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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Identity and the Pursuit of School Success
Understandings of Intelligence and Effort in Three High Schools

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in

Sociology

by

Lisa Michele Nunn

Committee in charge:

Professor Amy J. Binder, Chair
Professor John H. Evans, Co-Chair
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Professor Akos Rona-Tas

2009

The Dissertation of Lisa Michele Nunn is approved, and it is acceptable in quality

and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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University of California, San Diego

2009

For Garrett,
to whom I owe all my happiness and success

And at the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

—T.S. ELIOT

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

Alt High	Alternative High
AP	Advanced Placement
API	Academic Performance Index
ASB	Associated Student Body
AVID	Advancement Via Individual Determination
CA	California
Comp High	Comprehensive High
CST	California Standards Test
CSU	California State University
ECH	Elite Charter High
EQ	Emotional (Intelligence) Quotient
GPA	Grade Point Average
HS	High School
IT	Information Technology
IQ	Intelligence Quotient
SARC	School Accountability Report Card
SAT	Standardized Achievement Test (formerly: Standardized Aptitude Test)
SES	Socioeconomic Status
SSR	Silent Sustained Reading
UC	University of California

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Identity and the Pursuit of School Success
Understandings of Intelligence and Effort in Three High Schools

by

Lisa Michele Nunn

Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

University of California, San Diego, 2009

Professor Amy J. Binder, Chair
Professor John H. Evans, Co-Chair

A great deal of sociological literature seeks to understand how and why students pursue—and achieve—school success differently. To further our understanding of inequality in achievement, this dissertation investigates students' beliefs about what it takes to succeed in school. Through a comparison of three high schools in California, I examine the ways in which understandings of school success differ across the three school sites. While I find that students articulate some combination of effort and intelligence in their explanations of what school success entails, I also find that each high school in the study fosters a distinct, local understanding of the relationship among intelligence, effort, and school success.

I identify two cultural schemas that are relevant to school success: the Effort Schema and the Intelligence Schema. Following a recent literature stream in organization theory, I demonstrate that each of the three schools has adapted and modified these two cultural schemas differently, to fit the circumstances and the sensibilities of the actors in the local school organization. Thus each of the three schools has its own local beliefs about school success. I argue that these local school beliefs serve to reinforce and perpetuate existing inequalities in higher education.

Intersecting organization theory with symbolic interaction theory enables us to see how these local beliefs about school success have consequences for students' sense of self. I focus on an aspect of self that I call "success identity." Students construct their success identities in the context of their local school environments. Their school's local understanding of what it takes to succeed becomes a powerful framework for individual students' understandings of their own school success. However, students do not passively adopt these ideas into their identities, they also adapt and modify them to fit their own sensibilities.

This dissertation investigates three levels of culture's multidimensionality: 1. Society shared cultural schemas; 2. Organizations' local modifications of those cultural schemas; and 3. Individuals' identity construction vis-à-vis those locally modified versions of cultural schemas. My research shows how both schools (organizations) and students (individuals) refine and adapt cultural ideas that are passed down to them from above.

PART I

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

A student's success in high school has powerful consequences for her future. School assessments such as grades on report cards, teacher evaluations, and scores on standardized exams matter for a student's prospects in higher education and the world of work (Brewer, Eide, and Ehrenberg 1999; Lemann 1999; Massey, Charles, Lundy, and Fischer 2003; McFarland 2006; Mehan, Hertweck, and Meihls 1985; Oakes 1985; Rosenbaum and Binder 1997; Rosenbaum 2001; Warren, Grodsky, and Lee 2008). On one hand, research shows that social class plays an important role in students' school success by affecting students' access to resources and encouragement for academics. Social class differences tend to advantage students from wealthier backgrounds and disadvantage students from poorer backgrounds through a variety of mechanisms including family attitudes toward education (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Cookson and Persell 1985; Lareau 1989; Lareau 2003; Legault, Green-Demers, and Pelletier 2006); neighborhood facilities/resources (Condron and Roscigno 2003; Devine 1996; Kozol 2005; Wells and Crain 1997); summer vacation learning opportunities (Alexander, Entwisle, and Thompson 1987; Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson 2007; Burkam, Ready, Lee, and Logerfo 2004; Chin and Phillips 2004; Heyns 1978); as well as strictly financial resources, such as the ability to hire tutors and have home internet access (Golden 2006; Kozol 1991; Sacks 2007). On the other hand, however, school success is

enacted through the bodies of the students themselves, therefore it is important to know about students' own beliefs and understandings of school success if we want a thorough understanding of how students pursue it.

Much of what we know about students' beliefs on this topic revolves around the attitudes of students who actively "resist" school, a topic discussed in greater detail later in this Chapter. Research on school resistance focuses on ethnic and racial minority students (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Cook and Ludwig 1998; Downey, Ainsworth, and Qian 2009; Farkas, Lleras, and Maczuga 2002; Fordham and Ogbu 1987; Michelson 1990) and lower class students (MacLeod 1987; Tyson, Darity, and Castellino 2005; Willis 1977) who are theorized to avoid school success for fear that their peers will ridicule them. While this research has produced a wealth of knowledge about some students' oppositional attitudes to school, we know very little about the beliefs of students who *accept* school, students who are white, minority, poorer, and richer alike.

Outside of academic scholarship, popular beliefs of education in the US tend to revolve around the potential for schools to be a Great Equalizer, meaning that people are believed to be able to overcome social disadvantages by acquiring an education (Hochschild 1995; Hochschild and Scovronick 2003; Johnson 2006; Sacks 2007). Schools are believed to be mechanisms that equalize opportunities for Americans, allowing everyone to compete on a level playing field. Johnson (2006) demonstrates that parents tend to affirm this belief even as they acknowledge wide disparity in the

education offered at schools in higher and lower income neighborhoods within their own cities.

Students, as actors, are located at this awkward intersection of the Great Equalizer ideal and the reality of unequal distribution of educational goods across schools. Further, students themselves are the agents who pursue school success within their own school contexts (Carbonaro 2005). Yet we know very little about students' own perceptions of school success and what they believe matters for attaining it. This dissertation investigates precisely that: students' beliefs about school success. This dissertation also interrogates how students construct self-identities vis-à-vis their understandings of how school success can be achieved. My research on identity and the pursuit of school success offers important insights into how our unequal opportunity structure of education looks and feels to those who are acting within its constraints. It offers insights into the ways in which beliefs about school success not only affect students' futures, but also affect their sense of self.

What We Can Expect Students to Believe Lies at the Heart of School Success

In line with the popular belief that schools function as the Great Equalizer is what Hochschild (1995) calls "American Dream Ideology", which she argues is a widely held cultural belief in the United States that posits that hard work and natural talent bring success. A study by Brint, Contreras, and Matthews (2001) shows that elementary schools give socialization messages to students that emphasize effort and hard work as part of the hidden curriculum. Thus, we might expect students to believe

that effort is the key to school success. Indeed, research shows that students' effort contributes to their academic achievement (Carbonaro 2005; Marks 2000; Natriello and McDill 1986), and that teachers explicitly factor students' effort into the grades that they assign (Brookhart 1993; Cizek, Fitzgerald, and Rachor 1995; Gullickson 1985; Stiggins, Frisbie, and Griswold 1989). However, Kelly (2008) closely investigates whether teachers use grades to reward effort and finds that the middle school English teachers in his sample do adjust their grades based on students' effort, but only for effort behaviors which are "closely related" to growth in achievement, since the main use of grades is to reward mastery of material, i.e. achievement (2008:32). Nonetheless, we might still expect students to believe that effort is a critical ingredient for school success.

As evidence of this, the *New York Times* recently reported on college students' expectations that if they "work hard" in a course, then they are entitled to an A or at least a B. Meanwhile, professors say that they grade exams and papers on content alone, and express irritation over students "haggling" for better grades simply because they feel they tried their best (Roosevelt 2009). In the scholarly literature there is a consensus that effort is indeed important to school success; what is contested is *how much* it matters.

Effort is only part of success, however. Existing scholarship on effort contrasts hard work with mastery of material as two separate elements in teachers' formulas for grades. Mastery of material requires cognitive ability. According to Hochschild's articulation of American Dream Ideology, natural talent, such as intelligence, is also

means to success in addition to hard work. Academic success is often popularly understood as at least partly—and sometimes largely—dependent on a student's intellectual abilities (Brody 1992; Gould 1981; Jensen 1980; Richardson and Bradley 2005; Zenderland 1998). Therefore, we might also expect students to believe that cognitive talent is the key to school success.

Intelligence is not a straightforward concept. Scholars and experts have never enjoyed consensus on the definition of intelligence, nor is there agreement over what exactly intelligence tests actually measure (Detterman and Sternberg 1986; Mackintosh 1998; Richardson 2002; Sternberg 1996). Definitions of intelligence and their relationship to IQ tests are taken up in detail in Appendix A. Here I would like to emphasize that despite scholarly disagreement over what intelligence is, it remains widely recognized as an aspect of one's personhood. In popular parlance it is sometimes described as a trait, perhaps biologically determined. Other times it is described as a talent or skill that can be honed with practice. Some view it as a combination of the two (Gardner 1983; Herrnstein and Murray 1994). In all cases, intelligence is understood as something that we can recognize in others.

Intelligence is also something which we recognize in ourselves (Guay, Marsh, and Boivin 2003; Marsh, Byrne, and Yeung 1999). Importantly, it is better to have more intelligence than less. Low intelligence, in the popular mind, is associated with inadequacy, incompetence, and limited horizons (Gould 1981; Mehan, Hertweck, and Meihls 1985; Mercer 1974; Zenderland 1998). High intelligence, on the other hand, is associated with unlimited potential for success, and opinions worthy of respect. Thus,

how much intelligence we see in ourselves is highly consequential to our sense of self; it influences how we present ourselves to others and the types of pursuits we believe are appropriate for us in life (Blumer 1969; Dweck 2000; Goffman 1959; Holstein and Gubrium 2003; Mead 1934; Mehan, Hubbard, Villanueva, and Lintz 1996). Intelligence is an important aspect of self-identity, and one that is highly relevant to school success.

This dissertation investigates students' perceptions of the role that intelligence and effort play in school success. Scholarly debates over the definition of intelligence, and the relationship between those scholarly debates and students' on-the-ground definitions of intelligence are spelled out in Appendix A. The dissertation focuses instead on beliefs about intelligence, effort, and school success that are pervasive in local school environments. The research investigates how individual students negotiate their self-identities against those local beliefs. The project takes student self-identity as a meaningful and highly consequential aspect of both academic success and life success beyond high school.

Sociological Literature on Student Identity and School Success

Sociologists have been concerned with student identity primarily on two fronts. The first is how student identity affects individuals' academic outcomes, and therefore influences future life trajectories. The second is how student identity is shaped and reinforced by practices of the school. Regarding the first concern, there are many identities which scholars have found to be relevant to school success, including peer

status, such as being a seen as a nerd, jock, social isolate, etc. (Eder, Evans, and Parker 1995; Milner 2004), and gender identity (Rolon-Dow 2004; Sadker and Sadker 1994; Thorne 1993). Further, there is a long running debate over whether and how racial/ethnic identity and class identity contradict school ideology in a way that makes students feel that they must not pursue scholastic success in order to be authentic in their ethnic or social class membership (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Downey, Ainsworth, and Qian 2009; Flores-Gonzales 1999; Fordham and Ogbu 1987; MacLeod 1987; Matute-Bianchi 1986; Tyson, Darity, and Castellino 2005; Willis 1977). Often referred to as the "school resistance" debate, this research focuses on whether student peer groups embody cultural attitudes which are opposed to school success. For example Fordham and Ogbu (1987) find that African-American students avoid good grades in order to avoid peer sanctions for "acting white." This line of research includes class-based resistance to school success as well as race/ethnicity-based resistance to school success. Importantly, both sides of the debate take student identity as a critical factor for scholastic achievement, though racial/ethnic and class identities do not correspond to a student's intellectual ability to achieve in school; rather racial/ethnic and class identity is found to matter by influencing a student's motivation to pursue school success, e.g. her effort.

Regarding the second concern, a wealth of sociological literature demonstrates that school environments and school practices/policies influence both students' perceptions of themselves as competent students (identity) as well as their academic outcomes. This happens largely through teacher expectations and teachers' behavior

toward students (Diamond, Randolph, and Spillane 2004; Garcia and Guerra 2004; Oakes 1985; Rist 1970; Wortham 2006). However, institutional constraints often guide teachers' behavior, such as school policies to invest in students who are most likely to keep the school's achievement test scores high (Katz 1999); thus teacher expectations can not be seen simply as personal preferences (e.g. racism); they are part of the larger organizational structure of schools. Curriculum tracking is another organizational practice which has profound consequences on how students see their place in the world as high or low achievers, as well as being consequential to future academic opportunities (Hallinan 1994; Oakes 1985; Oakes, Gamoran, and Page 1992; Rosenbaum 1976; Tach and Farkas 2006).

The literature makes it clear that the ways in which school organizations treat students is crucially important, both at the level of school policies and the level of teacher interaction (Cohen 2000). This extensive body of research takes student identity as a critical dimension of the experience of schooling and as consequential to academic success. Curiously, these studies do not focus discretely on an identity of academic ability. The central activity of school is ostensibly to have students *learn*, to use their cognitive abilities to master material and gain academic skills. One might expect the most important identity for academic success to be an identity of intellectual ability.

Mehan, Hubbard, and Villanueva (1994) do take up the question of student identities regarding academic ability as the authors contribute to both the school resistance debate and the literature on curriculum tracking. The authors find that school

environment can help foster an "academic identity" in students whose class position and ethnic membership might otherwise draw them away from the pursuit of school success. Their research finds that students who participated in their high school Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program were able to "develop a critical consciousness about their educational and occupational futures" (1994:91). Mehan and his colleagues describe this critical consciousness as an "academic identity." Students who develop this academic identity are able to successfully pursue academic achievement by navigating the institutional structure of school more effectively. AVID coaches racial and ethnic minority students who score promisingly on standardized tests to see themselves as entitled to advanced curricula and entitled to college futures.

Mehan's and colleagues' research demonstrates the importance of both student identity and school structure on academic success. However, again, the central activity of school is ostensibly to have students *learn*, to use their cognitive abilities to master material. While the notion of academic identity is certainly critical for students to negotiate the institutional demands of school, Mehan's and colleagues' understanding of academic identity rests on an assumption that students only need to *want* to succeed in school in order to become high achievers; they only have to *try hard*. Their concept of academic identity assumes that students can see themselves as intellectually capable of scholastic achievement. Yet it is precisely that aspect of self-identity—how students see themselves vis-à-vis the intellectual demands of school success—which may very well be a fundamental identity of academic success.

I define this identity as success identity in school. It is the aspect of one's self that identifies, or recognizes, one's own intellectual capabilities, which are tempered or enhanced by the amount of effort an individual dedicates to the pursuit of success. Due to the fact that the pursuit of school success relies only in part on raw intellectual ability, in order to actually achieve school success, a student must demonstrate her cognitive capacity through schoolwork and exams; therefore some level of effort is also required. It is important to remember that students are often encouraged to focus on the effort component of schoolwork as the key to school success (Brint, Contreras, and Matthews 2001; Kelly 2008), however intellectual ability is widely understood to be the basis of a student's academic potential, since learning rests on intelligence (Richardson and Bradley 2005).

Like gender identity or ethnic identity, success identity carries particular expectations for behavior. Societal expectations include expectations that one will pursue an education and career appropriate to one's intellectual capacity. Of course, how willing an individual is to exert the requisite effort to be successful in a particular career influences others' expectations. Individuals' everyday behavior also corresponds to success identity; behaviors in school include taking (or not taking) rigorous courses, and completing (or not completing) homework on time. Students' success identities affect whether they actively enjoy school or whether they focus on the aspects of school they dislike. Individuals come to be known both to themselves and others as people who can be expected to enjoy school and pursue school success or to not enjoy school

and disavow school success (Goffman 1967). Thus, there are social consequences of success identity, as there are for gender identity and ethnic identity.

Success identity, as defined here, is not fixed or permanent, but continually negotiated through a student's interactions with other people and with institutional structures such as standardized educational tests, curriculum placement, and daily school practices (Blumer 1969; DeLamater and Myers 2007; Goffman 1959; Holstein and Gubrium 2003; Mead 1934). At the same time, we can anticipate that significant experiences might have enduring influences on one's success identity (Gubrium and Holstein 2000; Irvine 2000). For example, experiences such as not scoring well enough on an aptitude test to qualify for gifted education can have a lasting impact on one's identity. Similarly, living in the shadow of a high achieving sibling can also have an enduring influence on one's identity. This study takes students' descriptions of themselves, their lives, and their experiences as meaningful and *complete* definitions of their intelligence and effort as it pertains to their self-identities.

