

Posing, Pretending, Waiting for the Bell: Life in High School Classrooms

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Taken from a larger study about life in high school classrooms from students' perspectives, this paper discusses how study participants pinpointed individual classrooms as the nerve centers in students' high school experiences. Punctuating the swirls of movement within school days, individual class periods contain clues about how students construct knowledge and meaning in school. Nested within classrooms period to period, participants reported being tangled in webs of peer influence that variously encourage, constrict, poison, and otherwise determine students' classroom interaction. Each 42-minute class period or classroom episode necessitates that students perform a kind of double-duty as they strike appropriate academic and social poses not only for their teacher but—much more importantly—for their peers, who create classrooms that can be comfortable, indifferent, or perilous to students.

Once inside individual classrooms, students work hard to follow tacit codes for appropriate behavior among assembled peers. Although this unspoken but de facto student culture can differ period to period, it nevertheless dominates students' experience of school. Because this finding reveals so much about students' social compromise and so little about their engaged learning, it seems that classroom teachers hold the surest, most immediate power to reclaim and reform classrooms from sites of student accommodation to sites of active and even enjoyable accomplishment.

For years as a high school teacher and now as a university-teacher educator, I have been curious about why and how schooling can help as well as inhibit learners and learning. Though my teaching career has shifted from the secondary to university classroom, six high school students' voices continue to charge my work. These students participated with me in an ethnographic study of school from students' perspectives. One enduring finding from the study pinpoints individual classrooms as the nerve centers in students' high school experiences. Once inside individual classrooms, students work hard to follow tacit codes for appropriate behavior among assembled peers.

Although this unspoken but de facto student culture can differ period to period, it nevertheless dominates students' experience of school. Because this finding reveals so much about students' social compromise and so little about their engaged learning, it seems that classroom teachers hold the surest, most immediate power to reclaim and reform classrooms from sites of mere student accommodation to sites of active and even enjoyable accomplishment.

As a teacher-researcher, I worked with six high school students on the study would become my doctoral dissertation. Entitled *Seen But Not Heard: Students and Their Stories of School*, the study also intended to give voice to students. Represented in the research but very seldom speaking for themselves, students within my study described the meaning and significance they assigned to school experiences. To insure the anonymity of students who participated in the study, they selected their own pseudonyms, and I assigned a pseudonym to the high school study site.

Data streams for this study included one-on-one interviews, group discussion, and individual writing. To capture the unique perspective of each participant in the study, I used case-study method to gather the variety of data. The flexibility of case-study method accommodated the shifts, pauses, analysis, and redirection of our study over time. The rich individual case studies informed the larger study question: "What does school mean to students?"

By triangulating data sources in the study, I compared and cross-checked the consistency of information derived at different times and by different qualitative means. Triangulation compares observational data with interview data. Throughout this study, I compared what the students said in public and during our group discussions with what they said or wrote in private response to study questions. I checked also for consistency of what the students said over time, compared the perspectives of students from their different points of view. Further, triangulation allowed for validation of information by checking for other evidence and other forms of evidence to corroborate findings within the study. Multiple sources of data provided

rigor within the study and ensured that meaning was derived by at least three independent approaches.

My data sources included six individual case studies of participants that included audio-taped interviews and transcriptions of those individual interviews, individual written reflections about school and school meaning, and audio-taped group sessions and transcripts of those sessions.

My study as a teacher-researcher at Memorial High School broadened my understanding of students and schooling in general and of my own work specifically by listening to and analyzing students' narratives.

Stereotyped in popular culture and publicly analyzed and ranked by standardized testing instruments, students continue to be represented in research and media reports but rarely speak for themselves about the meanings underlying their own performances and experiences in school (Erickson & Shultz, 1992; Phelan, Davidson, & Cao, 1992). Individually and collectively, the six participants in my study contributed many insights about their social, cognitive, and practical engagement with school and classroom life. Taken in consideration with some other researchers' work with student participants (Pope, 2001; Stinson, 1993; Phelan, Farrell, 1990), the study also reveals the hectic yet purposeless portrayal of so many teenagers' experience of school. Analysis of their stories and experiences corroborates and further suggests significant generalizations about how many American adolescents experience secondary education.

Punctuating the swirls of movement within school days, individual class periods contain clues about how students construct knowledge and meaning in school. Nested within classrooms period to period, participants reported being tangled in webs of peer influence that variously encourage, constrict, poison, and otherwise determine students' classroom interaction. Because this finding reveals so much about students' social compromise and so little about their engaged learning, it seems that classroom teachers hold the surest, most immediate power to reclaim and reform classrooms from sites of

student accommodation to sites of active and even enjoyable accomplishment.

Faking It

Even though we understand that children mature at different rates and in different ways, schools struggle and often fail to honor students' individual differences and strengths. Constricted in the sticky webs of peers in classrooms, students harbor their own individuality, desires, and needs. What students do seem to learn is how to play individual variations of the school game while managing compliant appearances. Such appearances can often belie individual feelings and needs, an aspect of school meaning for students captured by Tina Rose:

You put up a front for your teachers so they think you're interested and you're enjoying it, and really you're bored out of your mind. I do it so I don't hurt their [teachers] feelings. And I also know if I don't pass the class, I'll have to take it over. You might as well just pay attention. . . . I don't think teachers understand that we're really bored, and we're attempting to pay attention but we're not fully there (Pierce, 1994, p. 121).

