and Some Philosophical Speculation on Education

Having gone into the never-done nature of high-achievement, and the moral overtones which accompany it, we can return to the question of critical stances or questioning of purpose from high-achievers who are advanced students. From a postmodern standpoint, one must step back from the discourses in which one participates, to critique the disciplinary process and see the control that comes with empowerment. From a Deweyian perspective, learning, and activity in general, must be undertaken with an awareness of purpose, of ends, and of the "why" of what one is doing. My analysis of the culture of high-achievement, and the hierarchical, always advancing, morally-weighted notions that run all through it, suggests that questions of purpose, of ends, of "why," are self-contained. High-achievement is the goal and the way of reaching it. The

means are also the ends, and this is reinforced by reference to ideals of merit and morality, which place value on the doing of achievement.

If such influences are present in the culture of high-achievement, and I certainly have come to think that they are, then this culture, in the sense of collateral learning, can be said to be producing students which are unprepared, from either a postmodern or a Deweyian sense, to act critically and with considered purpose. If the function of schooling is to educate students as both people and as citizens of a democratic nation, as Dewey and others (e.g. Parker, 2003) hold, then the culture of high-achievement seems to provide little support for reflective and meaningful action on the part of individuals or to promote a critical stance toward society. As with studies of achievement and motivation, the culture high-achievement takes that which is being achieved as given, justifies it through various ideological and moral narratives, and produces students in this mold. If the question is one of collateral learning, the answer is that the best of the best are trained to use their talents in ways which, for whatever opportunities they have for more interesting and challenging work, still fall within certain circumscribed boundaries which do not extend to critique, reflection, purpose, and meaning.

Going off somewhat farther into the philosophical realm, the culture of high-achievement can be placed into the context of narratives of education from both the postmodern and Deweyian standpoints. Modernism promises answers, truth, objective knowledge, and guidance on how we should live, but has not delivered any of these. Instead, there is a never- ending quest, which has been termed the failure of modernism, or the postmodern condition (Gergen, 1992; Kvale, 1992; Lather, 1992; Lyotard, 1984; Polkinghorne, 1992). One finds only hierarchies of better and worse knowledge, justified

through different discourses which count varied things as knowledge and truth. In seeking ends, modernism has only found differences and justifications. Like the culture of high-achievement, the project of modernism is never done, but it can justify certain structures and ways of doing things. Education, as the “Child of the Enlightenment,” (Usher & Edwards, 1994) can be seen as putting forth the promise of getting there, and shaping students into such a quest, without delivering an end.

For Dewey, all of this goes back to his concern about the potential downsides of formal, institutionalized education in complex, literate societies. Dewey’s goal of uniting the subjective and the objective, the moral and the scientific, is one which has at its base a rejection of the idea that knowledge can be decontextualized and separated from activity and meaning. Once knowledge is decontextualized and set up as an ideal, as with the modernist project, it becomes reified, static, set into a hierarchy, and the goal of knowledge becomes, not use, but accumulation. In either view, there is still a sense of never being finished. But Dewey also takes this down to the level of what it means to learn, and to act. From his account of the “reflex arc” (1897) and throughout his philosophy, he put forth a concept of unified activity, in which means and ends are progressively brought together, and in which considerations of purpose and consequence must always be included. This same recursive relationship between ends and means forms the basis for his account of educative, intelligent, and aesthetic activity (Bernstein, 1966; Dewey 1916, 1934/1980, 1938/1997; Feffer, 1993). His vision of meaningful social activity, that which preceded formal education as a mode of learning the knowledge of society, is difficult to achieve in the context of schooling, and so educators must look to the educational power of environment, the whole context and activity of

learning. If this is not done, if education in schools is treated as the way in which learning works, then the best of education is the best of the acquisition of knowledge out of context, without the unified, purposeful features which he insisted were necessary for personal growth and a democratic mode of living. Speculating from Dewey's standpoint, then, one might say that the culture of high-achievement carries within it some of the very dangers of schooling which preoccupied Dewey and led to his calls for a progressive sort of education in which interest, purpose, and meaningful activity lay at the center of teaching and learning.

This philosophical pondering is intended to connect to the picture of high-achiever culture which I have created here. This is a study of one classroom at one school, of course, aiming at meanings and stories and culture and not at a national assessment of the state of education. Such things may be portrayed as limitations of the study, a denial of its applicability outside of a narrow context, and indeed the qualitative and Deweyian frame I have adopted would preclude my taking this study and pointing to it as any sort of final word on the culture of high-achievement in an all-encompassing sense. There is something here, though, themes and pieces, ideas and ideologies, which can be taken and used to examine and think about other classes, other schools, education itself, and the culture of high-achievement more broadly. My recourse to philosophy is carried out in this spirit, and in the critical spirit as well, an attempt to pull out those parts of the culture of high-achievement which should be examined, to work and stretch them, and to try to bring a different view to that which is taken as the good, the advanced, the best of the best.