A New Approach to Studying Intelligence in Relation to Student Identity

Questions of intelligence and academic success have been taken up in psychology research as well as social psychology research. Psychologists and Social Psychologists tend to approach the relationship between students' self-perceptions of their intelligence and their academic achievement as best understood through comparing self-perceptions directly with academic performance. Most of this work takes scholastic achievement as a valid measure of students' abilities and compares how

intelligent students think they are to how well they perform in terms of grades, teachers' ratings, or standardized test scores (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, and Dweck 2007; Chapman and Skinner 1989; Skaalvik and Valas 1999; Stipek and Garlinski 1996; Zeidner and Schleyer 1998).

In this literature, students' self-perceptions of intelligence is termed "academic self-concept," and it is typically measured by a survey instrument, such as Susan Harter's Self-Perception Profile for Children and Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents (Boivin, Vitaro, and Gagnon 1992; Granleese and Joseph 1994; Harter 1985; Harter 1988; Hoare, Elton, Greer, and Kerley 1993). Students' academic self-concept score is then statistically analyzed against an external academic performance measure. A longstanding debate in this literature is over the question of causal ordering between students' views of their abilities—their academic self-concept—and their academic achievement (Bandura, Barbaranelli, and Caprara 1996; Calsyn and Kenny 1977; Guay, Marsh, and Boivin 2003; Harter 1999; Marsh, Byrne, and Yeung 1999; Marsh and Yeung 1997).

Standardized test scores are commonly used as the measure of academic achievement, against which academic self-concept is analyzed, as standardized tests are objective and uniform assessments which are meaningful to schools and state governing bodies (Helmke and van Aken 1995; Marsh, Trautwein, Ludtke, Koller, and Baumert 2005; Muijis 1997). Other studies prefer to analyze students' academic self-concept against teacher ratings with the rationale that teachers have insight into factors that can affect academic-self concept aside from strict measures of learning (Frentz, Greshman,

and Elliot 1991; Guay, Marsh, and Boivin 2003; Hay, Ashman, and van Kraayenoord 1997; Skaalvik and Hagtvet 1990). For example, such studies emphasize that students engage in social comparison processes, meaning that they take their classmates' academic performance into account when they rate themselves on the academic self-concept survey. Students also view their teachers as significant others, meaning that students take academic feedback from their teachers as important indicators of their abilities. Further, Frentz, Greshman, and Elliot (1991) report very strong correlations (.43 to .72) among teacher ratings, the Peabody Individual Achievement Test, and the Wechsler Intelligence Test for Children. Therefore, many researchers in this line of inquiry consider teacher ratings to be reliable indicators of students' actual intellectual abilities.

Clearly this body of scholarship on academic self-concept is relevant to an investigation of success identity, as it addresses the question of how self-perceptions of intelligence are related to school success. However, I argue that the approach that Psychologists and Social Psychologists take to studying the relationship between intelligence, student identity, and school success will be well supplemented by a more sociological approach. My project focuses on intelligence's and effort's cultural meanings and social consequences. Further, I take a symbolic interactionist approach to identity, meaning that identity is treated as a continual process of self-evaluation and response to social interactions with others and with institutional structures (Blumer 1969; Cooley 1964; Goffman 1959; Holstein and Gubrium 2003; Mead 1934). Accordingly, I treat students' understandings of their educational experiences, school

assessments, and the attitudes and beliefs of others as factors which shape a student's own success identity.

I argue that a comprehensive investigation of students' beliefs about what it takes to succeed in school involves careful study of the consequences of those beliefs on students' success identities. To accomplish that, we must allow students to explain their school performance in terms of what that performance (e.g. grades or standardized tests scores) *means* to them. This allows us to tease out whether grades' (and other measures of school success) meanings neatly correspond to cognitive talents for students, or whether grades serve better as indicators of how hard a student tries. It also helps us determine where and how this distinction matters. Moreover, it is crucial to allow students to explain their academic performance as events within the particular context of their own school and teachers. We should expect students' perceptions of whether they are being graded fairly, for example, to affect whether the student takes assessment to heart. Further, the attitudes of peers in a student's school environment should also be expected to influence how that student understands her grades and standardized test scores, as well as how she understands and defines school success more broadly. By investigating these dynamics through students' own descriptions, we gain a clearer understanding of the cultural meanings of intelligence, effort, and school success and the social consequences that accompany them.

Existing research on academic self-concept holds an important place in psychology and social psychology, and has expanded our understanding of the role of intelligence in school success. My project's sociological approach will contribute to

our understanding by offering data which provide more depth: accounts of students' intelligence and effort which are complicated and even self-contradictory at times; rich descriptions of school assessment which include not just the final grade or score, but the teachers and circumstances involved in the emergence of that grade or score. Thus, rather than thin measurements of self-concept being compared against thin measurements of achievement, this project offers rich descriptions of identity to be compared against rich descriptions of assessment. This approach gives us insight into the complex ways that local school structures and local peer attitudes combine with individuals' experiences in ways that affect a student's understanding of herself vis-à-vis her academic performance.

My study listens carefully to students' own voices. It is critical that we allow students to describe themselves: phrased in their own words, situated in the context of their particular schools and their particular experiences with teachers and assessment. Through their voices we gain insight into how these fundamental aspects of education: intelligence and effort, and school success are perceived, shaped, and acted upon in students' lives. From this perspective we can interrogate the relationship between a student's self and the institutional environment of school in a critical, yet understudied way: How do local environments at schools affect students' sense of how capable they are to achieve school success, and with what consequences?

Schools as Organizations: Local Sites Where Cultural Schemas and Identities are Negotiated

In order to effectively contextualize students' understandings of school success and their success identity as a product of their interactions within their local school environments, it is critical not to neglect the role played by schools as organizations. Schools influence both students' definitions of school success as well as their success identities by shaping the conditions under which students interact with each other, with teachers, with school policies, with academic tasks, with their academic evaluations, and so on.

This dissertation focuses on two levels of analysis: individuals (students), and organizations (three particular schools). However, organizations such as schools cannot be analyzed without an understanding of the institution(s) in which they are embedded. In Part III of this dissertation, I acknowledge Leslie Irvine's broad definition of an institution as "patterns of activities organized around a common goal" (2000:11), however the conception of institution that I use throughout this dissertation is more concretely articulated by Friedland and Alford (1991). They define institutions as both "supraorganizational patterns of activity through which humans conduct their material life in time and space, and symbolic systems through which they categorize that activity and infuse it with meaning" (1991:232). While "sociologists find institutions everywhere, from handshakes to marriages to strategic planning departments" (DiMaggio and Powell 1991:9), I focus on the institution of education in the United States, as both a "supraorganizational pattern of activity" that defines appropriate activity for schools, as well as a "symbolic system" through which students, teachers, administrators and others "categorize that activity and infuse it with meaning." As my

interest lies in ideologies of success, the institution of education as a symbolic system is characterized by two cultural schemas in my analysis: the Effort Schema and the Intelligence Schema (discussed below) which provide frameworks for understanding success.

Organizations are embedded in institutions (Davis and McAdam 2005), and institutions shape organizational structure and action (DiMaggio and Powell 1991). Many facets of organizational life then, are institutional elements. So we should expect to find that activity in schools is shaped by cultural ideologies of the Intelligence Schema and the Effort Schema. However, it is critically important to recognize that organizations are filled with people, and these people "inhabit" the institutions that are embodied by the organizations (Hallett and Ventresca 2006b).

My project takes an "inhabited institutions" approach, following a recent line of research in organizational literature (Binder 2007; Hallett and Ventresca 2006b; Westenholz, Pedersen, and Dobbin 2006). This recent research highlights the ways in which actors who "inhabit," or operate within, institutions interpret, negotiate, alter or support the ideologies and logics proffered by the institution, and by wider society. Hallett and Ventresca (2006b) explain that an inhabited institutions approach is "one filled with dynamic interactions that are constitutive of what institutions 'are' at the ground level. It is an intellectual home where institutions are recognized for their double construction: institutions provide the guidelines for social interactions ('construct interactions'), but institutions are also constituted and propelled forward by interactions that provide them with force and meaning" (2006b:229).

The inhabited institutions approach is part of a current research stream which is launching a response to New Institutional theory by highlighting the ways in which local meanings are constructed by actors in local contexts. New Institutional theory emerged in the late 1970s, itself a challenge to the dominant functionalist explanations of organizational behavior (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Meyer and Scott 1983). DiMaggio and Powell (1991) explain that New Institutionalism came out of dissatisfaction with rational-actor models. Scholars began taking a more sociological approach to the study of organizations. As opposed to older conceptions of institutions, "neo-institutionalists" recognized that: "not norms and values, but taken for granted scripts, rules and classifications are the stuff of which institutions are made" (1991:15). Neo-Institutionalists also offered new perspectives on institutions' stability and change by identifying that "institutionalized arrangements are reproduced because individuals often cannot even conceive of appropriate alternatives (or because they regard as unrealistic the alternatives they can imagine). Institutions do not just constrain options, they establish the very criteria by which people discover their preferences" (DiMaggio and Powell 1991:10-11). New institutional theory focuses on macro-level ideologies, sometimes called scripts, or schemas, and are often referred to as "institutional logics" (Friedland and Alford 1991). New institutional theory seeks to explain how these institutional logics are disseminated.

New Institutional theory is criticized for creating a conception of social life in which "institutions shaped all behavior and, thus, seemed to arise and evolve on their own accord" (Westenholz, Pedersen, and Dobbin 2006:889). The inhabited institutions

approach is part of a growing body of work which looks at the level of actors to explain institutional change and the emergence of new institutional forms (Creed, Scully, and Austin 2002; Fligstein 2006; Hallett and Ventresca 2006a; Haveman and Hayagreeva 2006; Hirsch and Lounsbury 1997; Patriotta and Lanzara 2006).

Institutional logics, or scripts, are not dismissed by the inhabited institutions approach, rather the focus of this new research is to examine ways in which such logics are mediated at the micro level. Where New Institutionalism is concerned with institutional logics' ability to shape human action, the inhabited institutions approach is concerned with actors' actual interpretations, (quasi-) acceptance of such logics on the ground. Although they are largely synonyms, rather than "institutional logics," or "scripts" in this study I use the term cultural schemas, following cultural sociologists such as William Sewell Jr. (1992) and Mary Blair-Loy (2001; 2003). Cultural schemas are pervasive ideologies which organize cognition, and motivate alliances and preferences; I chose this term to emphasize that ideologies surrounding education are widely shared across US society, rather than confined to institutional settings. Blair-Loy gives a detailed definition of schemas as: "shared cultural models we employ to make sense of the world. These schemas are frameworks for viewing, filtering, understanding, and evaluating what we know as reality. Constructed by societies over time, they gradually become largely unquestioned. Schemas are objective in the sense of being shared, publicly available understandings. They shape social structure, the patterns and activities of groups and individuals in institutions, firms, and families" (2003:5).

Blair-Loy goes on to emphasize that cultural schemas are not just objective frameworks imposed on our perceptions of the world around us, but that schemas also affect individuals' sense of self: "[Schemas] are also subjective and partially internalized, thereby shaping personal aspirations, identities and desires" (2003:5). In order to comprehensively understand self-identity, then, it is critical to consider the role of cultural schemas' influence on both the individual and on the local institutional environment of the organization in which the individual negotiates her identity.

Several works in the inhabited institutions vein take identity as a central concern (Binder 2007; Creed, Scully, and Austin 2002; Haveman and Hayagreeva 2006; Meyer and Hammerschmid 2006; Westenholz 2006; Westenholz, Pedersen, and Dobbin 2006). Actors' identities play an important role in how they perceive and define their local circumstances and actions vis-à-vis wider cultural schemas or institutional logics. Binder (2007), for example, finds in her study of a single-parent subsidized housing development that the manager of the preschool facility runs the preschool and its budget according to professional standards which fit the manager's image of herself as a college trained professional in Early Education whose mission is to protect the future (educational) interests of the children who attend the preschool. Not only does this manager refuse to allow parents or staff to treat the preschool as day care, but she also refuses to allow many outsiders—sometimes even potential donors—to come and observe during the day for fear of disrupting the children's learning. Yet in other aspects of her job, her approach is tightly coupled with funding-centered logic. As there are multiple institutional logics she might draw on to inform her managerial approach,

she chooses those which resonate with her professional training and self-image, when and where they make the most sense to her.

Binder finds that in a different department of the same subsidized housing development, things are run quite differently. Agents in the housing department adhere much more tightly to funding-centered logic, meaning that they take pains to ensure that funding sources' expectations and rules are cleanly met. This department would not thwart potential donors the way that the manager of the preschool facility does; such action would not fit the local understanding of appropriate work practices in the housing department. Binder's contribution here is to demonstrate that even within the same site, multiple organizational logics are employed in multiple ways across the organization's subunits. Binder finds that there is an important interplay between the identity of the actor and the logic of the institution that matters for how or whether that person follows the institution's script or adapts it to fit her own sensibilities.

Other work in the inhabited institutions vein looks at how workplace identities are challenged or (re)negotiated in moments of crisis or flux, such as Meyer and Hammerschmid's (2006) study of local responses to the emergence of a new executive identity in the Austrian public sector. Based on changing global norms toward outcome-oriented management practices, a new type of executive became popular, and the authors find that local actors developed hybrid logics and hybrid identities in response to the shift in global schemas. While my project does not interrogate moments of institutional change or moments of contested identities per se, work such as Meyer's

and Hammerschmid's and Westenholz (2006) and are instructive in their careful consideration of identity types which emerge in local organizational contexts.

Westenholz finds that workers in the two Danish information technology (IT) companies she studied use identity stories, or "field stories" to describe types of people (but not actual individuals) who are character types within a particular organization. Field stories are widely shared among actors in a specific organizational context; they are identity types relevant to the local work practices of the organization. In the Danish IT companies, Westenholz identifies field stories of the "organizational citizen", the "free agent" the "grassrooter," and the "project maker" as four distinct identities pertaining to ways that programmers solve their jobs. She argues that field stories are invoked when an individual's identity is (re)negotiated in response to his or her behavior in new circumstances within the organization. She provides an empirical case of how co-workers differently perceived two IT programmers who were each unable to solve the programming tasks they were assigned. One programmer, Jacob, was able to fluently navigate between being seen as an "organizational citizen," who operates closely within the boundaries of the company and a "grassrooter," who calls on resources outside the company, looking for innovative ideas and solutions to problems. Thus, he successfully was able to garner help from his superiors in the form of access to the company's British colleagues when he could not complete his assigned task on his own or through help from internet programming forums—outside help was seen as appropriate for someone like Jacob.

On the other hand, the second IT worker, Nils, was seen as a disloyal "villain" by his superiors when he went outside the company for help on an assignment that he was incapable of completing. Nils violated the code of the "organizational citizen" field story by going over his boss' head and requesting help from the client. As a result, both his superiors and his co-workers re-negotiated their view of Nils in response to this particular field story because it became a salient frame of reference by which to judge Nils' behavior. While his superiors saw him as a villain in the "organizational citizen" field story, his co-workers saw him as more of a "tragic hero." However Westenholz emphasizes that both groups drew on the same field story as "raw material" to negotiate Nils' emerging identity.

Westenholz takes identity to be "socially constructed stories about individuals and their surroundings as they engage in social work practices" (2006:1018). She ties identity closely to behavior and practice within specific local contexts where local actors attempt to make sense out of each other's actions within bounded circumstances. She emphasizes that "identities are not exclusively discursive, symbolic, cultural phenomena but are coupled to practice" (2006:1018). Westenholz' concept of field stories is highly relevant to the study of success identity in schools, as it offers an analytic framework which focuses on the interplay between people and the identity types which are available in particular contexts. While school organizations share many similarities as units embedded in the same institutional arena, each school is also a discrete organization, an environment where we might expect local actors to draw on local field stories that are unique to that school's practices.

Unlike cultural schemas, which are more widely shared in a society, field stories are relevant to the particular circumstances, experiences, and concerns of local actors in specific environments. To take an inhabited institutions approach means to look carefully at how actors interpret cultural schemas in local institutional settings in ways that can support, shift, or even dismiss a schema. As Westenholz demonstrates, one way that local actors make sense out of a cultural schema is to identify types or characters who embody specific attributes and concerns of the local actors. These types are expressed through field stories, again field stories do not describe individuals within the organization or institution, rather they describe a *type* of person, such as a "grassrooter", they are identity stories against which the actual actors can negotiate their own and others' identities, their locations within the local environment.