Along with her pragmatism about why students should pay attention, Tina also conveys the sense that classrooms are places where students and teachers co-exist but share little in the way of understanding. Participants described how students busily maintain classroom appearances for their teachers as well as appearances for their peers within classrooms. Although students tend to both the teachers' and their own classmates' agendas—performing a kind of double duty—their duties and roles are renegotiated every time they change classes and face another teacher and another set of peers as Ty Francis explains:

This in-between class business is a lot of fun. . . . Then it's off to math I go. . . . as I enter the threshold, I realize then and there, I'm in for 42 minutes of pure hell. . . . if I'm gonna be stuck in math for 42 minutes, I'm gonna cut that down in some possible way. . . . I either go to the nurse, get a drink, go to the bathroom, . . . bathroom breaks are a big part of school. . . . I come

back like ten minutes later . . . you have to beat the system. It's not winning, it's definitely not winning, I'm probably losing along with missing information that's given, but I just have to get out. . . . You can't talk. . . . But I always tend to concentrate more on writing notes back and forth with Lauri This way . . . , I only suffer 1/4 of the time these other eggheads do (Pierce, pp. 135-36).

Throughout this study of school meaning, the participants described their school lives in relation to others, particularly peers. Whether considering academic standing or classroom behavior, participants constantly gauged themselves to their peers within the school environment. And the school environment was depicted by participants as movement from level to level and from class to class. Students move through school with peers; they pass with their peers from grade level to grade level and from class to class. During all this movement, Todd Christopher admits that class material is the least of what students learn:

It's interesting how different atmospheres and the presence of certain individual in the class can really determine how someone acts and feels in the room. . . . I see a lot of hurt in these halls. . . . kids struggling, being harassed, ridiculed, teased. . . . It appears that the courses in school aren't really the hardest part about it. And the material taught in classes is probably the least of what is learned within these walls. But what kids learn, is it helping them or pulling them apart? School is more of a war zone—a place to survive (Pierce, pp. 85-87).

Todd wonders whether school is helping students or pulling them apart. While school holds different meanings for each of the participants as evidenced in individual reflections, the question suggests one of the common themes within our study: school often holds not one meaning for students but often contradicting ones. Students behave one way in school, but their behavior frequently belies their personal feelings. For instance, the participants described their own classroom behavior, and then admitted that those actions did not reflect their per-

sonal feeling or motives. Acting one way and feeling another seems characteristic of classroom relationships among students and between students and teachers.

Inside classrooms, routines—however inadequate—are more important than mastery. Students generally do not feel particularly happy or contemptuous; they are docile. Studies on schooling have long held that schools are dull places that fail to feature much interesting intellectual work (Sizer, 1992a; Goodlad, 1984; Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985). In depicting four dominant elements of classroom life, Goodlad (1984) notes that the vehicle for teaching and learning is the total group, the teacher is the strategic center in this group, the norms of the group maintain the teacher's strategic role, and emotional tone might be described as "flat" (p. 108). Participants in this study continually confirmed these characterizations as excerpts from Tina's description of her school day indicate:

But the only reason that this math class is remotely fun for me is because we have all the class clowns in one room . . . , you have to be able to laugh, because that is all you end up doing. The teacher tries to teach us, and does an okay job...except that we have so many disruptions it is hard to learn anything at all. . . .the teacher continues with class, but when you have so many interruptions it is hard to keep up your concentration. . . . my mind continually wanders to other places. . . .at third period, right now, it is boring because we have health, but when we have gym it is great. . . .Fourth period is the most boring period of the day. That is because all I do is sit in a lecture for 42 minutes of history. . . . Fifth period is one that gives me the most stress of the entire day; it is probably because the class never completes anything. . . .people are always talking and complaining . . . it remains quite dull, and we hardly ever do anything fun (Pierce, p. 119-125).

While passivity might best characterize students' involvement in their classrooms, that does not mean they have not noticed what is happening—and not happening—within class-

room contexts. Traditionally, description of the school climate has been the almost exclusive domain of administrators and teachers, and although collegiality among administrators and teachers is crucial, schools are also the workplaces for students. Other researchers also suggest that school context has not escaped students' attention and that students' perspectives offer "more holistic understanding of complex school environments" (Phelan, Davidson, & Cao, p. 696). This study, in which participants examined and explained their own school as a workplace, started with the assumption that schools are highly-complex cultural settings and that meaning is socially constructed among individuals within those settings.

It seems that the flat or apparently neutral tone of high school classrooms is deceiving because it masks students' underlying individual feelings and energy exerted to keep up complicit appearances for their teachers and among peers. Keenly aware of their period-by-period charade, students do what they feel they must to get by within the school system and among their peers. Participants in this study corroborate Phelan, Davidson, & Cao's research that indicates "the most important aspect of school climate for students is the level of tension or ease underlying peer interactions" (p.702). Peer interactions include relationships between peer groups, levels of hostility or good will and openness between people of different backgrounds. Participants in the study acknowledged that they do work for school, but more than anything else, school seems to mean learning to work the school system or even trying to beat it. Students calculate and maintain their academic survival within school much more easily than their social survival among classrooms of peers; the latter requires moment-to-moment monitoring and adjustment.

Topics such as friends, sports, coaches, administrators, and parents barely appear in the study's data. For these particular participants at the particular moment of the study in their senior year, school meant constant negotiation and coordination of social requirements and academic appearances.