Conclusion

As a critical study, as a Deweyian study, this work is not disinterested and neither, as a qualitative and ethnographic project, does it claim the status of an absolute and authoritative account. It does not, thus, proceed from an assumption of objective research findings presented as a proven basis for educational practice. This stance makes the idea of “recommendations” a problematic one, since such a notion is rooted, in part, in a different tradition of research. Still, Dewey’s work was ever-directed toward his goals of fostering intelligent, aesthetic, fulfilling, and democratic activity in school and in society, and with this in mind, no study which claims Deweyian roots can get by without putting forth some ideas about what could be done in the schools. Neither can a critical study come out with findings, or ideas, without looking at how they relate to the status quo, the thing being questioned, the issues being opened up for discussion. Thus, as I conclude this study, I undertake to say a bit about what I believe this study means in relation to the culture of high-achievement¹, and the roles and responsibilities of educators in connection with that culture.

Before I move more deeply into my conclusions, it is important to say a bit about why anyone might want to listen to them. Clearly, this is not the first study of school culture, and with a long tradition of critical work on the hidden curriculum and similar ideas, this study is, in some ways, nothing new. Yet the emphasis here is different in several key ways. First, there is the specific emphasis here on the culture of high-achievement. This culture has itself been little studied, and there is in current educational policy debates a decided lack of questioning of the successful in our educational system. And these successful students, prepared to take important roles in society, should be the

focus of study in their own right, as well as for what their success says about the priorities of the educational system.

From another direction, previous work in the area of school culture has not employed Dewey as a theoretical or normative framework, and the unique spin that a Deweyian frame puts on this study and its findings distinguishes them from work in the functionalist, critical, Marxist, and postmodern traditions. Yet, for all its Deweyian roots, this study makes use of a wide variety of concepts from these various traditions; this open and democratic approach to theorizing is another distinguishing mark of this piece. In the Deweyian spirit of applying philosophy to the “problems of men,” I have made use of perspectives, ideas, and frames which I have found useful, leaving aside their differences and instead focusing on how they might illuminate the setting at hand. Because of this approach, this study might appeal to educators from a variety of backgrounds.

As for my conclusions, I begin with the idea that from the start of this work, with its emphasis on culture and on collateral learning, the idea has been that what we teach in schools goes beyond the formal and, indeed, that “school culture,” the ways of living and working in schools, is much of what students learn in educational institutions. As a study of the culture of high-achievement, then, this work is a look at what high-achievers are learning in school, as well as the contexts, narratives, and practices that come into this learning. From the idea of collateral learning also comes the notion that educators bear some responsibility for school environment, hidden, implicit, and null curricula, and culture. The frame of this work also included the notion that students play an active role in the creation of their culture. Putting all this together, the first recommendation I can come up with is one which is inherent in the frame I have used, namely, that those who

participate in the institution of schooling, educators and students both, must approach school with a wider awareness of what happens there, where it comes from, what meanings are implicit in it, and where it aims to go.

As I said in my introduction, many pages ago, culture is an inherently democratic concept, contingent as it is on local meanings and experiences. Research like this study, while informative, is in a sense not really the answer when seen from such a perspective. My carrying out this study is helpful, interesting, potentially useful, but these are really the sorts of questions that educators and students should themselves be asking. Therefore I believe it would be valuable, in terms not only of how history is taught but indeed of how schooling is approached, to find a role for teachers and for students in the engagement of questions of purpose in education. This is not necessarily just a matter of taking a critical stance toward history or schooling, or more discussions about such subjects, though this may be a part of it. It also means looking again at Dewey's contention that meaningful activity in schooling, work with some purpose which engages the students, is a route toward developing a flexible intelligence, skills in judgment, and awareness of what one is about. This is also a challenge toward the wider hierarchical structure of education which places teachers in the position of those who carry out the work and researchers in the position of those who think, and leaves students out of the equation entirely.