Therefore, taking an inhabited institutions approach to students' understandings of school success and the consequences for students' identities provides essential groundwork in two ways. The first is that it requires an investigation of how organizational arrangements matter for student identity. The second is that it lays an expectation that students (actors) in different school environments might not imbue similar meanings to institutional features which are shared across schools. For example, grades might be understood differently at different schools, or standardized test scores might be treated as important indicators of intelligence in one school but not others. It also lays an expectation that each local school environment might differently interpret popular American beliefs about school success. A comprehensive understanding of

students' beliefs and student identity must take into account the local environment of the organization within which their beliefs and identity are negotiated.

A noteworthy contribution which my project makes to the inhabited institutions literature is its use of comparative cases. Although already important, the body of empirical work in this vein is still rather limited and very little of it uses comparative cases to draw insights across multiple organizational sites. Westenholz, for example, does conduct research in two IT companies, however, she does not draw systematic comparisons between the two sites, rather she follows her subjects as they participate in work at both sites. In the section below I outline my project design, which features comparisons across three high schools in one metropolitan area. These comparisons allow my findings to elucidate how a school's local interpretations of cultural schemas of school success matter in the bigger picture: life beyond high school. Indeed, my main conclusion from this research is that one schools' local beliefs serves to advantage its students in their pursuit of higher education, while the other two schools' local interpretations serve to disadvantage their students.

Project Design

My project design emphasizes the influence of school context on student perceptions by comparing student perspectives at three schools, each with a very distinct educational mission and school environment. The goal of the comparative design is to shed light on how different organizational arrangements and educational environments matter in how students perceive school success.

The schools in this project were selected to highlight differences among students from various socioeconomic backgrounds as well as racial and ethnic backgrounds. The schools were also selected to highlight differences among organizational approaches toward secondary education. Three high schools were selected from the same metropolitan area in the state of California: 1. Comprehensive High, typical of state-wide performance averages and typical of the state's demographics which are roughly 50% Latino; 2. Elite Charter High, located in an upper-middle class, largely white neighborhood. The school emphasizes academic rigor and excludes many traditional high school elements such as sports teams and cheerleading squads; and 3. Alternative High, whose students are largely drawn from urban neighborhoods and are predominately African American and Latino. These students choose Alternative High for its non-traditional approach to secondary education, e.g. attending school only three days a week and spending the other two days at job internships. Detailed descriptions of the three school sites are based on both quantitative measures and qualitative observation data are presented in Chapter Two.

In this dissertation, I draw comparisons across the three schools in order to highlight ways in which local educational environments and organizational contexts differently influence students' understandings of academic assessment and their own identities vis-à-vis academic assessments. Additionally, one would expect to find differences within each school, particularly between levels of curriculum tracks. In order to highlight these differences, the interview samples at each school are split between honors/AP level students and general curriculum (often a "college prep" track)

students. As Alternative High does not practice curriculum tracking, a feature of its non-traditional approach to secondary education, the interview sample at Alternative High was split between one ninth grade and one tenth grade class. As a newly opened school at the time of this research, Alternative High had only ninth and tenth graders enrolled in its student body; therefore it made the most sense to divide the sample between the two grade levels.

The data are comprised of 57 in-depth interviews with individual students (approximately 19 from each school, 9-10 at each curriculum level where applicable), daily observations for three weeks in each of the classrooms from which the sample is drawn, and informal interviews with teachers and administrators. The interview sample is comprised of ninth, tenth, and eleventh graders, as opposed to elementary school students, in order to maximize respondents' school histories, and to maximize the level at which respondents might be able to articulate their experiences in school. Twelfth graders were not included in the interview sample to minimize the behavioral and attitudinal changes which are common among students who are transitioning or preparing to transition to life after high school graduation. The goal was to interview students who are embedded in their school contexts.

Conclusion

The observations and interview data in this dissertation are analyzed to highlight the ways in which these three very distinct school environments shape students' understandings of their school experiences, their interpretation of grades and other

assessments, their future aspirations, and most specifically: themselves as intelligent, hard working individuals. Certainly all three high schools share some commonalities by virtue of being high schools in the same geographical region. For example, like other Americans more broadly, they have an understanding of achievement ideology and believe that hard work lies at the heart of success. I refer to this belief as the Effort Schema, outlined in Part II of the dissertation. They also have an understanding of intelligence as the foundation for learning, a personal trait which individuals possess in unequal amounts. I discuss this as the Intelligence Schema in Part II of the dissertation.

In spite of such commonalities, the three schools are each their own local context where broad cultural ideas about effort and intelligence are not simply enacted according to script. Rather, each school is an "inhabited institution," a local context where cultural ideas are interpreted and refined, sometimes embraced, and sometimes dismissed. Local spaces have their own rules and norms as well as their own modified versions of larger cultural notions. This dissertation charts out critical elements of students' success identities, and, in the process, identifies which elements are distinctive of particular local environments of the three schools.

Chapter Two provides "thick" descriptions of each of the three school sites (Geertz 1973). I present quantitative data on school demographics and academic performance in the aggregate. From my field notes and observations, I give details on classroom dynamics, teaching styles, school structures, and the overall feel of the environments at each of the schools. Part II of the dissertation is titled Intelligence, Effort, and School Success in Local School Environments. Before we can

comprehensively understand students' own success identities, we must be familiar with the local contexts in which students identities are negotiated and developed. This section of the dissertation lays out the landscape of local ideas around intelligence, effort, and school success in each school. I identify two cultural schemas relevant to students' understandings of school success: the Effort Schema and the Intelligence Schema. In Chapters Three, Four, and Five, I demonstrate how each of the three schools interpret and modify the two schemas differently in their explanations of school success. I illustrate features of each school environment that contribute to the local interpretations of the Effort Schema and the Intelligence Schema. I also present identity types, what Westenholz (2006) calls "field stories," which are used to explain school success at each site. I find striking differences among the three school environments in terms of how they perceive intelligence's and effort's roles in school success. Put simply, local context matters.

Part III is titled Individual Students' Construction of Success Identity. In Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight, I describe individual students' own success identities at each school. The analysis pays careful attention to the ways that students invoke local field stories, the Effort Schema, and the Intelligence Schema in their descriptions of themselves and their personal experiences of school success. I find that key differences in success identities of students across the three sites are rooted in the differences of their local school organizations.

In the Conclusion, Chapter Nine, I discuss the implications for these students' futures. The beliefs about school success that each school environment fosters have

consequences for students' transition to higher education. Only at the upper-middle class high school in this study, Elite Charter High, do the local variations of the Effort Schema and the Intelligence Schema fit well with the philosophies and attitudes of college entrance boards for elite universities (Golden 2006; Karabel 2005; Lemann 1999; Stevens 2007). At the other two schools, which serve populations of students that are underrepresented on college campuses, the local variations of the Effort Schema and the Intelligence Schema are not aligned with elite college admissions expectations. Thus, the local beliefs and field stories at Comprehensive High and Alternative High become a form of invisible disadvantage these students carry on their transcripts and college applications.

Beliefs about success at Alternative High are more closely aligned with community college expectations for school success, the lowest tier of higher education. Beliefs about school success at Comprehensive High resonate with not only community colleges but also with middle-tier state university expectations. As a result, the local beliefs at each school serve to reinforce and perpetuate existing inequalities in education.

CHAPTER TWO

THE THREE SCHOOL SITES

As the starting point for an inhabited institutions approach to success identity, this Chapter offers a detailed perspective on the differences among the three sites in this study. Organizational differences contribute to differences in the local school environments; the goal of this Chapter is to provide a sense of what these schools look and feel like. Below I provide information on each school's academic performance, each student body's demographic composition, as well as qualitative descriptions of daily life based on classroom observations.

Comprehensive High, Alternative High, and Elite Charter High: Quantitative Descriptions

The three schools in this study are very different on multiple levels. Table 2.1 displays each school's academic performance on standard measures, side by side for comparison. California state averages are also included as a comparison point. These data are compiled from reports by the California Department of Education, as well as each school's School Accountability Report Card (SARC), annual public reports on school performance mandated by state and federal legislation. The data here are in the aggregate, as I was not granted access to individual-level student data by any of the three school districts.

Table 2.1 presents data on each school's Academic Performance Index (API), which is a score ranging from 200 to 1000. California has a state-wide target of 800 for its schools. The API is largely constructed from student scores on standardized tests, including state standards tests and the high school exit exam. A school's API determines whether it receives awards or sanctions from the government. Table 2.1 also details each of the three school's California Standards Test (CST) results. The results are reported as the percentage of students who meet the state's minimum proficiency standards in various subject areas. The CST is a set of standardized tests designed to evaluate how well students have learned required curricular material at each grade level.

Although the research at these sites spanned 2004-2006, Tables 2.1 and 2.2 only show information from the 2005-2006 school year. This is to facilitate comparisons among the three schools due to inconsistent reporting of data for Alternative High for the 2004-2005 school year. As a newly inaugurated school with only a freshman population, several of these performance measures were not taken during 2004-2005. To ensure accuracy, Table 2.1 indicates where reported data are similar but not identical measures at each school. For example, Elite Charter High's SARC reports its geometry CST scores rather than more general math CST scores which the other two schools report, so the geometry score is shown on a separate line in the CST math category. Also, as Alternative High's student population in 2005-2006 was comprised only of ninth graders and tenth graders, Alternative High's SARC reports its CST results specifically for each grade level rather than in the aggregate. Table 2.1 displays tenth

grade scores for Alternative High because tenth graders take all of the CST subject exams reported here, while ninth graders do not. Table 2.1 displays California state averages corresponding to each school's particular datum.

Table 2.1: Descriptive Data on Academic Performance of the Three School Sites

2005-2006 School Year	Comprehensive High	Elite Charter High	Alternative High	State Average
API	704	840	709	687
CST English	39%	71%		42%
			34% 10th grade only	37% 10th grade only
CST Math	26%			40%
			17% 10th grade only	20% 10th grade only
		46% Geometry		24% Geometry
CST Science	31%	67%		35%
			6% 10th grade only	35% 10th grade only
CST History/ Soc Science	29%			33%
			3% 10th grade only	30% 10th grade only
		66% History only		38% History only
10th Graders Passing CA HS Exit Exam	Math 82% Lang Arts 78%	Math 98% Lang Arts 98%	Math 83% Lang Arts 91%	Math 76% Lang Arts 77%
CA Univ requirements	67%	87%	N/A	38%
SAT averages	510 verbal 510 math 496 writing	553 verbal 569 math 554 writing	No senior class	495 verbal 516 math 495 writing
Seniors taking SAT	24%	79%	No senior class	41%

As Table 2.1 demonstrates, Elite Charter High has the highest academic performance of the three schools, and nearly doubles California state averages on CST

scores. Comprehensive High is largely on par with California CST state averages, and

performance-wise, is situated in between the other two school sites.   Alternative High

has the lowest academic performance of the three, and is acutely below California state

averages on CST in science and in history/social science.

　　　　Academic performance is only one axis on which the three schools differ. Table

2.2 below shows some detail on the composition of each school's student body.

Table 2.2: Descriptive Data on Student Populations of the Three School Sites

2005-2006 School Year	Comprehensive High	Elite Charter High	Alternative High	State Average
Student population	1,456	1,481	104	1,313
White	36%	83%	19%	37%
Latino	53%	11%	37%	42%
African American	3%	1%	36%	8%
Asian	7%	5%	7%	12%
Socioeconomically Disadvantaged	43%	5%	54%	40%
English Learners	22%	2%	1%	15%
Avg Class Size	31	35	19	29
Dropouts	25 (1.7%)	7 (0.5%)	0 (0.0%)	3.4%
Jrs and Srs taking AP exams	6%	61%	N/A	25%
AP courses offered	8	22	N/A	unavailable

Data in Table 2.2 are also compiled from each school's SARC and California

Department of Education reports. Total student populations are given, as well as

percentages of ethnic and racial groups. Percentages of socioeconomically

disadvantaged students and students whose native language is not English (called

"English Learners") in the school population are included in Table 2.2 as well.

Socioeconomically disadvantaged is defined as annual earned income less than $35,798 based on a family of four for 2005-2006.

Additionally, Table 2.2 shows average class sizes and the number of Advanced Placement (AP) courses each school offers. AP courses are college-level, subject-specific curricula, which can count for college credit on one's transcript if the student passes a standardized, national AP exam in the subject. Table 2.2 gives the percentage of eleventh and twelvth graders at each school who took AP exams in 2006. AP information is not available for Alternative High because its course design does not mirror traditional curriculum tracks. During the school year reported in Table 2.2, Alternative High had only ninth and tenth graders in its population, however, once becoming eleventh and twelvth graders, these students will potentially be eligible to take courses at a nearby community college as part of their high school coursework. Alternative High is structured to allow its students to take actual college courses as an alternative to teaching AP (college level) curricula within the high school itself.

As Table 2.2 demonstrates, Elite Charter High has the most homogeneous student body both racially as well as socioeconomically. This has a great deal to do with its location in an upper-middle class, largely white neighborhood in a relatively elite suburb of the metropolitan area. Only 5% of Elite Charter High's students are considered socioeconomically disadvantaged. Although it is a charter school, which means that it draws its students from all over the district and is not bound by neighborhood zones, Elite Charter High's entire district is similarly white and upper-middle class. Comprehensive High and Alternative High are comprised of much more

heterogeneous student bodies, again, in terms of racial/ethnic diversity as well as socioeconomic status. Alternative High also draws its students from various neighborhoods within its district, but, unlike Elite Charter High, it is located in a large urban district, which, like many urban school districts, is rich in racial diversity, but not rich in economic advantages. In fact, the campus itself is situated centrally in the metropolis, and several of the 20 white students who attend Alternative High commute long distances from their homes in the suburban corners of the district limits.

Comprehensive High is located in a middle and lower-middle class suburban school district. Its student body reflects state averages fairly closely in most respects, but with relatively more Latino students and English Learners than is typical in California. English Learners comprise 22% of the student body, while AP exam takers comprise 6%, which indicates that Comprehensive High's resources are likely more heavily dedicated toward language proficiency for English Learners and general curriculum than toward advanced curriculum.

Comprehensive High, Elite Charter High, and Alternative High:
Qualitative Descriptions

Naturally, there are many more differences among the three school sites which are not captured in Tables 2.1 and 2.2. Certainly academics, economics, and race/ ethnicity contribute to the overall environment of a school, but descriptive statistics do little in the way of describing what it *feels* like to be in a particular school context. This section relies on observational data at each of the three schools as well as informal and

semi-structured interviews with the teachers in whose classrooms I observed. The goal of these detailed descriptions is to provide a sense of what the local environment at each of the three schools is like. Analysis in this dissertation draws heavily on local contexts. I demonstrate in Part II and Part III that local attitudes and beliefs at each school matter for how students make sense of their experiences, theirs and others' school success, and their success identities. Thus, it is important to sketch a portrait of each of these contexts.

Elite Charter High

Elite Charter High is located in an upper-middle class residential neighborhood. Although it is a high performing school with much to be proud of, it is not the star of its district. Another high school upstages Elite Charter High dramatically in terms of academic performance, placement of graduates in elite colleges, and state of the art facilities. As one might expect, the district boundaries around that superstar high school enclose some of the most valuable real estate in the state (and the country), meaning that funding and social networks from its parent base allow the school to afford its reputation and standing. It is one public school to which wealthy parents in the area consider sending their children as an alternative to private education. Students at Elite Charter High often use this local superstar high school as a reference point in their discussions of their own high school experiences. Few students I interviewed at Elite Charter High claim to have friends who go to the other school (which would give them some inside knowledge of it), rather, they reference stereotypes and well-known facts

about the superstar school. For example, comments such as "well, it's not like everyone here gets a new Porsche for every A they get on their report card like they do over at [Superstar High]" are common.   While the Elite Charter High students whom I interviewed are by and large proud of their school, they also seem quite aware that they are overshadowed by a "better" high school, which is populated by wealthier and more privileged teenagers than themselves.