Going through the Motions

While peer interaction dominated the partici-

pants' descriptions of school and classroom life, those descriptions were strikingly devoid of references to self and/or learning in relation to school. Yet in discussing the reasons behind certain courses, participants seem to resent the lack of relevance of school to their current lives. On the off-chance that current classroom work might benefit them some day in their hypothetical futures, participants hardly saw that as justification for their attendance or attention in school as Todd explains:

... I've looked at school as being pointless and useless. . . . So there are some courses that I feel aren't for me. . . . And maybe I would benefit from other courses where I actually learn hands-on things, like Home Maintenance or a nutrition course where you actually get to do things as you're learning. I believe experiencing something is very important to allow you to grow (Pierce, p. 82).

Participants expressly valued opportunities for learning they considered "real life." School life and classroom work specifically seemed artificial and useless when compared to "real" issues and challenges outside the classroom. Sometimes, opportunity for real engagement and learning presented itself beyond the classroom walls, and despite the pressures and challenges from the school system itself or from other people in their lives, participants assertively explained their reasons for pursuing learning experiences outside of school. In their descriptions of learning that mattered to them, participants lacked the self-conscious preoccupation with the opinions of peers or teachers prevalent in other descriptions. Participants seemed to relish opportunities for what they saw as real learning and understanding. In Todd's case, he worked hard to propose and conduct an independent study of urban housing, and Courtney Hall fought with teachers and peers in defending her travel to Vietnam as a volunteer with Operation Smile in the middle of her team's field hockey season. The self-conscious caution participants adapted toward their academic and social survivals in school contrasted markedly with their self-assertive explanations about learning and issues that they considered worth pursuing.

In the few reflections about personal academic decisions and out-of-classroom experiences, the participants used terms like "individual" and "learning." Learning considered valuable related to participants' experiences with the world in general, the world outside high school and showed that students eagerly engage with experiences that they consider interesting and meaningful. The few descriptions of meaningful learning also suggest that school system structures themselves often thwart students' purposeful responsibility. Episodes of learning about life, others, and self emerged rarely during our study; but when they did, a sense of active, well-defined individuality bursts through participants' descriptions. Descriptions of self-selected, outside-of-school learning introduced a passion and assertiveness absolutely missing from the body of descriptions related to classroom learning.

Moving through the System and Getting By

Within the study, participants described school as the regulated reshuffling and movement of students in and out of classrooms. Seen over time and as a larger context, school is a delivery system that not only transports students from one classroom to another but from one school year to the next, from pre-kindergarten through college. Schools move students. Students paddle hard to staying afloat in school and go along with the system so as not be left behind by it. Keeping up with particular requirements of the system at its various levels seems to dominate students' thinking about school; students work to survive the system and progress through it. When senior status is conferred on students, the last year at Memorial High School serves as a launch pad to the college system. The commonly accepted purpose of each level of the school system, though, is delivering students to the next grade level. Each stage of school presents various social, academic or social/academic obstacles to students as Ric Kilpatrick and Lisa Starr indicate:

Ric: You didn't get grades in kindergarten, first, or second grades. Then, our system starts in third grade: "Oh, my God. I'm getting A's and B's now instead of 'satisfactory' and check marks and personal remarks." I started to fall behind and I

remember in fourth grade, I got a D in math. . . . I was like devastated (Pierce p. 105).

Lisa: At the end of the marking period, it comes to the point where: "Oh, the end of the marking period is here and I haven't done any work. I need to do something about it." They come to a point where they don't know any of this stuff. "What am I going to do now?" And that's when they rely back on cheating (p. 167).

The participants regarded fondly their elementary school years, and then explained that school became more stressful as they aged and their schoolwork started receiving grades. One way that students eventually handle academic stress is through the end-of-the-marking-period routinized panic and cheating detailed by Lisa. Emerging social pressures progressively overshadow students' concerns with academics and grades. As social cliques emerge later in elementary and middle school, happier, friendlier school experiences disappear from participants' descriptions of school.

Tina: In elementary school everybody was friends, and there were no cliques. Everyone was friends with everyone else. . . . Once we got to middle school [after five years in one of the districts three elementary schools], everyone was just dumped together and we all had to find ourselves again and make new identities just so everyone would know who we were. I thought that was really tough (Pierce, p. 127).

Courtney: School is like a playground . . . a place for fights. There are different crowds on the playground. You have the opportunity to have fun but don't always take advantage of it. The older you get, the more you can do fun stuff. But then, the older you get, school—like the playground—is a drag (p. 90).

Many students at Memorial High School proudly note the school's reputation for rigorous academic and athletic competition. However, the rigor depicted by the participants involved learning to survive within the system. The struggles and learning reported by participants

did not revolve around issues of course content or subject matter. "Beating the system" and "getting by" emerged as general themes describing what students do in and around school. In relation to learning, grades, and several other specific aspects of school life, the themes take added dimensions but still portray students' lives in school as efforts to either outsmart the system or stay afloat within it as Ric concedes: "I play a different role in just about all of them [classes]. I know that sounds sad, but in this school, I've learned it's the only way to get by. And believe me, I am *just* getting by" (Pierce, p. 114).