A great deal of work is needed, not only on the part of educators who operate in the realms of research, but of those who spend their days immersed in the concerns of practice, to approach education critically and with a mind toward purpose. Our students, too, should be treated as worthy of confronting and wrestling with these questions of how

and what they are learning, and to what ends it is directed. All of us should confront questions of what schools should be aiming for, and should work toward answers and toward action from those answers. The high-achievers of AP US History are certainly learning some things which could be called valuable, including the ability to focus and to work hard, skills in getting along in schools and institutional settings, quite a bit of historical knowledge, the idea that history can be interesting and lively, and a sense of their ability as students. At the same time, however, they are picking up quite a few other lessons, some of which I have highlighted here, which are of questionable value for reasons already stated. Without going further into what is or is not desirable in terms of educational goals, it can be said that it seems less than ideal for educators and students to participate in a system of schooling which directs their activities and ideas in ways which are unexamined. It is a radical idea, really, stating that the operation of schooling should include a constant questioning of the “what” and “why” and “how” of teaching and learning, but the other choice seems to be mere acceptance, closing off critical, even intelligent, activity.

This focus on student and teacher participation in the purposes of education should not be mistaken for a merely instrumental, “how can I use this?” approach to that which is learned in school. Indeed, such an approach is already present in the culture of high-achievement, as students do what they need to do, play the game, and strive to get ahead. That which they learn can certainly be used, but these uses fall within the confines of achievement itself, again leaving the getting-ahead as the self-defining purpose. The questioning of use, of purpose, of the “why” of education is the focus here, and such questioning takes knowledge out of the realm of instrumentalism when the answers can

be found outside of achievement itself. Defined this way, instrumentalism may be said to be use defined by use, the purely instrumental approach which puts means as ends. Criticality, in expanding purpose through questioning, makes knowledge richer, employed for considered purposes and avoiding the trap of limiting and unthinking use of means as ends-in-themselves.

As for additionally recommendations, they are somewhat limited by the fact that I did not, as some have, take Deweyian principles into the classroom and test how they might work. I did not try to implement a different vision of education. Therefore, I am not well-prepared, within the confines of this work, to make concrete suggestions for what should happen next. This is a natural result of my chosen frames and methodology, for if the strength of critique is its questioning of what is happening, its weakness is in taking the next step and putting forth alternatives. Still, Dewey's ideas, and recent work on implementing Dewey in classrooms, may give some direction to speculation about what might be done.

Just what might a different sort of education, constructed along Deweyian lines, look like? A promising answer is that they may look like new Deweyian approaches to pedagogy, variously known as "idea-based" (Cavanaugh, 2005; Pugh, 2000, 2002), "big ideas" (Smith and Girod, 2003), "aesthetic understanding" (Girod and Rau, 2000; Girod and Wong, 2002), or "realist-constructivist" (Cavanaugh, Prawat, Bell, and Wojcikiewicz, 2005). These approaches operate with a focus on students' using the ideas they have learned to "re-see" the world. In getting students to appropriate these ideas for their own use in ways that change the students' perspectives, and themselves, these idea-based approaches are aiming for the Deweyian educative experience. Students carry out

assessments as in their normal lessons, and these Deweyian lessons have been constructed with state content standards in mind. Yet the focus is not solely on the fulfillment of classroom requirements; students are encouraged to make use of these ideas, in and out of school, to change the way they perceive and act upon the world. The results of these studies have been encouraging. When students appropriate science ideas, often in the form of metaphors, they report that this learning process changes the way they look at themselves and their surroundings.

From the point of view put forth in my study, such approaches are encouraging precisely because they emphasize the students' participation in the use of their learning on their own terms. In focusing the purpose of the learning on changing students' perceptions and realms of action in the world beyond the classroom, these new Deweyian pedagogies may be able to bring in the realm of purpose and meaning in a way that more achievement-focused educational practices do not. Put this way, the self-justifying, morally-charged nature of the culture of high-achievement could be addressed by providing justification that goes beyond achievement itself, setting value instead on seeing the world anew, and acting upon it in new ways.

Additionally, these Deweyian pedagogies, implemented in classrooms where tests, grades, and standards are all still present, also hit upon a point made earlier: that achievement, hard work, and participation in the discourses of which we are all a part are not themselves automatically and entirely negative. All of these are, and are likely to remain, important parts of the picture of schooling. In keeping with Dewey's idea that philosophical work should be directed toward educational and societal change, it seems important to here make suggestions that have some hope of implementation in today's

educational institutions. These Deweyian pedagogies indicate that change may not be a matter of unrealistically broad and sweeping reform as much as a re-alignment of purpose and practice of existing classrooms so as to make achievement a means rather than an end. That being said, it seems that such approaches, while not the focus of the present study, may hold promise for addressing the points raised here.