This is not to imply that Elite Charter High students struggle economically, at least most of them do not. The median home value in Elite Charter High's portion of the school district was just under $340,000 according to the 2000 Census (the superstar highschool's area had a median home value of $445,000). Also, most Elite Charter High students come from well-educated homes: 91% of students have parents who attended college, according to self-reported student data provided by the school.   As a charter school, Elite Charter High has more freedom than non-charter schools in its approach to how education is structured. Elite Charter High makes use of this freedom primarily in two ways, both of which are designed to foster high student engagement with academics. First, they operate on what they call a 4x4 block schedule. This means that each semester students take only four classes, as opposed to the standard six. School days are organized as four class periods each an hour and a half long, with an additional 25 minutes of homeroom time between first and second period twice a week. Homeroom time is intended to be an opportunity for the homeroom teacher to build relationships with one group of students and keep close tabs on their progress. The rationale behind block scheduling is that longer periods mean more opportunity for

students to solidly engage class material without disruption. Additionally, in the case of Elite Charter High, students take four classes each semester, only three of which are core academic classes, which allows students to focus on a few subjects in depth rather than spreading their mental energy across several diverse subjects. Elite Charter High boasts that the material covered in a single semester at its school is equivalent to a full year of material at a typical high school. This belief is reflected in their course credit distribution as well: Elite Charter High students earn 80 class credits in a school year (for completing eight courses, four each semester) while other high school students earn 60 (for completing six courses over the year).

The second way that Elite Charter High makes use of its freedom as a charter school is that it does not have sports teams nor the accompanying cheerleading squads, pep rallies, Homecoming Dances, and so on which characterize much of the "school spirit" on many American high school campuses. For this reason, Elite Charter High appeals to students who dislike the popularity contests driven by athleticism and beauty, which are common features of typical high schools' social environments (Milner 2004). Typical high school popularity largely excludes bright students who are interested in academics and excel in schoolwork. Elite Charter High provides a social environment which several of its students say allows "smart kids," as James, a junior, phrases it, to be who they are without any social stigma attached. In fact, at Elite Charter High being smart is seen as "cool."

Elite Charter High administration's philosophy of focusing on rigorous academics and students' descriptions of the school as a place where "smart kids" can

pursue academics socially unfettered are well supported by my observations of classroom life. The principal allowed me to select from all of the classes whose teachers volunteered to have a researcher sit in. She had emailed her staff in advance about my project, and had a healthy response. I chose an AP chemistry class and a general curriculum (considered to be a college preparatory track) chemistry class, intending to have a balanced interview sample between non-AP students and AP students. In addition to observing teaching differences and curricular differences between AP and general track classes, I planned to talk to students whose academic lives and identities are aligned with each track. I soon found, however, that few of the students I interviewed from the general Chemistry class actually think of themselves as non-AP/honors students. They simply were taking general Chemistry, while many of their other classes, and planned classes for future semesters were honors and AP level. Being at least partly an honors-level student seems to be part and parcel to being an Elite Charter High student. As Table 2.2 shows, 61% of juniors and seniors there take an AP exam, and many more students take honors and AP courses.

I returned to the principal and requested permission to sit in on a third class: a new remedial English program that the school had just adopted that year. My logic was that if general chemistry is mainly comprised of honors students who happen to be in one non-honors class, then remedial English students might be general curriculum students who happen to be in one remedial course. For the most part, I was right. In the remedial English class I found students whose native language is not English, and lower-income students who attend Elite Charter High not because they are drawn to its

reputation, but because they live in walking distance, and their parents do not have the means to provide transportation to any other high school. However, low income students and English Learners, as the district calls them, comprise a very small portion of the student body at Elite Charter High: 5% and 2%, respectively. While they are not representative of the general student body, I felt it important to include their perspectives in this study.

In all three classes I observed, I found serious engagement with course material. The intensity and pace of the material presented varies according to the track, however. The AP Chemistry class forges through concepts, equations, and lab work at a vigorous pace. While it is perhaps a bit slower, still, than a typical university's introductory course in Chemistry, the AP class nonetheless has the rhythm and instruction of a college level course, true to the AP concept. The AP teacher is extremely knowledgeable in chemistry, above and beyond the concepts he is responsible for in the curriculum. He regularly supplements lectures and discussions with examples and comments on chemical properties and equations in advanced chemistry which are outside the realm of the lesson, yet relevant and colorful to the topic at hand. His level of expertise seems uncommon for a high school teacher, particularly in comparison to Comprehensive High's AP English teacher who admits struggling to keep up with the AP test; the demands of which she is largely unfamiliar with. For his part, Elite Charter High's AP Chemistry teacher seems to know the AP test backwards and forwards, evidenced by his ability to continually answer students' questions about particular items' likelihood of showing up on the AP exam.

Further, while he is unmistakably covering curriculum to best prepare his students for the AP test, his pedagogy is much more widely encompassing than test preparation alone. He frequently adds live demonstrations—particularly ones including combustible gases and lit matches—to his lessons to both reward students with spectacular displays of chemistry, and also to excite them about the world of science. Comments such as "look at the amazing stuff you can do if you just know a few basic properties of helium" are typical for him to say as he ignites a controlled explosion in the lab. He also runs an extra-credit "mole" contest where students make their own stuffed animals in the shape of moles, the small burrowing animals that live underground. The contest is a clever play on the word *mole*, which—in Chemistry speak—is a unit of molecular mass that students must learn to convert to and from grams—an equation students find difficult to master. The stuffed animal mole contest is intended to bring some lightness of spirit to the chore of mastering mole conversions. The teacher also hosts a pancake breakfast every year with parents of his chemistry students on October 23rd, or 10-23, to help his students remember that 10^{23} is an important number in the mole equation. The teacher serves pancakes and his students are allowed to hassle him for more syrup to their hearts' content.

His class is not all fun and games, however. The room is overcrowded with 35 students (originally 41 were enrolled) in the period I observed. The teacher has a second section of AP Chemistry later in the day, which is similarly overcrowded. Several students do not have a permanent seat, but simply pull a chair up to whichever row or cluster of desks they choose on a given day, and share the available desktops

with classmates. Due to the fast pace at which the material is covered, most students spend the hour and a half diligently taking notes and asking questions to clarify concepts and equations as the teacher lectures. There is very little goofing around among students, though that is not to say that there is none. Occasionally a student can be found exerting all of his or her energy eating snacks out of a lunch bag; text messaging; reviewing notes for a test the following class period; or covertly applying eyeliner. The class is a relatively free space, and students are permitted to stand up and stretch their legs or walk over to a table at the side of the room where the teacher has bottled water available for 25 cents.

When not lecturing, the AP teacher encourages students to work together on homework and labs, emphasizing that students are each other's resources. This promotes a rather open atmosphere with a cooperative and collaborative dynamic. Shouts of "Ah hah!" or "*HOW* did you get that?" are common to hear during homework sessions. Many students also engage the teacher by calling out questions, comments, or jokes during his lecture, and this is not only tolerated, but often reciprocated by the teacher. This vocal accessibility and open banter with students helps relieve some of the tension over the intensity of the material. However, a good third of the class rarely said a word during the entire three weeks that I observed them, so clearly the vocal space is not equally shared. Many students regularly fail the tests in this AP class, despite the teacher's willingness to give partial credit for wrong answers that are well-attempted. It is a demanding course.

The general curriculum Chemistry class also demands full attention from its students. While much less material is covered over the course of the semester compared to the AP Chemistry class, the general Chemistry class takes the material seriously, including weekly quizzes to ensure that students do not fall behind. The general chemistry class is quieter and in some ways more orderly than its AP counterpart. Students for the most part sit and take notes on the lecture or work together on group projects, as appropriate. They ask questions, but almost exclusively raise their hands and wait to be called on. A good deal of this difference has to do with the personality and teaching style of the teacher: she is a highly-organized, energetic woman who ambitiously sets out to cover a particular set of information each class period. Nonetheless, it is difficult to say whether her presentation style leaves little room for creative questions and discussions from students, or whether the students themselves simply do not devote their creative energies toward chemistry questions of "what would happen if…" as do the AP students. Either way, the result is that the general Chemistry class progresses through the semester in a patterned trajectory of lectures, homework, quizzes, labs, and group projects. Students I interviewed from this class describe it as challenging, especially those who do not describe themselves as "a math person."

Looking at Table 2.2, it is not surprising that both of these chemistry classes are largely white, since the student body of Elite Charter High itself is largely white. In the AP class, one student is Asian American, and one has a Spanish surname, though in appearance his ethnicity is ambiguous; the remaining 33 students are white. There are

17 males and 18 females in the class. In the general Chemistry class three students are Latino and 25 are white. There are no African American students in the class, but the teacher is an African American woman. There are 13 males and 15 females. The remedial English class I observed, on the other hand, is more than half Latino. This is a tricky comparison, however, because the remedial English class has only eight students in total, and it is designed, at least in part, to accommodate the special needs of English Learners at Elite Charter High, so it is a place we should expect to find a disproportionate number of non-white students.

The remedial English class also engages the course material seriously, though the pace and expectations of the class are substantially lower than either of the Chemistry classes. Unlike literature on tracking would predict (Metz 1978; Oakes 1985; Rosenbaum 1976), the remedial English teacher takes great pains to create a comfortable, encouraging environment where these eight students can feel competent in language. Five of the eight students are English learners, all Latino, and three are white students who suffer from mild learning disabilities or simply struggle tremendously with reading and writing. There are four girls and four boys in the class. Research on curriculum tracking has found that students in the lowest tracks are often expected by the teacher to be students with behavior problems, attitude problems, and little interest in learning (Oakes 1985). Thus, teachers come into such classes fully prepared to enforce strict discipline without necessarily being prepared to help the students learn and succeed. Out of the three teachers I observed at Elite Charter High, this teacher does end up spending the most time giving disciplinary warnings and persuading

students to stay on task. Nonetheless, Elite Charter High's remedial English class offers a warm, friendly environment with carefully constructed tasks and assignments designed by the teacher with individual students in mind.

To prepare herself to teach this new remedial course, the teacher attended a special training program designed to help teachers give effective support to students with low reading and writing skills. The teacher explains to me after class one day that the ultimate goal is to give these students confidence in their reading, to foster identities in them as "readers," people who read for pleasure and personal satisfaction. She is sincerely hopeful that these eight students will develop into the kind of people who do not go on vacation or go out to the park without wanting to bring a book along. Toward these goals, students are required to keep writing journals, booklets in which they reflect on things they have read or experienced each week. The teacher encourages students to fill their journals with any ideas that they want to express, even if they are not sure that sentences are structured correctly.

The remedial English class is not typical for Elite Charter High. It is an important point of comparison however, to see how such a high performing school attends to its low performing students. The eight students in the class are some of the few (13%) at Elite Charter High who will not graduate with a transcript that is eligible for state university enrollment. Rather than dismissing this small population of underachieving students, as the remedial English teacher tells me that the school has historically done, Elite Charter High has begun allocating resources to advance their language development. This is important, particularly in light of the fact that it is

unlikely that these students will improve enough to score well on standardized tests during their high school years (Katz 1999).

The general population at Elite Charter High, on the other hand, can be characterized as high performing. Through my interviews with students in the AP and general Chemistry classes, I discovered a climate of fierce competition over grades and test scores. It seems that in a place where "smart kids" are free to revel in their academic prowess, high achievement becomes an arena for jealousy and heartache among students. It is in this academically intense environment that students negotiate their success identities against classmates' academic performances and against local understandings of the *type* of person who is able to reach highest school success. Part II of this dissertation demonstrates how each local school context fosters concerns and beliefs about school success that are specific to the particular school. In the case of Elite Charter High, Chapter Three shows that students feel pressure to achieve high academic success to such a degree that they worry that attaining straight A's would require a sacrifice of emotional and mental sanity. Many feel that they can have a happy, balanced teenage life *or* straight A's, but not both. The prize of excellent grades is so coveted that it is imagined to be available only at an unforgivable price. Part III of this dissertation shows the consequences of this local attitude at Elite Charter High on students' success identities. Even high achieving students with 4.25 grade point averages feel a sense of inadequacy about their school success, their college prospects, and about their own intellectual abilities.

Alternative High

Alternative High opened in the fall of 2004 with a freshman class of 70 students, split among three classrooms. The school's design and mission is based on a school reform effort which was launched on the East Coast and now boasts nearly 50 schools around the country to be working off of its model. These schools take a non-traditional approach to education, focusing on ways to advance the future prospects of inner city students in particular. While promising to fulfill all the course requirements for college entrance, Alternative High's structure is also designed to prepare students for the world of work. The explicit goal of the school model is to help students identify what they are passionate about and hone their skills and future goals to accommodate their interests.

The students attend school on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. The other two days of the week they spend at internships with local businesses, government offices, and the like. Not all students have an active internship at all times, so the school is open on Tuesdays and Thursdays for students who are in between internships to be able to complete schoolwork with the school's facilities. However, the teaching staff is minimal on Tuesdays and Thursdays; the teachers rotate days of having their own classroom open to house all the non-internship students. The internships are structured to last just part of the day on Tuesdays and Thursdays; typically students start work around 9:00am and finish around 12:00pm. This means that students have a good portion of those days to schedule as they please. There is an expectation that students are doing schoolwork on their own during that time, but there is no expectation that students will attend school after their internship.

Students' internships are intended to be field sites where they can put their academics into action. Toward this goal, students keep journals on their internship work and record any math, for example, that they do in their jobs. Students can earn credit toward their math grades this way, and toward their grades in any other subjects that are practiced in their internships. Internships are touted as additional sites of academic learning, which means that they are also additional sites where students negotiate their success identities.

While I did not have access to observe students regularly at their internships, they discuss their experiences in the interviews, and several interviews took place at the student's internship site. All in all, students express positive views of the internship component to Alternative High, despite several students feeling unsatisfied with their actual current internship work. Internships are unpaid positions until the student turns 16, at which time the company or mentor can decide whether or not to hire the student for a legal wage. Students are able to change internships each quarter.

In a few cases, I was given the impression that the internship mentor was exploiting the free work of the student, though no student expressed such a feeling to me directly. For example, I interviewed two respondents who worked at the same internship: a small photography studio run by the owner/photographer. Three students are interns there and during neither of my two-hour long visits was the owner present at the studio. It seems that it is routine for the owner to schedule off-site photography shoots while the interns handle the phones and other administrative work. I became particularly skeptical of the benefit these three students were receiving from their

mentor when one of the students, Alma, told me that she had been at this internship for two years now, and felt disappointed that during all that time she had not learned anything about photography. Alma initially took this internship because she was interested in perhaps becoming a photographer someday. She adamantly claimed that she had learned a great deal working at the studio, things such as how to run an office and how demanding running one's own business can be. Her goal of acquiring skills in the art of photography, however, had not been met.

Alma's situation can be seen as a perversion of Alternative High's goals for internships. Rather than gaining hands on experience in photography from a professional mentor, which would help Alma determine whether this career was right for her as well as give her marketable assets, instead Alma is being trained in low-level clerical work. Receptionist work could be considered a step up for Alma compared to the work her parents do, as immigrants from Mexico with elementary school educations. However, receptionist work is decidedly not the sort of "passionate interest" Alternative High seeks to develop in its students via internships. Importantly, this also contributes to a tension Alma feels between her perception of herself as an intelligent, hardworking person and her situation of not being entrusted with learning opportunities by her internship mentor.

By focusing on Alma's case, I do not mean to imply that all students are disappointed in their internship work. Many of my respondents from Alternative High rave about their experiences in law offices, police stations, kindergartens, and so on. Many also rave about their close relationships with their internship mentors. One

mentor has even started a college fund for her student intern. Many students also describe their internships as places where they learn a great deal of practical and academic knowledge. Rather, I present Alma's case to emphasize the fact that Alternative High structures students' school week to include hands-on learning in the world of work, and this feature of school life has consequences for how students negotiate their success identities.

Another structured feature of the school experience at Alternative High is that Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays are planned to begin with a "Get it Going" session where the entire student body and teaching staff gather in an auditorium, out on an athletic field, or another venue to start the day together with an inspiring speaker; large group activity; or other engaging event. Get it Going begins at 8:00 and ends at 8:30. During my weeks of observation, only four Get it Going sessions actually took place, as there were regular cancellations. The Get it Going design allows for a flexible start to the day, as attendance cannot easily be taken in the larger venue, so teachers wait until they are back in their classrooms to take roll. This allows students who are habitually late, or have parents who are habitually late in dropping them off, to escape being accountable for timeliness on a daily basis.

Once in their classrooms, students remain in the same room with the same homeroom teacher throughout the day. Homeroom teachers are generally responsible for English and History curricula, and most other subjects are taught by non-full-time staff members, some of whom are retired instructors from a nearby community college. When it is time for a chemistry lesson or a Spanish lesson, for example, the chemistry

teacher or Spanish teacher comes to the students' classroom, rather than the other way around. This presents a problem in terms of facilities, but it is a great convenience and time saver in terms of student traffic around the school. The chemistry teacher, for example, must bring in all the necessary equipment for lab experiments, and the students perform the lab work right at their desks, rather than in a laboratory. An additional benefit of the stationary class is that students are able to make the classroom space their own in a variety of ways. For example, many classes have walls adorned with personal photos of not only students, but students' families, non-school friends, and romantic others.