Moving in and out of Classrooms

What school seems to mean to students at Memorial High School is maintaining academic and social appearances. The participants described the rules and rites of passage from grade level to grade level within the system. Beating the system and trying to get by preoccupy students' efforts regarding the school system at large, and that is no less true within individual classrooms. In fact, moving into individual classroom settings seems to intensify students' self-consciousness and worried maintenance of outwardly complicit appearances with classroom teachers and peers—two very different and often competing forces for students' attention. Throughout this study, most of the participants' descriptions of school related to their lives inside classrooms, but getting to and from classes emerged as significant and distinct parts of students' school day.

The in-between class time is bracketed by waiting for the bell to ring in one class and entering into and starting a subsequent class. Whether they're traveling through the hallway and casually greeting or observing other students or deliberately meeting and talking with friends, the participants characterize as significant and distinctive their movement before, between, and after classes as Ty Francis explains:

At the start of the year I get my hallway patterns down, so I know exactly who walks what halls and when they walk them. This is the first step in making my school days fun and a more exciting place. . . .(Pierce, p. 135).

To see other students and be seen as well are important aspects of students' four-minute passage between classes. These hallway passings are vital moments with varying degrees of social function and weight. As a classroom teacher, I often asked students to speak with me after class, and when they started fidgeting and backing toward the door, I naively assumed they were worried about being late for their next class. Now, of course, I realize that the least of my students' worries was being late for their next class when I was monopolizing what students see as prime time, *their* time between classes to flirt, scout, meet, and converse with friends. Students usually walk to their next class with the same other person or two each day. In contrast to the 42 minutes spent in class with a random or master-schedule driven collection of peers, the passing period offers students opportunity to meet with friends and enjoy socializing by choice as Courtney and Ty indicate:

Courtney: Brrriinnng. . . the bell sounds, and I start my hell ascent on the stairway to Physics. My stair-climbing crew consists of Adrienne, Jerry, and Lauri... (Pierce, p. 94).

Ty: I then take an essential and crucial route to Social Sciences. This is important because I see pretty important people on this path, and all for different reasons. A student only has four minutes to accomplish a lot, so I use it to my benefit. . . . Talking to certain colleagues is so important to me that I sometimes skip things and trot a little fast down a hall just so I can see her or him (p. 139).

The participants accorded so much proportional detail within the study to the time between classes that it must be seen as significant time for students. With the same kind of self-conscious ceremony used to describe their entry into a class, students often approached the period's end like a NASA blast-off.

Ric: As the teacher slowly dwindles down his stories, so does the clock. I swear that every word that comes out of his mouth takes one minute to actually reach my ear.

. . . Alright, the bell rang (Pierce, p. 103-04).

Ty: When I hear and register the tone, I'm off to the races and out of that room (p. 139).

Lisa: Oh, wow, this class is almost over. There goes the 11:30 [warning] bell . . . next the 11:37 bell . . . alright, the 11:45 bell; we're outta here (p. 164).

Preoccupied with life at the moment, participants described what they did in school as moving from one 42-minute class to the next. The four-minute passing time between classes seems extremely significant, not just because it is a release from class but because students see the passage as their time. Time regulates students' movement as if each class were rounds in a game. Within the school day's eight 42-minute class periods, rounds of play are broken up with four-minute hallway passings.

Strung together, a series of 42-minute classes creates a feeling of school days that are hectic and haphazard. Yet analysis across the data reveals that within students' hectic school days classes are predictable and usually dull and barely connected to each other within the course of a day—let alone across a week, month, or marking period. The calendar cues students' lives throughout the school system at large while the clock cues the flow of students in and out of classrooms.

Passing periods string the school day together for students and make it cohere. Time outside of classrooms, whether during hallway passing or lunch, seems as essential as it is invigorating for students. Descriptions of in-school but out-of-the-classroom periods are lively compared to descriptions of in-classroom experiences. If students get together at all during the school day and enjoy time with peers whom they consider friends, it is during these sessions between classes.

Inside Classrooms

Once inside the classroom, students enact a class behavior that seems to have been invisibly scripted and rehearsed among students and to some extent with (or in spite of) the teacher. Participants described the various ways teach-

ers and students together constitute their 42 minutes. Participants did not seem to notice or care about the purposes behind or connections among various classes. Hardly unique, Memorial's system of eight, 42-minute class periods creates what Sizer (1992b) calls "the cumulative intellectual chaos" of the American high school day (p. 103). Goodlad (1984) further says the "never-ending movement of students and teachers from class to class" prohibits teachers and individual students from developing stable, mutually supportive relationships (p. 112). Again and again and still, the very structure and organization of the high school day foils opportunities for intellectual as well as emotional support and development among students and their teachers.

What ran consistently through the participants' descriptions of their classes was the sense that students tacitly form a kind of web among themselves determining the class affect or attitude. While this class disposition is flavored by the collective, students seem to acquiesce to dominant students regarding the nature all overt class interactions. Individual strains within and upon members of the class dictate a tacit code of appropriate student behavior in relation to other students, the teacher, and the subject matter. Powell, Farrar, and Cohen (1985) describe the tacit treaties formed between students and teachers, an unarticulated but nevertheless *de facto* system of rules for minimum expectations in the classroom. Some treaties are formal and explicit; most lack any formal development between students and teacher, but the less explicit treaties are no less powerful (p. 68). Classroom treaties hinge on the students' and teacher's interest in engagement with learning or avoiding learning. Most classroom bargains combine simultaneous impulses to avoid and engage, and the students' and teacher's preferences are "mixed and changeable" (p. 70).