The focus on purpose that has inhabited this study, and which make the new Deweyian pedagogies promising from my point of view, also bring up some other recommendations which touch upon issues which were not directly confronted in this study. If teachers and students are to be brought into the consideration of the purposes of education, this may, for example, have some implications for the practice of teacher education. In my experience much of teacher education is focused on the technical aspects of teaching, and less on the moral aspects of purpose and consequence. This is indeed the concern expressed by Field and Latta (1994), who claim that teacher education aims for “competence” but not for “wisdom.” The question, it seems, is whether the focus is on preparing teachers to take their places in the existing system, on getting a defined job done with skill, or whether it is on training them to participate in the determination of what their work is, and why and how it is carried out. A critical stance, or one which emphasizes intelligent and aesthetic action in a Deweyian sense, demands more than technical skill and familiarity with a smattering of educational research. This is, deep down, a very Deweyian goal, reflecting the same sort of discomfort with institutionalized education in a way which relates to Dewey’s objections to the lack of control and purpose in industrialized work. A real focus on the “why” of schooling, and of teaching, seem to

be topics in need of greater consideration, or at least of work along these lines in the study of teacher education.

Getting back to what I have found in this own study of the culture of high-achievement, there are some pieces which seem to demand further attention. For the students themselves, their collateral learning as high-achievers emphasizes many ideas already held up for critical examination in educational research, from assumptions about meritocracy and intelligence to their positioning in the school and society. The place of such ideas in school and in high-achievement raises questions not only about how school is talked about by teachers and students, but also the uses and effects of this educational research. For all the work that has been done in examining the culture of schools, it seemed that there was little evidence, in AP US History or at Fairlawn High School, that such work had been influential in the ways that educators and students approached their schooling experiences.

As for high-achievers themselves, the possibility that they are caught up in a morally-charged system of constant forward motion toward always-distant ends is as disturbing for their own search for meaning as it is in their position as citizens of a democracy. The same can be said about their status as high-achievers, the role they play in the school and in their advanced class, and the attitudes these can foster toward work, learning, and toward other people. If there are recommendations to be made here, one is to pay greater attention, not only to what is being done in education, but why. Another is to examine, and re-examine, that which is taken as good, as “the best,” to treat achievement not as an end, but as a means toward ends which are, if not agreed upon, at least taken into consideration. As Dewey claims that democracy is not a finished

product, but must be re-imagined and re-built in every generation, so, too, must education and achievement. And this is vital, both for high-achievers as individuals and in their potential role as professionals and leaders in society.

Another role played by high-achievers is that of examples of what it means to be successful in schooling, and how this relates to students who are not high-achievers. Students who take advanced classes, get good grades, participate in extra-curricular activities, and find favor with their teachers are doing what they are supposed to do. They are the best of the best, the cream of the crop – you may take your pick of hackneyed descriptions – and are thus also the model for other, less successful students. This means that efforts to improve the academic performance of average students, low-achievers, under-achievers, and the many poor and minority students can be seen as efforts to bring all students into this very culture of high-achievement being questioned here. While this study does not directly address any programs such as the No Child Left Behind Act and corresponding attempts to raise achievement levels, it may have something to say about them, since achievement which is the point of such efforts. If achievement is a troubling goal for high-achievers, it could just as easily be seen as a troubling one for other students. With this in mind, the ideal of raising achievement should itself be brought under scrutiny.

Such questions might also be asked about other educational settings aside from the one studied here. While this was not a study of university education at any level, the possibility of correspondence between the seeking of achievement in AP US History class and similar approaches to schooling at other levels suggests that the culture of high-achievement may be found in colleges and universities as well. Indeed, the idea that the

high-achievers of my study will go on to college and career with the same ideas and attitudes they have formed in high school implies that this culture exists at multiple levels. If this is so, my call for attention to the issues raised here applies to all of those levels. In addition, my own experiences in college, in graduate school, and in the world of educational research, suggest that achievement is very much a goal in itself even among those who study education. While I do not seek here to make any claims about these settings, the parallels I have witnessed, which have contributed to my own ideas and purposes in carrying out this study, suggest that the features of the culture of high-achievement may be found, and should be looked for, in places besides high-school classrooms.

As I finish this work, my stance is a hopeful one. As an active definition of culture holds forth the potential for change, as culture is a democratic idea, so too does the role of responsibility in collateral learning and culture put critique, awareness, and even reform in the hands of all involved in the project of education. As a participant in the discipline of academia and educational research, I wrestle with questions such as the role of research, our reasons for educating, how schools might be structured, how teachers might be trained and how their work could be defined, and my own part in all this. I do not, however, believe that these are questions which, as in the hierarchy of knowledge and academic work, should be confined to those of us who have reached a certain position. In that spirit, I end my observations, analysis, and ponderings, not by calling for this or that in particular, but by putting forth my own vision of a democratic approach, one in which high-achievement and schooling are taken to task by all involved, and come out better for it.

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