All of the classrooms at the school are arranged with students' desks in the middle, facing the center of the room in an O or rectangle. The perimeter of the class is lined with desktop computers for the students' use, facing the walls. Whiteboards also line the walls, but due to the placement of the desktop computers, only one, and sometimes none, of these whiteboards are easily accessible for teachers to actually use for lessons. An overhead projector is standard in every classroom, and is operated from the center of the students' O. The teacher's desk sits off to one side of the room, usually in a corner. Also, lining the walls that are not taken up by desktop computers are bookshelves with pleasure reading books, reference textbooks, and students' work files.

Alternative High does not practice curriculum tracking. Keeping students integrated is part of its educational mission, and the school day is designed to have enough flexibility to accommodate students' individual learning speeds without

stratifying the curriculum. Students are rigidly separated by grade level, however, so I decided to observe in one ninth grade class and one tenth grade class in order to be able to make comparisons within the school. Through my observations I found that the pace and atmosphere of both classes are remarkably similar. The one dimension on which the two classes markedly differ is racial tension: evident in the ninth grade class and not evident in the tenth grade class. This is perhaps due to the fact that the ninth graders are newer to the environment of Alternative High. Many of the African American students attended nearly all-minority middle schools and elementary schools, where getting to know white schoolmates—and getting *along* with white schoolmates—was not part of the educational goal. In their ninth grade class at Alternative High they are in a small, intimate setting. The class is comprised of four white students, one Asian American, seven African Americans, and eight Latinos. Several of the African American ninth graders exhibit distrust of and distaste for their white classmates, who, to make matters even more provocative, are more economically well-off than the rest of the class. The median value home is $228,000 in the sections of the city in which the white students in my sample live, compared to median home values of $131,000 to $166,000 in the sections of the city where the African American and Latino students in my sample live (Census 2000).

The following example illustrates the type of racial tension experienced at Alternative High. Early one morning before school starts, while the teacher is out of the room, several students are hanging out. Jaynah, an African American classmate enters the classroom, puts down her backpack and calls out loudly in an agitated voice: "You

need to turn that white boy music off. It is giving me a headache!" Two white males in the back of the room glance up surprised and silently comply by reducing the volume of the song playing on one of the boy's computers. Neither boy responds directly to the challenge, but the volume is left at a high enough level to still be heard across the classroom, signaling a refusal to be completely pushed around. Jaynah, for her part continues to rant—mainly to herself—about the intolerable qualities of "white" music. In private interviews with me, each of these boys expresses disappointment and some astonishment that they are targets of racial frustration, feeling that they have done little to warrant animosity from classmates. To all the students' credit, actual fights are routinely avoided.

In the tenth grade classroom I did not witness any similar episodes of racial tension, nor was it a topic which the homeroom teacher addressed with the class in my presence, something that the ninth grade homeroom teacher did on more than one occasion. The tenth grade class had already spent an entire year together as ninth graders, and carried out daily classroom life in ways not unlike a large family. Not everyone got along well, and the same people did not necessarily get along with each other every single day, but by and large the students and teacher fell into favorite work routines and everyone seemed to know what to expect from everyone else in the room.

Chapter Four describes how this intimate arrangement contributes to Alternative High students' understandings of the relationship between intelligence, effort, and school success. Students at Alternative High express confidence that school success is not meant to be accomplished all on one's own. Rather, students understand that

relying on others for support and having others keep tabs on their progress is a necessary ingredient for school success. As Part III of this dissertation shows, students at Alternative High negotiate their own and others' success identities against whether the person has enacted behaviors in school which will effectively garner success in school. Therefore, having a room full of classmates who are like family members, who will keep you on track with your schoolwork, contributes directly to whether a student can claim intelligence, effort, or success for herself. The small intimate class structure contributes to how students understand the role of intelligence and effort in their own school success.

In every class at Alternative High, students spend a portion of their day on "independent work time", during which the homeroom teacher exerts some supervision over their attentiveness, but for the most part allows students to walk freely around the room, and choose on their own which assignments to work on. During my observations in two separate classrooms, I noticed that a fair amount of chatting with neighbors, text messaging on cell phones, organizing personal photo albums, and the like was tolerated during independent work time. I found independent work time to be a comfortable, if not a bit distracting, environment for students to work at their own pace, collaborate with classmates, and have the teacher available to answer questions. This is in sharp contrast to the rather rigid, sit-in-your-seats environments at the other two schools. And to be fair, students in the other schools are not less distracted, they are just more discreet about it.

Similar to independent work time, a portion of class time is devoted to Silent Sustained Reading (SSR), during which time every student in the class is required to read a book for a minimum of 20 minutes in a row. They are permitted to read a book of their own choosing, however magazines and graphic novels are prohibited. The two teachers whose classrooms I observed routinely participated in SSR along with their students, citing it as one of their favorite parts of the school day. They encouraged me to select a novel from the bookshelf and participate as well. In my observations I found that the teachers' participation allows students the opportunity to sleep unnoticed, or at least uninterrupted, during SSR time, because the teacher herself is fully absorbed in her own reading. However, the majority of the students does not sleep during SSR, but reads intently.

Aside from independent work time and SSR, the rest of the school day is occupied by subject-specific lessons. In both the ninth and tenth grade classes I found students to be very vocal and interactive with the teachers who come in to deliver lessons in math, science, test prep for the high school exit exam, and so on. Students openly display interest in ideas or assignments, such as the group project to design a roller coaster in Physics. Also, they openly display any lack of desire they may feel to work on tasks. Many students are very comfortable publicly confronting their various teachers on unfulfilled promises or instances when they feel overworked or harshly graded. Multiple times during my observations the homeroom teachers had to step in and protect a subject-specific teacher from being railroaded by the class. While this gives the impression that Alternative High students are disrespectful or difficult to

manage, it is also important to recognize this sort of classroom dynamic as instances of students feeling entitled to be taken seriously by their teachers. Open, even heated, negotiations with adults is one of the skills that allow students to successfully navigate institutional settings such as schools and have their personal needs met by institutional agents—a skill that lower class students often do not develop (Lareau 2003). In this light, Alternative High students' demanding attitudes toward teachers can be seen as the development of a useful life skill, rather than seen as disrespect or aggression. This aspect of the environment at Alternative High is taken up again in Chapter Four where we see how, through their expectations, teachers reinforce Alternative High students' concerns over failure and fraudulent success.

Alternative High promotes rhetoric of itself as a place where students are able to find out for themselves what their personal strong suits are and then plan an educational and occupational future around their strengths. The school promises to hold students to rigorous academic standards while at the same time enabling opportunities to participate in the real world of work through their internships. Students are required to set their own academic goals and prove that they have reached those goals by an end-of-quarter demonstration of their schoolwork. This is very different from a week of final exams, as traditional high schools have; nonetheless, these end-of-quarter demonstrations are every bit as stressful for students. Students follow school norms of wearing professional attire and creating elaborate demonstration materials to exhibit their academic work. Poster boards and powerpoint presentations are common elements in end-of-quarter demonstrations. Students' homeroom teachers are not the only judges of

the demonstrations; a second teacher from Alternative High judges each presentation as well. Additionally, schoolmates and the general public are invited not only to attend, but also to offer written and verbal comments and criticisms to the student which the judges can take into consideration. Generally, the "public" does not include more than the students' parents and internship mentors, but in principle, students must be prepared to respond to comments from outsiders as well. During the period of my observations and interviews I attended ten end-of-quarter demonstrations, and found them to be an excellent venue for practicing presentation skills, despite being relatively weak in terms of academic content.

As Table 2.1 indicates, students at Alternative High perform extremely poorly on some of the standardized tests, and about average for the state on other measures. This is perhaps not surprising considering that Alternative High is not a charter school, but a career and technical high school, which is usually a category of public schools reserved for students who are failing out of their regular high school. While Alternative High is solidly a reform effort in education rather than a last resort for failing students, as most other career and technical high schools are, its placement in the district's hierarchy is not clearly identified. The student body comes from other high schools in the large urban district, and these students are drawn to Alternative High because of its mission to do things differently from traditional high schools. Many of Alternative High's students were indeed underperforming in their middle schools, and came to Alternative High in hopes that more individual attention from teachers and the relative freedom of attending school only three days a week would foster better academic results

for them. Thus, while I characterize the academic content of their lessons I observed to be relatively low, it is important to remember from where these students are starting. I certainly saw that most students at Alternative High are challenged by their curriculum, and their homeroom teachers hold them accountable for improving their skills in each subject.

Comprehensive High

Comprehensive High campus covers a city block. It is accessed through one main entrance off of a busy thoroughfare, and is cornered between major six-lane boulevards which feed strip malls, restaurants, supermarkets, auto repair shops, and the like for miles in each direction. Although it is considered a suburban school, not an urban one, the landscape surrounding Comprehensive High's campus does not have the quiet peacefulness of a residential neighborhood like many suburban schools enjoy, including Elite Charter High. Entering the school parking lot, each car must pass through a guard gate where security personnel check parking passes and verify visitors.

The median home value in this suburban area is $203,000 (Census 2000). However, I found great disparity in the homes of students I visited. White students in my sample tend to live in fairly large, spacious homes in newly constructed subdivisions, complete with perfectly landscaped yards. Meanwhile, Latino students I interviewed tend to live in older neighborhoods in homes in various states of disrepair, with non-functioning cars crowding driveways and front yards. Still others, Latinos and

whites alike, live in apartment complexes scattered around town. I interviewed very few students who live close enough to Comprehensive High to walk to school.

Comprehensive High has been undergoing a great deal of organizational change over the last several years. This is not uncommon for schools that are scrambling to avoid sanctions and meet standards exacted by No Child Left Behind legislation. Comprehensive High has had three principals in the last five years. Additionally, a new high school was built nearby to relieve Comprehensive High of its overpopulation problems. It opened the year before this research was conducted, and many of the students I interviewed are able to reflect on the changes after the school size was halved: it was reduced from 3,123 students to 1,456; from 126 teachers to 70 teachers (teachers were further reduced the following year to 63). The students I interviewed are by and large happy with the smaller size of their school, although several of them express disappointment that some favorite teachers have transferred to the new school. Many students mention that gang activity on campus has severely subsided since the school split. Several students remember that fights were common during every passing period when the school was large, and gang members defended territories on various parts of the campus. My observations of passing periods and the school grounds in general before and after school corroborate students' claims that things are fairly calm these days since the school split. Nonetheless, not all students I encountered on campus give the impression that Comprehensive High is a safe, non-threatening place to be.

The principal granted my request to observe in and solicit my interview sample from two classrooms, one upper track and one general track in terms of curriculum

level. She selected the classes based on my preferences, and sent me to an eleventh grade AP English class, and a tenth grade "college prep" World History class. The principal emphasized that Comprehensive High no longer has a "general track"—all students are enrolled in college preparatory courses that meet the state university entrance requirements. Both teachers warmly accepted me into their classrooms and gave me permission to be as active or passive as I preferred. As I did in all three schools, in order to maximize observations and minimize intrusions, I chose a side table in the front of each room and busily took field notes during the class periods.

Comprehensive High has recently switched to what is called a "block schedule" meaning that students attend, for example, math class only on Tuesdays and Thursdays, but spend a block of two hours there instead of one. Comprehensive High actually adopted a "modified block schedule" which means that some days are block days and other days are not. Their particular bell schedule has students in all six of their classes on Mondays and Fridays for 57 minutes each, and in only half their classes on Wednesdays and the other half on Thursdays for 120 minutes each. Tuesdays have a separate schedule altogether, where students begin the day 43 minutes later than other days, and spend 51 minutes in each of their six classes. Of course this schedule was altered frequently during my three weeks of observations to accommodate pep rallies and other school assemblies; testing days where schedules are rearranged; or minimum days, etcetera, when minutes are taken off of the class periods. Although dizzying to keep track of, students and teachers I spoke to seemed generally content with the arrangement.

The purpose of the block schedule is identical to Elite Charter High's rationale for its own: to allow more intensive instruction during a two-hour block than is possible in 57-minute segments. From my observations I cannot confidently claim that this goal was met in either of the two classes in my study. The AP English class is certainly able to spend long stretches of time reading texts or writing essays uninterrupted; this is the goal of the block period. At the same time, however, the teacher often begins instruction and ends instruction a full ten minutes or more inside the allotted time. Clearly, maximizing class time is not a weighing concern for this class.

The History teacher, on the other hand, very carefully and promptly budgets his class minutes. He also schedules in a mid-block break for the students to have free time and stretch their legs, presumably to reduce the physical burden of sitting in a confining desk for two straight hours. In addition, this particular teacher's pedagogy entails segmenting class time into discrete activities, often largely unrelated to one another. This seems to be a carry-over from the pre-block days. His tried-and-true lesson plans were not scrapped to maximize the new time frames; rather they are simply refitted as segments within longer class periods. The benefit of uninterrupted stretches of time is not as fruitful as it is perhaps intended to be under the circumstances of either the AP English teacher's or the History teacher's methods. Nonetheless, the principal proudly touts the modified block schedule as evidence of the increased academic intensity of her school.

The pedagogy I observed is effective. I have no doubt that students walk away from their class sessions having learned something new. Nonetheless, the pedagogy in

both classes can best be characterized as correct-answer-oriented. By this I mean that instruction and discussions seem tightly focused on guiding students to understand how they might respond correctly to test items on the course material, as opposed to a more open-ended comprehension of the subject matter. To be fair, my observational data was collected during spring, which is schools' "testing season," a time when helping students prepare for CST and AP exams weighs heavily on teachers' minds. However, I noticed that even after the CST tests were completed, the pedagogy I observed remained the same. Again, to be fair, I did not have the opportunity to continue observations after the AP exams were completed, however this gave me a firm impression that correct-answer-orientation was not a temporary mode for testing season, but rather it is the standard format of instruction. In Chapter Five, I argue that correct-answer oriented teaching styles contribute to tensions that Comprehensive High students experience between their understandings of what it takes to succeed in school versus notions of "real learning," as René, an AP junior calls it. Students at this high school say that "regurgitating" information on tests and assignments is required for school success, but it is neither a mark of true learning nor of true intelligence.

I offer an example of correct-answer-oriented teaching from the AP English class I observed, where almost all of the presentation of the material is referenced directly to the AP exam. One morning while the class is reading an excerpt from Thoreau, the teacher stops the student who is reading aloud after the first couple of sentences: "What is this called? What did he just do?" Students seem unsure what the correct answer is, and they fidget quietly. The teacher continues once she is sure that no

one is going to volunteer an answer: "For the AP test, you would have to know that he opens with a paradox."

This example illustrates how closely learning is tied to correct answers on standardized exams in courses such as this one. The History teacher I observed is similarly correct-answer-oriented in his presentation of material, and similarly focused on student success on standardized exams, in this case the CST exams rather than an AP exam. He diligently covers material which students can expect to find on the tenth grade history CST, and he continually reminds them of the importance of committing the material to memory precisely for this reason.

Although teachers lead classes, their pedagogy is only a part of the learning environment. The students themselves contribute a great deal of influence over the contexts of classrooms, which of course characterizes the larger sense of the local environment of a school. In the AP English Class, the teacher generally has to exert visible effort in order to quiet the class down to begin the day's lesson. This is also the case when the teacher attempts to resume leading a lesson after a disruption, because any time the teacher's attention is turned away from the students for even a moment, vigorous chatting erupts. As we would expect, in both the AP English class as well as the general curriculum World History class, there is also a fair amount of discreet behaviors of disengagement with the lesson while the teacher is giving instruction: cell phone texting; make-up application; and homework for other classes being done inconspicuously.

The atmosphere in the AP English classroom is very interactive, which seems to be a positive goal of the teacher's pedagogy, even though the interaction very often gets beyond the teacher's control. Students continually collaborate with each other and the teacher in developing points and fleshing out definitions and examples. Students are comfortable jumping into an ongoing discussion without raised hands—though this comes with the usual consequence of less assertive students being left out of the verbal interaction. A handful of students, one junior named Stephanie in particular, dominate the verbal space of the classroom. These students are able to draw the teacher's attention away from her interactions with quieter classmates, even for non-academic comments and questions. Often when this happens, the quieter student never gets the teacher's attention returned to her or him, so she or he loses the chance to interact with the teacher further.