Useful as these treaties are in explaining classroom relationships, participants suggested that the strongest, tacit pacts exist among students themselves regarding conduct in a particular with a given teacher. In a relatively small school like Memorial, most of the students have been attending classes with the same students for as many as twelve years and regard their peers

with familiar predictability. The individual teacher can influence the tone of the classroom, but the collection of students within particular classrooms determines compliance or rejection of the teacher's agenda. The teacher is a player in the classroom, but the web of students in class collectively and tacitly interprets and arbitrates the treaties regarding interaction and behavior.

A teacher's reputation is an important factor in students' acceptance, approval or disapproval of individual teachers and is based on common lore among students. For instance, students actually know most of the teachers at Memorial or at least feel they know them by reputation. Before entering a teacher's class for the first time and especially by senior year, students know what to expect and how to act in certain teachers' classes. The participants did not express comfort with such predeterminations but resignation to the "way it is" as Todd indicates:

I'll be in a class and depending upon the teacher . . . , the kids will sit there giving the utmost respect to that teacher. Then the same kids will go into another class, and just because it's totally the teacher, they'll be like flying off the wall. . . . But I've even noticed the class as a whole . . . will be rowdy with certain teachers. Nobody would take it seriously. But if you took the same class and go to another teacher's class, they just sit there (Pierce, p. 197).

Participants explained that students can forecast the nature of individual classrooms based partly on the teachers but mostly on the particular collection of students within the class. Just which students comprise a classroom is the most significant determinant of how a class period will run. Subject matter and learning were discussed rarely in participants' descriptions of school life, and subject designations like "math" or "history" seemed to be used merely as referents to particular classes.

From class to class, participants explained how students face differences in teachers' styles and expectations. Such differences among teachers seem to annoy students with mixed messages about academic standards, rewards, and pun-

ishments. So while participants complained about the lack of varied school routines to keep their interest, they also indicated that students want to know what to expect from their teachers and what their teachers expect from them as suggested by Ty:

Kids think: "I'll be here for a year; this is your job. You just teach. . . . I'll be in and out of the class. . . . I really don't give two shits about this teacher. We just want you to give us the work" (Pierce, p. 200).

Participants infrequently expressed any sense of control or responsibility over their own classroom conduct—socially or academically. If classroom peers hold the key for students' school and classroom social survival, then teachers figure in students' academic survival. Participants suggested that students want consistently prescribed and applied rules and behavior from their teachers.

Aware of teachers' efforts to teach and manage within their classes, Ty indicated that students are also aware of teachers' trying to achieve or maintain status within the school district, within the high school, and among peers and students and said, "It seems like teachers come in different categories; it's like the "The Young and the Restless," "The Old and the Hip," and "The Old and the Hopeless" (Pierce, p. 201). Teachers classified as "young and restless" were new to the high school and preoccupied with their own career establishment and "fitting in" around the school and with students to relate well with students. "Old and hip" teachers do not try to fit in; the characterization implies professional and personal maturity as well as an ease in relating to and understanding students. "Old and hopeless" connotes teachers' longevity within the school system and apparent indifference towards students.

As described by participants, students deal with their teachers much more than they deal with subject matter. Understanding a teacher's reputation seems key to students' sense of academic survival. According to this study, understanding "how a teacher is" is a part of students' academic repertoire; estimation of a teacher is an academic skill and often seems to constitute engagement with subject matter. Conceding that

teachers must deliver subject matter to their students, the participants suggested that some teachers are willing to mingle subject matter with interesting delivery styles and relaxed work arrangements in class.

Todd: Now in this class, our teacher has great control over everyone and he has shown that since day one. He really doesn't take any crap. It seems that most people feel comfortable in that they are able to speak out and say what they feel (Pierce, p. 83).

Tina: I think if you like the teacher, you pay attention more and you'll try to behave and listen and learn and make the teacher recognize that you know what you're doing; you want to impress them (p.123).

Generally, teachers were described in terms of how they conducted their classes. Motivated by kindness or pragmatics of academic survival, students seem interested in saving face with teachers. So despite the importance of a teacher's relationship with a class at large, individual students see the practical value in staying on a teacher's "good side" and ensuring that a teacher recognizes individual student cooperation in the form of polite appearances and attitudes.

Students in Classrooms

The variety of students in a class can be a favorable aspect of the class or the very cause of stress and discomfort. Early in our study, the participants noted how other students and they themselves acted differently from class to class as indicated by these observations. Todd's experiences suggest how inhibited he felt in one classroom and how diminished the teacher's role can be:

In this class, I'm probably the most quiet than in any other class. . . . some of the students in my class utterly disgust me. . . . And this turns me off from the class. I can't concentrate like I should, and I really feel defenseless. I know other students share the same feelings. . . . there is a variation of "groups" represented here. But it seems that when certain kids get together they change and act differently. . . . No one

seems comfortable, and most of the kids are negative about learning so they get on the poor teacher's back. . . . The teacher is really unaware of most of what is going on. I feel he puts up with too much (Pierce, pp.84-85).

Ty: I talk and can still do my work, but it's funny; I get mad at my friends sometimes....I don't sit near those guys. There's like 30 of them; they're all my friends. And the minute that bell rings, I go: "Whoop!" and walk out together laughing. But for 42 minutes I say to myself: "I can't because I'll get caught in the web and I'll be done" (p. 143).

The term "web" is useful because it suggests the intricate connections among students in particular classrooms; the web can be as attractive as it is treacherous to students within a class. Ty's description suggests how complicated and important classroom social webs are to students. Both Todd's and Ty's descriptions show how—even as they deliberately avoid direct involvement with the web—students cannot seem to avoid entanglement and preoccupation with their peers in class.

Individual strands compose the entire web, yet its construction and support rely on the group's collusion. Dominant students' dispositions influence the disposition of the classroom web. Strands in the web can be positive, negative, or almost neutral. Regardless of its disposition, the web influences students into silence, mayhem, or politeness. The observable conduct of the class at large reveals nothing of the students' individual personal feelings that underlie their evident classroom behavior.

The Web of Students

Two factors seem to determine the conduct of a class. The obvious factor is the relationship between a particular teacher and the collective group of students assigned to the class. In the case of participants' experience at Memorial High School, the relationship between teacher and class seems predetermined before students started a particular course, with a slight and fleeting opportunity for new negotiation early in the course.

The other and clearly stronger determinant of classroom conduct, turned up repeatedly in participants' descriptions of their experiences. An invisible aspect of classroom life, the ethos generated within the classroom collective of students forms a most influential life of its own and binds students into a kind of web. Some combinations of students form friendly webs that work well together and with their classroom teacher. Combinations of students can form hospitable, hostile, or indifferent webs. Students are bound by the web of peers within classrooms, and all class interaction—academic and/or social—relies on the web's disposition as Ty explains:

...my English class, I just sit back and watch it go. The students are tough and strong, so I don't really use my social abilities in this class because it's never the time or place for it (Pierce, p. 140).

These classroom webs dictate not only students' engagement with each other but with individual teachers and course content. During each class period, students at Memorial High work simultaneously at and within the social webbing that demands students' participation, complicity, or toleration. Students are tugged at and strained by these classroom collections of their peers, but no one breaks the behavior code among peers within a given teacher's class.

Just who happens to be in a given class seems more important to students than any other factor. My own English 12 class provided us with a case study since two of the participants were in this class of 28 students. On the first day of class, the students surveyed each other and predicted we were "all in trouble" because of the particular combinations of students in the class. As the teacher, I really did not understand my students' premonitions. As the teacher, I was not looking at the 28 faces gathered in fourth period the same way that the students were seeing themselves—and regarding me, their teacher.

Our study provided useful (and sometimes painful) access to students' perspectives on how the web of class interactions reverberates among students and creates the classroom context. What struck me as a classroom teacher lis-

tening to the participants was how incidental the teacher is to the ethos among students; the teacher's effect on class conduct seems insignificant once the class membership establishes its interpretation of the class patterns of social/academic behavior. Several of the participants alluded to the helplessness they themselves often felt to affect classroom interactions as Todd explains:

For me I know it has always been difficult to take criticism and that's what students open themselves up to when they speak out and express their true feelings. So as a result, we have classrooms full of tension, hurt, and so many defenseless students. . . . it's below the surface.... Different personalities, different backgrounds, different views, different attitudes—all thrown together and unfortunately they clash and clash hard (Pierce, p. 212).

Participants indicated that there are times when students are immobilized by the social constraints of the class and must deny personal instincts to participate in the class or tell other students how they actually feel. Individual inclinations aside, students behave in ways that insure their social survival. To rebel against peers or extract oneself from the class web would be social suicide. Farrell (1990) explains that adults' notions of adaptive behaviors can seem maladaptive to adolescents. Peers give adolescents more reinforcement, are their social life, give them knowledge of sexuality and access to sex, and counsel them. Peers learn self-expression and social interaction techniques from each other. Alienating peers would be maladaptive in an adolescent culture such as the high school classroom (p. 55). Once the strands of the class web are in place, no student or teacher has much power to alter the disposition of the mass.

The dispositions of classroom webs are never neutral. The neutral or boring tones created in classrooms were generally attributed to the teacher or the subject. Throughout the study, the participants rarely described curricular engagement which leads me to believe that the curriculum is barely perceived by students—or certainly not perceived as it is by teachers and administrators. The participants did not talk

much about how their engagement with content or learning in collaborative groups, but they did describe how they felt being in classes with certain other students.

Students and School Meaning

Students seem to understand well and early in their careers how the school system is designed to move them from grade level to grade level and then off to college. One stressor within school life for students relates to their hopes for graduating out of the system. Throughout their years in high school, students worry about grades, doing well on standardized tests, and being accepted to colleges. Staying afloat within this system is a dull yet constant strain on students.

Yet the system-related stress students experience pales in comparison with the daily intensity of individual classroom life and the strains of peer interaction within the classroom. In school, individual classrooms are hothouses of student life where—depending on particular combinations of environmental conditions—students potentially blossom, merely survive, choke, or wither. The classroom can breed intensely positive, negative, or indifferent environments, and students' peers are the most significant determinants of classroom environment.

Gathered around peers, a classroom teacher, and—to a lesser extent—subject matter, students in classrooms strike poses that must delicately or rudely assert their membership among peers above all else.