In addition to the typical gossip and schoolwork complaints, students engage in side conversations over current politics, national news scandals, and the like. Their conversations do not express particularly sophisticated viewpoints—for example students' opinions of the then-current presidential candidates are echoes of media soundbites rather than thoughtful opinions—but these topics and the debate-style interaction among classmates/friends are noticeably absent from the general track World History class. Students at all three schools view discussions of "smart topics" such as politics and history to be signs of a person's high intelligence. In Chapter Five, we see that at Comprehensive High, AP courses are understood to be reserved for intelligent students, despite the common belief among AP students themselves that the

demands of the courses might actually be easier than general curriculum because there are relatively fewer assignments due in AP courses. Thus, while AP classes may or may not be challenging the students, they are experienced as spaces where intelligent students congregate and engage in casual discussions on "smart topics." Such is the environment in which AP students negotiate their success identities.

The AP English class is comprised of: ten white students, seven Latinos, four Asian Americans (including one Korean immigrant), and one African American. There are eight males and fourteen females. It is a relatively small class of twenty-two. The World History class, on the other hand, has a student composition that more closely reflects the school's larger student body. Out of thirty-seven total students, fifteen are white, twenty-one are Latino, and one is Asian American. There are twenty males and seventeen females.

The World History teacher is punctual with beginning and ending his lessons, and offers an eight-minute break during the block days, when the class period lasts two full hours. During that time, students are free to wander the room, though few of them do. However, they do talk loudly; sleep on their desks; eat snacks; listen to ipods; text message on cell phones; or goof off with classmates who sit near them. This teacher has very little trouble getting the lesson going again after the break; the students are rather compliant in sitting down and enacting the quiet, docile behaviors that are acceptable in his class. This teacher uses the eight minute break time as leverage whenever the class is too disruptive or inattentive, meaning that he threatens to take away minutes from their break if they do not immediately settle down and resume the

rhythm of his lesson. This is a surprisingly effective technique, perhaps because he makes good on his threats and warnings. I witnessed two days when minutes were removed from the break time.

To characterize the quality of academic discussion in the World History class: most information is disseminated by the teacher through handwritten slides on an overhead projector, supplemented by oral elaboration on the material by the teacher. The teacher often asks open questions, factual in nature, allowing students to respond. These questions are largely review-type questions, asking students to recall dates or names from previous class sessions. Occasionally, the teacher invites participation in his delivery of new material, for example: "Why do you think they called it the Cold War?" To which a student calls out: "Because it was fought during the winter!" In this case, the teacher corrects the response, assuring the student that is was a good guess (the student was visibly surprised that his answer was not right).

Occasionally, students raise hands or call out semi-unrelated questions in the middle of his presentations. One example happens during a description of Nazi policies of sending not only Jews to concentration camps, but also other populations considered undesirable or inferior, including homosexuals. A female student calls out incredulously: "You mean they had people like that even way back then?!" The teacher responds—a bit stiffly: "Yes, there have been homosexuals all throughout history." The student continues her open interaction with the teacher: "I didn't know that!" The teacher immediately resumes his lecture on Nazi camps. The teacher is unwilling to be deterred for long from his presentation, perhaps due to the controversial nature of the

topic, however his reaction in this example is typical of how he handles other unsolicited questions from students. He is willing to field questions, but is quick to return to his lesson agenda.

On the whole there is a great deal less open interaction in the World History class compared to the AP English class, however, there is also a great deal less time spent straying from academic topics in the World History class, and no oligarchy of student personalities dominate the verbal space of this classroom. These differences may partly stem from the class sizes: 22 in AP English and 37 in World History. It is more difficult to keep a lesson on track if 37 voices are free to openly contribute to the presentation of material. Nonetheless, the differences also correspond to findings in the literature on curriculum tracks which suggest that upper-track classes have students and teachers who expect the class to be managed in a discussion-oriented, collaborative way; and lower-track classes tend to have both students and teachers who expect the class to be managed in a more disciplined, top-down way (Metz 1978).

From my observational data, it seems that AP students and general curriculum students have very different classroom environments in which they negotiate their success identities. In the general curriculum class, there is much less opportunity for students to publicly display their intelligence or effort in front of their classmates. Of course, most AP students are enrolled in at least one general curriculum class, and often several, thus they experience both types of spaces. As I demonstrate in Chapter Five, concerns about whether intelligence is truly recognizable in A's on report cards arise among AP students at Comprehensive High, notions that general curriculum students do

not seem concerned by. AP students disdain classmates who receive excellent grades by memorizing material for tests like "machines"; they describe it as an insult to true intelligence. Their classroom experiences with correct-answer-oriented pedagogy and unstructured AP class minutes during which "smart" chatter erupts undoubtedly fuels this tension over how to identify authentic intelligence in others. For these students, authentic intelligence and "real learning" are important elements in the negotiation of one's success identity.

Conclusion

This Chapter has provided descriptions of the three school sites in this study. As detailed in Chapter One, my investigation of success identity in high school students takes an "inhabited institutions" approach to identity, which means that the local environments where students attend school are taken as critical elements for students' identities. Schools are contexts where local actors interpret, modify, and act on cultural schemas in ways that make sense within that particular organization. Local school environments foster local attitudes and beliefs about education, routes to attain school success, and the roles one's intelligence and effort play in the process. From this perspective we cannot assume that all high school students' success identities are developed and managed in similar ways. Instead, we expect that students' success identities are products of a student's interactions with his or her particular school environment, laden as it is with local understandings of how intelligence and effort matter to school success, and what counts as school success in the first place. We must

expect students in different schools to construct success identity differently. Thus, this Chapter's careful articulation of the details of daily life at each of the three schools is an important starting place to begin analysis of how and where local organizational contexts matter in the construction of students' success identities.

PART II

INTRODUCTION

INTELLIGENCE, EFFORT, AND SCHOOL SUCCESS IN LOCAL SCHOOL

ENVIRONMENTS

This section of the dissertation lays out the success identity landscape, so to speak, at each of the three schools in the study. Identities are negotiated in specific contexts, through interactions with other actors and with institutional and social structures (Blumer 1969; Goffman 1959; Gubrium and Holstein 2000; Mead 1934). Thus in order to thoroughly understand individual students' success identities, is it critical to start with an understanding of the prevailing sentiments about school success in students' local contexts. This study privileges schools as the location of greatest interest to the investigation of success identity. Certainly students' homes, peer hangouts, and other locations are relevant sites in the ongoing development of one's success identity as well. Students' home lives and peer friendships also contribute directly to their understandings of school success. However, I chose schools because they are the location where students achieve school success or fail in their pursuit of it. In school, students are routinely evaluated in terms of their intellectual abilities and their effort. Students' academic performance serves as important feedback on how well they are faring in their pursuit of school success, which contributes to students' construction of their success identities. Further, I chose schools as the location for this research because school assessments have profound consequences for students' futures. Grades on report cards, scores on standardized tests, and teacher evaluations, exert

weighty influence over the prospects for individual students' educational and career futures (Brewer, Eide, and Ehrenberg 1999; Massey, Charles, Lundy, and Fischer 2003; McFarland 2006; Mehan, Hertweck, and Meihls 1985; Oakes 1985; Rosenbaum and Binder 1997; Rosenbaum 2001; Warren, Grodsky, and Lee 2008).

We know that school assessment matters to students' *futures*, Part III of this dissertation takes up the question of how school assessment matters to students' sense of *self*. Before we can get there, however, it is necessary to chart the terrain of the local school contexts in terms of local attitudes and beliefs surrounding school success. Throughout the following three chapters, I identify ways in which students at each school explain school success, paying particular attention to competing rationales of intelligence and effort. Once the relevant attitudes in these local school landscapes are mapped out, we can then go on to see how individual students position themselves within that terrain in Part III.

This section concentrates on students' descriptions of their school around them, descriptions of how they perceive others (not themselves), and what they understand to be normal behaviors and normal attitudes at their schools. The majority of the data presented in the following three chapters come from interview questions where I ask students to look at report cards of anonymous students. I ask them to imagine that the report card owners are students at their school, and to describe what they think these anonymous students might be like. The intention behind the anonymous report cards is to elicit responses from students that characterize their beliefs about the *type of person* who receives excellent grades, versus the *type of person* who receives poor grades, for

example. In short, the data offer insight into the relationship students perceive between identity and school success. The discussions of the report cards also offer insight into the relationship students perceive between intelligence, effort and school success. If students did not volunteer comments on intelligence, for example, I asked them directly for their impression of how intelligent the anonymous students might be.

In the following chapters the term school success refers to the grades that students receive on their report cards. I use the term school success rather than simply grades for two reasons. The first is that school success better captures the wide-ranging set of achievements which are embodied in good grades, and which are perceived as lacking in poor grades, according to students I interviewed. Students say that good grades indicate intelligence, effort, responsibility, and even moral value. They also suspect that a student who receives unacceptably low grades lacks at least one, and possibly all of these achievements.

The second reason I use the term school success is that specific grades, such as C's for example, are viewed very differently at each of the three schools in this study. At Comprehensive High, C's are the bare minimum of acceptable grades. C-minuses and lower are thought to be unacceptably low, but C's and above are considered reasonable success. Students at Comprehensive High often emphasize the importance of demonstrating that one is average or better than average, and that that C's are official designations of "average" (B's are official designations of "good" and A's "excellent"). At Elite Charter High, on the other hand, anything below a B is an unacceptably low grade to receive on a report card. Even though Elite Charter High students

acknowledge that C's officially mean "average," in their school B's are the norm for feeling minimally satisfied with one's grades. Alternative High has yet a different threshold for acceptable grades; students at Alternative High express great concern over failure. Failing a course or even appearing to be on the verge of failing a course is the dividing line which separates acceptable grades from unacceptable ones. Usually this means that D's are unacceptable, but "too many" C's or C-minuses can be interpreted as dangerously close to failure as well. While at Comprehensive High it is important to prove that one is at least average, at Alternative High, it is important to demonstrate that one is not failing. In light of this variation among schools, I use the term school success because it more fluidly identifies the broader set of accomplishments involved in achieving acceptable levels of grades at each school, regardless of each local definition of acceptable.

The Intelligence Schema and the Effort Schema

Taking an inhabited institutions approach means to look carefully at the ways in which local actors—in this case students—actively interpret, amend, or perhaps even dismiss cultural schemas in their local organizational contexts—in this case high schools (see Chapter One for a more detailed discussion of the inhabited institutions approach). I identify two cultural schemas surrounding school success that we might expect to emerge in students' descriptions. The first I refer to as the Intelligence Schema. The Intelligence Schema embodies the widely held belief that individual students' capacities for learning varies with each student's intelligence level. Thus

success in school, or at minimum one's potential for success in school, is thought to rest on native intelligence. Although it is not commonly referred to in scholarly literature as the Intelligence Schema, the logic of this schema is well documented by existing research (Gould 1981; Halloway 1998; Herrnstein and Murray 1994; Nisbett 2009; Richardson 2002; Sternberg 1996; Stevenson and Stigler 1992). We can expect this cultural schema to be quite pervasive due to the long history of intelligence testing—in all its various forms—being an integral part of the practice of education in public schools in the United States (Johnson 1953; Karabel 2005; Lemann 1999; Osgood 1984; Richardson and Bradley 2005). The Intelligence Schema offers a relatively uncomplicated relationship between intelligence and school success: the more intelligence one has, the greater his or her school success can be; the less intelligence one has, the lower we might expect his or her school success to be. Within this schema, native intelligence is seen as the mechanism through which a person learns, therefore the strength of that mechanism hinders or boosts how effectively one can learn, which directly and powerfully affects school success. Native intelligence is conceptualized as a talent, one that is rewarded in educational endeavors. The Intelligence Schema accepts that any population will have an unequal distribution of intelligence across individuals, and this is accepted as a fair, natural inequality.

However, the Intelligence Schema is not the only available explanation for school success. A student's motivation is also understood to play a critical role in achieving school success. Students who are motivated to try hard in school can also earn school success, according to popular wisdom.

Motivation to succeed in school comes from a variety of sources. Home life circumstances and family attitudes toward school influence students' motivation to achieve school success. Of course some families' influences reduce a student's motivation toward school while other families' influences promote motivation in school (Alexander, Entwisle, and Thompson 1987; Chin and Phillips 2004; Glasgow, Dornbusch, Troyer, Steinberg, and Ritter 1997; Lareau 1989; Lareau 2003; Mehan 1992; Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell 1999; Sanders, Field, and Diego 2001; Willis 1977). A student's motivation toward school success is also influenced by peers' attitudes in friendship circles, groups whose membership often overlap with race and class status (Flores-Gonzales 1999; Fordham and Ogbu 1987; MacLeod 1987; Matute-Bianchi 1986; Mehan, Hubbard, Villanueva, and Lintz 1996; Tyson 2002; Tyson, Darity, and Castellino 2005; Willis 1977). Understanding sources of motivation is important because motivation inspires effort. According to both popular understandings and research in education, effort is a key factor for school success (Brint, Contreras, and Matthews 2001; Brookhart 1993; Carbonaro 2005; Corbett, Wilson, and Williams 2002; Crocker, Brook, Niija, and Villacorta 2006; Kelly 2008; Legault, Green-Demers, and Pelletier 2006; Mueller and Dweck 1998; Newmann 1992). A common thread that runs through all of the various scholarly literature on the topic of motivation is the notion that school success rests on an individual student's effort in school, regardless of the source(s) from which the student draws motivation for school effort. I refer to this explanation for school success as The Effort Schema.

The Effort Schema is less straightforward than the Intelligence Schema. The Effort schema embodies the widely held belief that school success is available to anyone who is willing to work hard enough to achieve it. What I describe here as the Effort Schema is derived from scholarship on Achievement Ideology (Barnes 2002; MacLeod 1987; Mehan, Hubbard, and Villanueva 1994; Valadez 2000) and American Dream Ideology (Brint and Karabel 1989; Hochschild 1995; Hochschild and Scovronick 2003; Johnson 2006; Mellow and Heelan 2008). However, the Effort Schema, as I identify it, encompasses ideas that pertain specifically to school success, rather than to success in life more broadly. I further limit the Effort Schema to a description of beliefs about ways that students can achieve school success for themselves through effort, rather than broader notions of how education yields success in life more generally.

The Effort Schema is not antithetical to the Intelligence Schema. As Hochschild (1995) posits, Americans believe that success comes as a result of an individual's hard work and/or natural talents. Since the Intelligence Schema treats intellectual ability as a God given talent that allows an individual to reap success, and the Effort Schema explains success through hard work alone, both schemas are compatible within Hochschild's framework of American Dream Ideology. Further, the Effort Schema does not dismiss intelligence as a factor in school success; rather, the Effort Schema suggests that hard work can compensate for limits to intelligence, barring any serious mental disability. This means that less effort is demanded of individuals with higher intelligence, and more effort is required from individuals with lower intelligence, yet

this inequity is treated as fair. Indeed, a key component of the Effort Schema is that this unequal requirement of effort across individuals is fair because effort itself is a mechanism for equalizing the availability of school success. An individual student need not resign him or herself to low school success based on his or her native intellectual abilities, effort is offered as an additional route to achieve success.

The Effort Schema is also more complicated than the Intelligence Schema because one's effort can be influenced by multiple sources of motivation or amotivation, as discussed above. Motivation is seen as variable and malleable in this schema. Although scholars readily acknowledge and study these factors, in the popular understanding of school success, the onus of responsibility is on the individual student for finding adequate motivation to put forth the necessary level of effort in school (MacLeod 1987; Mehan, Hubbard, and Villanueva 1994). This presents a tricky complication, one that the Effort Schema largely glosses over. Motivation is acknowledged to be rather easily swayed by outside influences such as peers and family, yet willingness to put forth the requisite effort to succeed in school is ultimately construed as a feature of the individual student's character. The Effort Schema posits that all a student has to do is try hard enough to succeed—but "enough" remains unspecified. "Enough" might mean extra hours of studying to prepare for a test on a particular day, and "enough" might also mean overcoming hindering influences of amotivation in one's life.

Another facet of the relationship between effort and school success that the Effort Schema glosses over is the fact that effort is heavily affected by resources.

Material resources such as internet access, money for private tutors, available transportation to a public library, and the like make a difference in the quality and quantity of effort required by various students. In addition, students have unequal access to human resources such as adults and peers who can help with homework. The Effort Schema focuses on the distance a student must cover between his or her native intelligence and school success, with only a vague acknowledgement of effort's susceptibility to resources and motivation obstacles. This dimension of the Effort Schema can be summed up by the popular adage "Where there is a will, there is a way." The Effort Schema holds the student responsible for doing whatever it takes to achieve school success. A student must simply try hard *enough*.