All students worry about safety and comfort among their peers. In a suburban school like Memorial, student angst seems more related to emotional risk among peers than to the physical dangers faced by students in other settings. And while Memorial students seem relatively safe from the threat of gangs and knives, they still report intense anxiety related to peers within their classes. I do not intend to trivialize the violent, anxious existence of so many students in American high schools; but regardless of setting, peers are the most significant aspect of school life for students. Whether they potentially wield knives or insults, whether they exist in homogeneous or heterogeneous settings, urban

or suburban environments—students influence and threaten each other.

Participants in this study worried more about keeping up appearances for the other students in their classes than in keeping up appearances for their teachers or learning classroom material. Busy as the participants reported being during their school days, they rarely reported being busy learning content-related material in classrooms.

Sizer (1992b) points out, “Being busy is not the same as being involved, a point some teachers miss. . . . ‘Working’ means working the mind. . . . One condition for getting a student to be a worker is catching her attention, enticing her to concentrate, to focus, to puzzle, to persist” (p. 87). Traditional classroom settings and academic subjects provide few opportunities for students to *do* things and actively engage in their learning (Stinson, 1993; Goodlad, 1984). The study participants did not complain about “traditional classroom” arrangements per se, but their descriptions created classroom settings that have very little to do with learning. Learning does not seem to be part of what school meant to the students who participated in this study.

Students work hard at maintaining their survival in the academic system as well as the social system of school, and both academic and social factors comprise the students’ school agendas. Within classrooms, a swirl of various student agendas congeal around a web tacitly created by its student membership; the web dictates conduct of students in classrooms and might accommodate, confound, or ignore teachers’ classroom agendas. The intersection of the students’ and teachers’ agendas might be where we would expect to find learning or some kind of engagement with curriculum, but that does not seem to be the case. The students’ and the teachers’ agendas seem to be more separate than they are competing. Students and teachers operate within the classroom vacuum and manage to maintain their respective agendas, but they understand very little about what lies between the lines.

What Do We Want School to Mean?

Created by peers and to some extent the teacher,

the classroom is a site of students’ social negotiation and compromise and often academic indifference or frustration. When academics did emerge, the participants complained about not being able to “get a word in edgewise” in history classes, not seeing any real-life significance to math, and detecting contradictions in their English teachers’ advice. The participants’ complaints are not complaints about learning, but about the conditions of classrooms.

In fact, students do seem eager to learn and care; some examples of important learning experiences bubbled up through the data—but they tended to be experiences outside the classroom. That the participants pursued experiences beyond classroom walls attests to students’ desires to learn and learn in ways that are personal, active, and purposeful. Their experiences also suggest that the classroom walls are often, themselves, impediments to important learning.

In negotiating their movement through individual classrooms and the school system, the participants explained the importance of learning to tolerate or beating the system in order to survive. In the name of subject matter and effective curriculum delivery, the eight-period school day conspires against thoughtful learning as it shuffles students in and out of classrooms where they are socially and academically pitted against each other rather than provoked into learning. A sense of social and academic survival motivates students through school, not a quest for recognition or learning. Is this the best we can do? Is that what we want our schools to mean?

While specific subjects or the stuff of curriculum seems to matter very little to students, the teacher does seem to have a hand in shaping students’ school experiences. Students in school orbit from class to class as they contain much of their interest and interaction to peers within that particular sphere. Students pass through individual teachers’ classrooms, and those teachers’ influences can cast various shadows and light on students and their school experiences.

Claiming to understand that contexts as well as knowledge itself are socially constructed, we

continue to design our schools and classrooms that fly in the face of our supposed wisdom and even common sense. We teachers continue to host students in our classrooms in ways that require us to “manage” them around ourselves and our subject matter centerpieces. These traditional arrangements do not give students very much to do other than busily spin their social webs around each other for each class period—in addition to or instead of tending to teachers’ explicit classroom agendas.

As teachers, we must engage students in authentic work in our classrooms—not try merely to counter or overpower their social tendencies with academic tasks. For instance, some collaborative learning models accommodate the teachers’ and students’ social and academic agendas. We must consider the people our students are and the learning we mean to sponsor in rearranging our classrooms. We cannot escape the political nature of our work as teachers any more than we can deny that students are telling us that classrooms can be intensely uncomfortable, boring, and rarely the sites of engagement or learning.

Professionally accepting our teaching responsibilities means that we must not only listen to what our students are telling us about our classrooms, but we must also take action and *do* something about the arrangements of our classrooms. In tending to our classroom in traditional ways, we miss opportunities to know and encourage our students’ academic and personal growth. If we want students to do more than show up in our classrooms for 42 minutes and dwell on each other, we must re-examine and re-form the traditional roles of teacher and student.

Further examining the role of teacher, Metz (1993) describes the peculiar double-bind of teachers’ authority within schools and classrooms by saying: “To be dependent on clients who are children for the accomplishment of one’s own success is both technologically paradoxical and socially demeaning” (p. 105). Teachers’ work is always paradoxical because it consists of affecting students, upon whom we are dependent for the actual success of our work as well as the evidence of that success, at the same time we are charged with directing and

controlling them. Metz acknowledges that seeing teachers as dependent on their students “runs against the grain of both society in general and education in particular,” but the view jibes with the insights and intuitions of teachers in her study (p. 133). Students and teachers both rely on clusters of students within classrooms for approval and satisfaction in school. What students and teachers share during their school day is this period-by-period reliance on particular webs of student influence, and it tends to be a constricting rather than liberating force.