Research on school achievement points to an additional factor that can significantly affect school success. Teachers' expectations for individual students' abilities are found to be excellent predictors of student performance and educational outcomes, even when the teacher expectations underestimate or overestimate performance compared to other, more objective measures (Alvidrez and Weinstein 1999; Jussim and Eccles 1992; Tach and Farkas 2006). Teacher's expectations are often conceptualized as a self-fulfilling prophesy, meaning that students tend to live up to their teachers' expectations of them, whether it be due to the student performing at the level the teacher indicates is appropriate, or due to the teacher perceiving the student's performance as no higher or lower than originally expected, or due to the teacher's creation of conditions which circumscribe the student's potential performance (e.g. track placement), or due to a combination of all three (Diamond, Randolph, and

Spillane 2004; Garcia and Guerra 2004; Jussim and Harber 2005; Katz 1999; Lane, Wehby, and Cooley 2006; Merton 1948; Rist 1970; Spitz 1999). While it is important to recognize the role that teacher expectations can play in a student's educational performance and outcomes, research on this phenomenon portrays it as a rather subtle process, one that often occurs beneath the consciousness of both students and teachers. Therefore, there is not a cultural schema that explains school success via teacher expectations. Teachers are not popularly viewed as vehicles of students' success. Although "good" teachers are considered to be inspiring in the lives of students, the student's own success or failure is seen to rest on the student's own merit: intelligence, effort, or some combination of the two. It is not the teacher, but the student, who is seen as ultimately responsible for school success.

Local Explanations of School Success through Local Field Stories

While cultural schemas such as the Intelligence Schema and the Effort Schema pervade all schools, the actors at each school construe local meanings from the schemas, modifying them in ways that make sense within the organizational structures of their particular school environment (Binder 2007; Hallett and Ventresca 2006b; Westenholz, Pedersen, and Dobbin 2006). Thus, the beliefs and attitudes at each school in this study embody the concerns and sensibilities of the actors—students, teachers, and administrators—who inhabit each local school. As understandings of success are closely tied to stories of individuals' characters and personhood (Hochschild 1995), we must interrogate ways that students' identities are incorporated into explanations of

school success. Following Westenholz (2006), in order to understand how local meaning making occurs vis-à-vis wider cultural schemas, it is important to recognize "field stories" or identity stories which local participants use as "raw material" for the negotiation of identities. Westenholz explains:

> Rather than talking about institutional logics assumed to be widely disseminated in the Western world or orders of justification assumed to be applicable universally, I propose the term *field stories*—with which the participants in a work practice are familiar—to describe the work practice and its participants. Field stories are relevant for the processes within the meaning arena; that is, they are claiming to describe a possible normal behavior in the work practice. However, not all actors are necessarily adopting the stories as "their" perceptions of how the field works.   2006:1020

Field stories, then, are stories that describe types of people, descriptions which are relevant to the specific local environment of an organization. Field stories are examples of how local actors adapt broad cultural ideas to fit the sensibilities of their specific organizational context. Specifically, field stories are local adaptations of schemas that are applied directly to identity. Field stories are identity types that are available in a local organizational setting; local actors draw on these identity types to explain the rationales of real actors' behavior. However, real actors do not conform thoroughly to the identity types described by field stories. Rather, field stories are *types* that embody the concerns and expectations of the local environment; they are "raw material," as Westenholz describes it, with which individuals construct identities of real actors.

Westenholz finds, for example, field stories of the "organizational citizen", the "free agent" the "grassrooter," and the "project maker" in her fieldwork in two Danish

Information Technology (IT) companies. Westenholz uses the concept of field stories to demonstrate how individuals' identities emerge and are negotiated within a particular organizational environment. She argues that field stories are pre-existing, locally shared identity-types which are invoked when an individual's identity is (re)negotiated in response to his or her behavior in new circumstances within the organization. Although this dissertation does not analyze *emerging* identities of individuals, field stories are relevant to the analysis of students' perceptions of the roles intelligence and effort play in school success because field stories embody the concerns and experiences of people who inhabit the local environment. School success is defined and understood differently at each of the three schools in this study. Awareness of the existing field stories in each school context provides insights into how various organizational arrangements matter to students' perceptions of success, and how their own success identities are shaped by their local school environment.

This study looks for ways in which students in local school contexts make local meanings from larger cultural schemas on the topic of intelligence's and effort's relationships to school success. However, there are differences we can expect to find among the schools based on existing literature. We should expect to find that students in middle and upper-middle class high schools are more college-focused than their counterparts at lower-income schools. This means that they are more aware of college requirements and admissions criteria (Golden 2006; Karabel 2005; Lemann 1999; Stevens 2007). Students at lower-income schools on the other hand are less likely to have been socialized toward college futures in both their home lives as well as their

school lives (Glasgow et al. 1997; Hansen 1994; Kozol 2005; Lareau 2003; MacLeod 1987; Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell 1999; Teachman 1987; Wilcox 1982). In addition, lower-income students tend to be more focused on immediate life concerns such as financial pressures, which makes them less able to confidently pursue the delayed rewards of higher education (Bloom 2007; Kozol 2005; Massey, Charles, Lundy, and Fischer 2003; Rosenbaum 2001).

In addition to being more college-focused, scholarship such as Wilcox (1982) indicates that students in middle class schools are socialized toward a different type of motivation for school success compared to students at working class schools. Wilcox found that elementary school students she studied in a middle class school were encouraged by their teacher to draw on internal motivation for school tasks, and to think independently, and make effective decisions—traits aligned with the demands of work in professional arenas. Meanwhile, students in the working class elementary school in Wilcox's study were socialized to respond to external motivation for school tasks, i.e. enforcement of instructions by the teacher, and they were encouraged to follow directions obediently rather than think independently, and to collaborate with classmates rather than make independent decisions about their work, and about how to use their time. Thus, we might expect to find that the social class location of each school contributes to the local attitudes regarding appropriate sources of motivation for school effort, i.e. internal versus external, as well as overall attitudes about what effort *is*, i.e. successful collaboration with peers versus successful completion of independent work and decisions.

The following three chapters each take one of the three high schools in this study: Elite Charter High, Alternative High, and Comprehensive High, and lay out the prevailing beliefs surrounding the relationship between intelligence, effort, and school success in each school context, paying close attention to how each site incorporates broader cultural schemas into its local definitions and understandings of school success. I highlight similarities and differences among the three high schools as well as illustrate features of each school organization which contribute to local attitudes and perceptions of intelligence, effort, and success. In each chapter, I also present and define local field stories, to use Westenholz' term, or identity types which offer explanations for school success (or lack of success) as local students understand it. At the same time, field stories embody the experiences and concerns of local actors, thus they both contribute to and are a product of the organizational environment of each site. Figures II.1 - II.3 offer a summary of the findings at each school.

Elite Charter High

Intelligence Schema   Cultural Schemas   Effort Schema

High intelligence engenders effort   Modified Schemas

Field Stories

OCD Overachiever (high success)
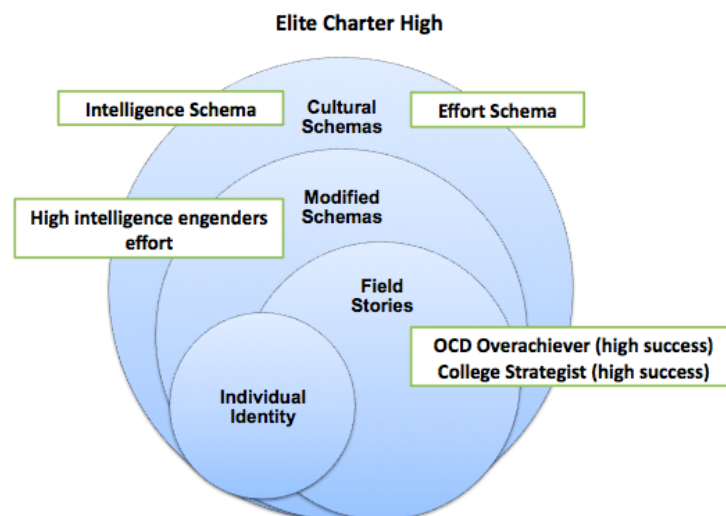College Strategist (high success)

Individual Identity

Figure II.1: Elite Charter High—Diagram Summary of Chapter Three
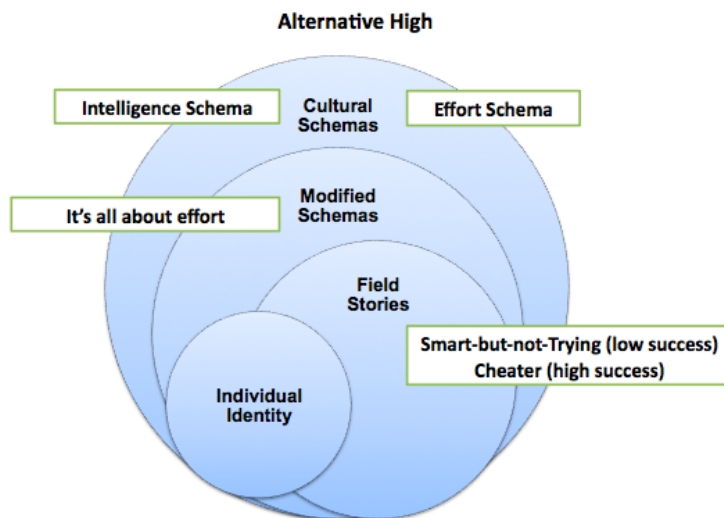
Figure II.2: Alternative High—Diagram Summary of Chapter Four
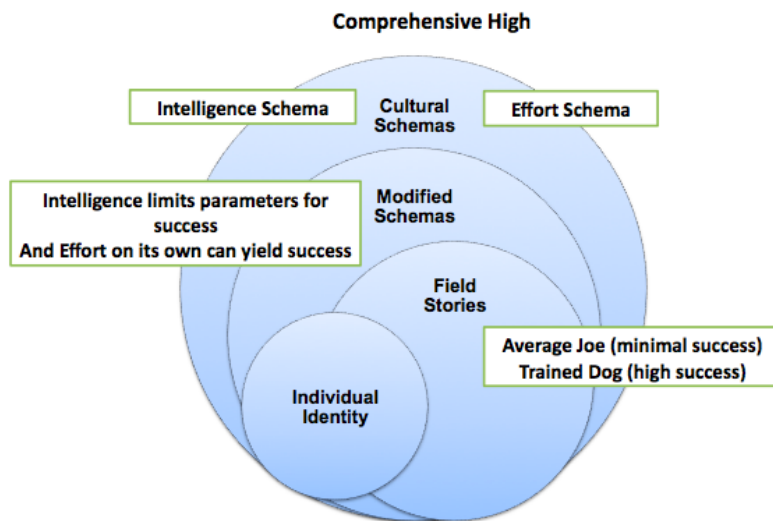

Figure II.3: Comprehensive High—Diagram Summary of Chapter Five

Field stories vary at each high school. Throughout Chapters Three, Four and Five, I discuss why the field stories that exist in one high school context do not appear in others. For example, while there are likely to be students who cheat at each high school, it is only at Alternative High that I find a salient field story of *Cheater*. Fraudulently garnering good grades by copying a classmate's work or the internet is something that Alternative High students are very concerned about. Cheating, as an illegitimate source of success, comes up again and again in interviews with students at Alternative High; it is high on their academic radar. In Chapter Four, I demonstrate that multiple features of academic life at Alternative High contribute to students' concern over cheating, including teachers who publicly accuse students of plagiarism, and the local belief that legitimate, respectable school success is dependent on a student's effort alone (not a student's intelligence). Meanwhile at Comprehensive High, during interviews, students discuss instances of cheating but the students do not describe it as a defining character trait of the person who does the cheating, as do students at Alternative High. At Comprehensive High, behaviors of cheating do not constitute a field story because identity is not implicated in the behavior. Further, at Elite Charter High, cheating does not seem to be a salient concern at all for students I talked to. Few students even mention it in interviews and when they do, it does not carry any emotional weight. At Elite Charter High students are more heavily concerned with the danger of spending too much of one's energy on schoolwork, they do not express concern over students who spend too little energy by cheating.

In addition to field stories being different at each school, that is, revolving around concerns that are specific to the students at each individual school, field stories also vary in whether they are positive identity stories or negative identity stories. Table II.1 illustrates the positive or negative orientation of each of the field stories I discuss in the dissertation.

Table II.1: Field Stories' Positive or Negative Orientation

	Positive Field Story	**Negative Field Story**
High Success	College Strategist (ECH)	OCD Overachiever (ECH) Cheater (Alt High) Trained Dog (Comp High)
Acceptable Success	Average Joe (Comp High)	
Low Success		Smart-but-not-Trying (Alt High)

Identifying local field stories offers insight into the relationship between local beliefs about school success and individual students' own success identities. From these descriptions of the local landscapes of beliefs around school success, we will have a thorough understanding of the contexts in which students' individual success identities are constructed. Each of the next three chapters start by describing one school site's local modifications of the cultural schemas: the Intelligence Schema and the Effort Schema, followed by a demonstration of the two most salient field stories I find in that high school context.

CHAPTER THREE

THE PARADOX OF EFFORT

INTELLIGENCE, EFFORT, AND SCHOOL SUCCESS AT ELITE CHARTER HIGH

At Elite Charter High, the students I interviewed describe intelligence as an integral part of school success. As do students at all three schools in this study, they assert that school success is not based on intelligence alone; rather it is the result of a complicated mix of intelligence and effort. However, unlike my respondents at Alternative High and Comprehensive High, Elite Charter High students characterize effort as a natural counterpart to intelligence. Thus, here, at Elite Charter High, school success in explained by both intelligence and effort, as it is at all three schools in this study, yet the local definition of effort precludes effort from existing as a category or resource for school success which is outside of or separate from intelligence.

At Elite Charter High, students describe effort in terms of *caring* about school and *wanting* success. Effort is characterized as a desire, which is fueled by high intelligence. In the interviews, I ask students to look over anonymous report cards and to describe the person who received the grades.

PE	B	2 absence	2 tardies
Woodshop	B	2 absence	0 tardies
Math	C-	2 absence	0 tardies
Science	C-	2 absence	0 tardies
English	D	2 absence	2 tardies
History	C	2 absence	0 tardies

Figure 3.1: Anonymous Report Card of Lower-Performing High School Student

Discussing a relatively low-performing student (see Figure 3.1), Denise, a white sophomore enrolled in two AP courses (out of four total classes this semester) gives a typical response: "[This student] just doesn't care about school at all…they probably just slacked off the entire year and then at the end of the semester tried to make themselves have a passing grade with two C-minuses. Like they studied for the last test and tried to get that D to a C. In English they couldn't do it because they couldn't get any insight up in them." Several students at Elite Charter High imply that low intelligence likely contributes to low grades, similar comments to Denise's assertion that the anonymous student lacks the capacity for insight in English class. However, the overriding explanation for low school success is a lack of internal motivation, usually described as not *caring* as Denise's response shows when she says the anonymous student "just doesn't care about school at all." Other Elite Charter High students also describe it as not *wanting* to attain success.

Descriptions of effort as caring about school are not characteristic of the other two schools in this study. Although some students at Comprehensive High do use the terms care and want, the words do not carry the same descriptions of personal desire that are evident in Elite Charter High responses. Moreover, in my interviews with students at Alternative High, for example, effort is almost exclusively described in terms of school-appropriate behaviors, such as turning in work. Caring about school and wanting success are not related to discussions of effort. Elite Charter High students' definitions of effort as caring about school and wanting to succeed might be seen as evidence of their socialization in middle and upper-middle class schools to find

internal motivation and personal desire to execute their school tasks, as Wilcox (1982) found. However, students' understandings of school success at Elite Charter High also involve a belief that intelligence is a requisite factor.

While low effort is the chief explanation for low success, students at Elite Charter High attribute excellent grades to the anonymous student's intellectual talents in addition to how much he or she cares about school and desires success. The students I interviewed see school success, e.g. the grades depicted in the report card in Figure 3.2, as evidence of high intelligence, not simply effort alone.

English AP	A-	0 absence	1 tardies
Physics	A	0 absence	0 tardies
Trigonometry	B+	0 absence	0 tardies
ASB	A	0 absence	0 tardies
Drama	A	0 absence	0 tardies
History AP	A	0 absence	0 tardies

Figure 3.2 Anonymous Report Card of High-Performing High School Student

Alexis, a white sophomore in four AP classes (out of four total classes this semester) gives a typical initial reaction to the near-straight A's on the report card in Figure 3.2: "This is really college-bound and trying hard in every class. Probably smart." Alexis goes on to explain that the report card indicates that the anonymous student is indeed intelligent, not just "probably smart" after all: "because they can obviously understand like a wide range of subjects. Like they're getting A's in all their classes except trigonometry, which they got a B in. But the still have an A in, like, Physics, so they obviously, like, can do math and they can do English. It's a pretty

wide range of subjects and they are doing well in them, so they can obviously, like, understand things and learn them and put them to use in a grade in the class."