Curtailling this arrangement of dependence is critically important if we intend to help students grow and develop—and if we, as teachers, are to grow and develop as well. Odell (1990) says that given teachers’ own experiences as students and training as teachers, it is no wonder our task is difficult. Professional training that emphasizes what *teachers do* when they plan a class or design a classroom activity does not help us focus on what *students do* as they attempt construction of their own meaning (p. 222).

Rather than emphasizing the mechanisms of education and delivering to students what teachers know, school should focus on student learning and use knowledge about learning, teaching, and growing up. In other words, we teachers should use what we know about the students with whom we work with in an effort to help them learn and grow instead of following a prescribed, single-subject classroom script. So how do we form learning partnerships with our students? Huberman (1993) says that in making the case “for the importance of intrinsically interesting learning tasks for children, we might spend a moment, too, on the value of intrinsically interesting instructional situations for classroom teachers. It may even be the case that the two [what is interesting to students and what is interesting to teachers] are related in important ways” (p. 22).

As teachers, we wrongly assume some kind of cognitive cohesion within our classrooms and throughout students’ school days. The participants in my study described little in the way of what I consider learning, engagement with curriculum, or connection among the parts of their

school days. For example, one day after reading some of the papers my students had written for health class, I asked them why they didn't apply what they knew from English class about simple writing mechanics, and Courtney told me that English teachers are the only ones who care about those things and that nobody else knows the difference. When I suggested that she *knew* the difference, Courtney explained it wasn't "worth the trouble to proofread a research paper for health class; they [the teachers] don't know the difference."

What is significant here is that, as an English teacher, I expected my students to "transfer" or carry their learning over from class period to class period, from one day of class to the next, from one school year to the following year, to draw on knowledge as needed in other classes and aspects of their lives. I realize I am not alone in this assumption about how students should store and appropriate learning. Many teachers rely on what Freire (1988) calls the "banking concept" of education where students are expected to draw on deposited information at some future date. Courtney bluntly told me there was no need to transfer English-class knowledge to her health paper. Throughout this study, participants provided scant evidence that students draw on previous classroom knowledge from class to class, year to year, or across disciplines. As traditionally constructed, students' school days are full of curriculum connections that educators imply and assume. For students, school is a system of crossed or irrelevant academic connections.

Students cannot afford to enter a fast-paced, information-driven world that is more diverse and less predictable than before as the passive recipients of facts or as socially unskilled or uncaring people. Cooperative learning approaches offer alternative classroom arrangements to the traditional teacher-as-transmitter classroom model. Cooperative learning is variously described and practiced, but principally promotes face-to-face interaction, individual accountability, positive interdependence, and group processing among learners.

Acknowledging that both teacher and students have distinct classroom agendas is an important first step. Locating the intersection of a class-

room teacher's and students' agendas seems like a way for teachers and students to share inquiry and work. According to Johnson and Johnson (2003), studies of cooperative learning show that cooperative efforts promote more positive cross-ethnic relationships and more effort to achieve than competitive or individualistic efforts (p. 102). Given the vitality of peer influence among adolescents, it seems imperative that educators consider how to harness positively such influences in classrooms—not just in hope of students' increased engagement with content but in hopes of their healthier engagement with each other.

However, if left unsupported in their local settings by members of the school community, teachers and students will find their restructuring efforts futile. If the school community does not support school and classroom restructuring for the sake of encouraging learning, a teacher working with rotations of students cannot succeed, and students have no incentive to change themselves or the system of schooling. Even if only part of the school makes its move toward restructuring, that move must be sanctioned and supported by the school community. The National Research Council (2000) argues for an integrated alignment of four perspectives on the design of learning—a learner-centered perspective, a knowledge-centered perspective, an assessment perspective, and a perspective that promotes a sense of community (p. 154). In order to integrate these distinct yet complementary perspectives, deliberate collaborative strategies for learning within classrooms seem especially promising for restructuring secondary classrooms and curriculum.

Summary

Conditioned by traditional and predictable classroom arrangements, students busy themselves maintaining appropriate appearances for their teachers and especially for their peers in classrooms. Students conduct double-duty in individual classrooms to meet both their teachers' and classmates' agendas. Teachers, too, seem conditioned by traditional, predictable school system arrangements. But teachers working with their students seem to have the unique—and to date, largely unrealized—power and responsibility to reinvent or realign

classroom arrangements to support engaged learning. Arranging learning or allowing for learning in school that is more real life than school life holds particular promise. This study acknowledged that better teaching practice—or for that matter, *any* teaching practice—does not reside within individuals but is constituted with others.

Because students in the study indicated that classroom life can have so little to do with specific subjects or learning how to learn among other people, classroom teachers seem to hold important keys to unlocking classrooms as sites of student accommodation to sites of active and even enjoyable accomplishment. Those of us who care about adolescents and their learning must boldly acknowledge the boredom and purposelessness that continue to characterize life for students in secondary classrooms. We must work ferociously hard to construct classrooms that support a variety of students who are actively engaged with each other, their teachers, and subject matters. We must deliberately explain to our students what and how we expect them to learn in our classrooms then actively join with them in the inquiry. By explicitly redirecting the web of student interaction in classrooms around curricular goals, teachers just might help reconstruct classrooms as contexts where students can make useful, meaningful learning for themselves.

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