Alexis' immediate association with academic success and strategizing for college admittance is taken up below. Here, I would like to emphasize that A's and advanced coursework are seen as unmistakable indicators of intelligence. Alexis' response is typical in its certainty that the report card in Figure 3.2 signals both hard work and intelligence; other students at Elite Charter High give similar interpretations.

For example, Rebecca, a white sophomore in three AP classes unhesitatingly declares that the near-straight A's report card in Figure 3.2 belongs to a person who is smart "because it looks like they are challenging themselves more with the AP courses and the physics…and it also shows that they strive for excellence. They are working hard." For Rebecca, A's in AP courses do not come easily. She reports spending 20 hours a week on homework outside of school in her own effort of "striving for excellence." Yet despite the extensive time she devotes to schoolwork, she is confident that her 4.5 GPA reflects her high intelligence more than it reflects her labor studying. (Honors and AP classes are assigned weighted grades. An A in an AP or honors course is given 5 points toward the GPA instead of the 4 points given to A's in general curriculum courses. Thus, it is possible to receive a GPA as high as 5.0 if all of one's classes are honors or AP level.) Rebecca's personal experience exemplifies what Elite Charter High students describe more generally. Part and parcel to being intelligent for students at Elite Charter High is the desire to challenge oneself, the desire to attain excellence. Thus, excellent grades such as those in Figure 3.2 are seen as clear

indicators of both intelligence and effort, but the effort is seen as a natural counterpart to being intelligent: intelligent people strive for excellence.

Students at Elite Charter High articulate the relationship between success, intelligence, and effort in a particular way. The relationship expressed by students here is distinct from the two other schools in this study. As Rebecca's answer above implies, intelligence engenders a desire to achieve. Caring about school success and feeling internally motivated to excel are described as byproducts of high intelligence. This relationship emerges in students' responses to the lower performing student's report card in Figure 3.1 as well. Jackie, a white sophomore in three AP classes asserts that she can tell that the owner of the low report card in Figure 3.1 is "not very" smart "because they're not trying, they're not enthusiastic about [schoolwork]." Here Jackie uses the term "enthusiastic" to capture the phenomenon of internal motivation to learn that is inherent to high intelligence. Elite Charter High students' descriptions demonstrate that they see this relationship between effort—described as internal desire: caring or wanting success—in instances of both high success and low success. Thus, it appears to be a rather stable relationship.

Denise, a white sophomore in two AP classes who is quoted above, also expresses this distinct relationship between intelligence and caring about school when she explains what she looks for when trying to figure out how smart another person is: "It's in how much they want, really. I mean, like, I don't watch people and say 'oh, they're dumb'. But if they tried hard in school and like did their homework and actually got interested—it's not just doing your homework and studying for tests, but

like *wanting* to know more about the subject." Clearly for Denise, effective school behaviors such as completing homework are not definitive signals of intelligence; rather intelligence is evident when a person takes an eager interest in learning new things. Yet it is precisely this feeling of internal interest that motivates students to enact effective school behaviors, according to students at Elite Charter High. As Maria, a Latina freshman in general (non-college preparatory) curriculum asserts, no absences on a report card is a signal of intelligence because "smart people don't like to miss anything." Several other students at Elite Charter High express this same understanding that intelligence engenders internal motivation to learn and also to succeed. Daphne, a sophomore in three AP classes, captures it well when she describes intelligence as embodied in "passion" for learning about a particular topic.

Students at Alternative High and Comprehensive High do not articulate this same relationship between intelligence and effort. While it is common for students at these other two schools, particularly Alternative High, to suggest that a low performing student (i.e. the owner of the report card in Figure 3.1) might be highly intelligent but simply not putting forth much effort in school, very few students I interviewed at Elite Charter High suggest that possibility. At Elite Charter High, it seems, the notion of intelligence includes caring about schoolwork, desiring success, and putting forth the requisite effort to attain it.

A critical insight here is that for students at Elite Charter High, intelligence and effort are in effect *not* separate resources for school success. Rather, effort, specifically

caring about school and wanting to succeed, is seen as a byproduct of, or a natural counterpart to high intelligence.

The Environment at Elite Charter High

We can expect each school to have its own particular "value climate" (Coleman 1961). Indeed, relative to the other two schools in the study, the environment at Elite Charter High is heavily focused on academics and academic achievement. Several of the structural elements of everyday school life at Elite Charter High contribute to this emphasis. Elite Charter High uses some of the freedom afforded by its charter status to structure the educational experience of its students in ways to maximize students' engagement with academics. The classes are offered on an accelerated 4 x 4 block schedule, meaning that students take four classes each semester, for a total of eight classes in a year, instead of six classes taken over the entire year as in typical high schools in the state. This allows students at Elite Charter High to spend their mental energy covering four subjects each semester (only three of which are core academic subjects) more in-depth rather than covering 6 subjects in a week with less time per subject.

Elite Charter High calls its schedule "accelerated" because it claims that in one semester its students encounter the same breadth of material in each subject that other schools cover over a year period. It is a school that attracts academically-minded students in part because of the promised intensity of the coursework, and in part because Elite Charter High does not host traditional sports programs such as football,

baseball, and basketball, nor the accompanying cheerleading squads, pep rallies, and the like. This is a conscious attempt on the part of the school to foster an academic-focused environment for its students by minimizing the social pressure of competitions of athleticism and beauty, which characterize many high schools in the United States (Milner 2004). Elite Charter High is a place where being smart is considered "cool." It is not touted as a place where anyone can learn and succeed, as is Alternative High, for example. Rather, Elite Charter High students and administration alike pride themselves on it being a place where intelligent students come to thrive.

The students are organized into curriculum tracks, however a typical student is likely to be enrolled in at least one honors or AP class, so there is not as marked a distinction between honors/AP students and general track students as exists in other high schools which practice tracking, such as Comprehensive High. Elite Charter High offers 22 AP courses, as compared to the 8 offered at Comprehensive High, and 61% of juniors and seniors at Elite Charter High take at least one AP exam, as opposed to 6% at Comprehensive High (see Chapter Two for more detailed academic differences among the schools in this study). Elite Charter High is clearly a place where it is commonplace to study AP level curriculum. It is more a question of *how many* honors/AP classes an individual is taking rather than *whether* one takes honors/AP classes. Indeed, how many advanced classes one is taking is a social distinction among students at Elite Charter High, and receiving high grades in AP courses is considered to be an intellectual accomplishment. Heated competitions over grades are commonplace among classmates in honors/AP courses to prove their status as highly intelligent, hardworking people.

Thus, the school organization creates an environment that is focused on intense academics, in particular through advanced coursework, in part by ensuring that AP courses are a ubiquitous feature of campus life. The school forefronts an academic image of itself, and promotes academic focus in its students. Moreover, teachers, such as the AP Chemistry teacher whose classroom I observed, tolerate and even promote grade rivalry among their students, as a way to encourage high achievement. For example, the AP Chemistry teacher routinely has students collaborate on homework assignments, test preparation, as well as review each other's test results to see which equations, formulas, and final answers are correct. This makes classmates' test results public information, and allows for an immediate hierarchy of intelligence (via test performance) to be established, particularly when students proudly parade around the classroom "helping" groups of classmates by allowing them to view the correct equations on their test. This also puts students with correct answers in a position where they are responsible for explaining their chemistry solutions to classmates, which elevates intelligent, successful students to status closer to that of the teacher.

The competitive environment these students are immersed in emerges in discussions throughout my interviews with them, including the anonymous report cards. For example, several students who take multiple honors/AP courses describe the nearly straight A's report card in Figure 3.2 with tones of jealousy. Jenny, a white sophomore in four AP classes, throws her voice, taking a high pitched mocking tone when I hand her the report card: "It's like the perfect little A student," she says, and bats her eyelashes brightly for dramatic effect. Jenny has a 4.25 GPA, but does not consider

herself to be wildly successful in school. Perfect grades are something that she would like to have, but they feel out of her reach. While she generally describes herself as content with her grades in the interview, moments like this, when she reacts so dramatically to the anonymous report card, betray an emotional burden that Jenny bears from her less-than-best grades.

Jenny is far from the only one of her classmates for whom mockery is the immediate response to the report card in Figure 3.2. Jacob, a white junior enrolled in four AP classes, for example sneers: "Oh this person is Mr. -uh- Mr. and Mrs. Outstanding." Jacob describes himself as very smart, and is proud of his current 4.5 GPA. He seems to have little reason to feel jealous of the report card in Figure 3.2. Yet, he announces in the interview, almost in a tone of confession, that his overall GPA is only a 4.29. In a soft voice he tells me: "uh I have gotten a couple of B's too." He seems to feel compelled to be forthright about his imperfect grades, and volunteers an explanation of his most recent B: "I got, uh, in my math class, uh I got a B and, and I said a B is a good grade but like earlier in pre-calculus, I got two A's and I, I know I have the ability to get an A. It's just that I, I might not have, like, looked on specific stuff enough or just certain things that I, I probably could have done better on." Jacob's current math class is AP Calculus, a course known at Elite Charter High to be very difficult. Disappointment in his B is evident, especially as he contrasts it with his earlier A's. Jacob expresses confidence in his ability to attain the highest level of success in school, which undoubtedly makes it all the more disappointing when his high expectations are not realized.

These displays of jealousy are evidence of the competitive AP environment at Elite Charter High. Excellent grades are highly valued, and they inspire envy as well as admiration. Some students, such as Jenny and Jacob, desire perfect grades so deeply that they feel unable to sincerely applaud others who attain them. In interviews with AP-entrenched students at Elite Charter High, descriptions of competitions among students over grades surface again and again, but they tend only to arise in interviews with students who are not triumphant in these competitions. The students who are actually able to earn the best grades, such as James and Brandon whom I discuss in Chapter Six, seem much less emotionally wrought over the best-grades-game. It seems to be the students who consistently earn almost-excellent grades who expend the most energy and emotion in the competition. Of course, there can only be a few victors; the majority of students are a step below the triumph of best-grades at Elite Charter High.

Beyond individual classroom experiences, the school organization's course offerings, e.g. 22 AP courses, and accelerated academic schedule help emphasize the importance of intelligence at Elite Charter High as well. These structural elements contribute to Elite Charter High students' belief that the heart of school success lies in one's intelligence.

Field Stories of School Success at Elite Charter High: the *OCD Overachiever*

Within this context of intense academic rivalry at Elite Charter High, fraught with ambition, jealousy, and often heartache, two distinct field stories of student types emerge in the interviews. The first is the *OCD Overachiever*. Again and again in

interviews, AP students at Elite Charter High use the term "OCD" to refer to students who receive excellent grades. OCD is an acronym for obsessive-compulsive disorder, it is a clinical term for a psychiatric disorder characterized by a person's obsessive thoughts or impulses and related behaviors or rituals which the person feels compelled to enact in order to prevent some dreaded situation (Koran, Hanna, Hollander, Nestadt, and Simpson 2007; Penzel 2000). However, students at Elite Charter High use the term in a more off-hand way, to emphasize the extreme, seemingly obsessive commitment to schoolwork that is required for perfect grades. The widespread use of this term at Elite Charter High associates highest school success with abnormality, a perception that suits students such as Jenny and Jacob, students who feel envious and frustrated by classmates' reaching higher school success than they are able to reach themselves.

A good example of how students describe the *OCD Overachiever* type is offered by Danny, a white sophomore in two AP classes. He says that, "people who try too hard end up becoming like OCD. It seems kind of crazy. I know people who like study all the time and you can't even hang out with them, it's like aghhh!" I ask Danny whether studying so much pays off for these students, whether they are "getting all A's" and he agrees that they do receive excellent grades. "But I guess in the long run, it doesn't really pay off," he adds. Danny explains that a student who is "OCD"—what I am calling the *OCD Overachiever*—is someone who "is scared of missing school…they are kind of tied up in this world where they are—where they have a fear of missing something because they are scared that they are going to go all downhill from there…they are too scared. They are scared of having a bad grade...they are crazy."

The *OCD Overachiever* is seen as "crazy" because she is committed to school success to an unhealthy degree. The pay-off is a coveted prize: excellent grades, but the price is one's sanity.

Denise, a white sophomore in two AP courses, who is quoted earlier in this Chapter, describes the *OCD Overachiever* as someone who receives a "straight A-plus report card." Denise says that such a report card requires too great a sacrifice for a normal teenager: "That would be like OCD or something, and [OCD] is basically what those kids have. They have NOOOO other goal except for to get those straight A's." Similar to many of her classmates, Denise is confident that high school students are better off with less-than-perfect grades if it means that they do not have to spend all of their free time and energy devoted only to academics; a balanced life is more important. Denise feels some discontent over her own grades, although they are very good: she holds a 4.25 GPA. Part of her discontent lies in a personal rivalry. Denise's long-time childhood best friend is a person who receives excellent grades, better grades than Denise's. Denise describes feeling somewhat inadequate and second-rate compared to her best friend, at least academically. While she is sure that her best friend would have a happier and more balanced life by devoting less of her free time to schoolwork, Denise is also sure that she herself would be pushed over the edge emotionally if she sincerely dedicated herself to attain the kinds of excellent grades her best friend achieves. That means, to Denise, that perfect grades are realistically out of her reach.

I use Denise's personal situation here to illustrate that students' own frustrated aspirations toward excellent grades help fuel their chastising attitude toward classmates

who receive perfect grades. Unlike students at Alternative High, for example, where the term "overachiever" is a compliment, students at Elite Charter High disdain *over*achieving as a burden, and attribute straight A's to a mental disorder rather than intellectual talents or any other respectable cause. The *OCD Overachiever* student type is an identity ridiculed by peers, but not pitied. It is an identity to be avoided if one wishes to maintain a healthy, sane teenage life. This means that the highest level of school success is seen as reachable, at Elite Charter High, but at a potentially devastating cost. At each of the three schools in this study, I find a negative field story that explains school success, an identity type which is not admired despite receiving enviable grades. Here at Elite Charter High an *OCD Overachiever* is disdained, but widely recognized as having high intelligence. At neither of the other two schools does the scorned-yet-successful field story involve admirably high intelligence. This speaks to how deeply students at Elite Charter High are concerned with intelligence; it is entwined with all versions of success, even negative ones.

Field Stories of School Success at Elite Charter High: the *College Strategist*

The second student type, or field story, described by students at Elite Charter High is the *College Strategist*. The *College Strategist* is a student who carefully and conscientiously charts out which courses she will take during high school to maximize eligibility to be admitted to a respectable university, hopefully even an elite university. In addition to developing a well-qualified transcript, the *College Strategist* actively takes on activities that demonstrate qualities thought to be characteristic of desirable

college candidates. The personal qualities which Elite Charter High students most commonly mention are: being well rounded; having leadership abilities; and trying to do good for greater society.

Unlike the *OCD Overachiever*, the *College Strategist* is an identity that most students whom I interviewed describe with admiration and respect. Even students who are outside the boundaries of the competitive AP environment of Elite Charter High refer to the *College Strategist* as a commendable type of student.

Elite Charter High is a school that proudly boasts 98% of its graduating class having immediate plans for college. Only two students I interviewed did not claim to be headed to college after graduation, Maria and Raquel. Both are Latinas and are "English Learners," as the school calls students whose native language is not English. They both are also enrolled in the school's new remedial English course (described in more detail in Chapter Two), and neither has a course schedule which will make them eligible for state university enrollment upon graduation. These two are by far the exception to the rule at Elite Charter High, and given the fact that Maria is a freshman and Raquel is a sophomore, they stand a chance to develop plans to attend college during their next few years in high school, though they will likely be limited to the community college option because the are not enrolled in college prerequisite courses.

Maria's and Raquel's atypical position only emphasizes the ubiquity of students at Elite Charter High having plans to attend college. It is something that just about everyone does. However, the students I interviewed perceive important differences in how well other students prepare themselves for a successful college application. They

applaud those who strategically develop a transcript (and other application materials) that demonstrates character traits widely believed to be sought after by college admissions boards. Alexis, the sophomore quoted above regarding the evidence of intelligence in the grades in the report card in Figure 3.2, describes the owner of the report card as "really college bound." She goes on to summarize the key characteristics of the *College Strategist* type when she says that the anonymous student in Figure 3.2 is "very academic, very school—college bound…someone who is trying to fit the college profile. Like they're taking ASB in leadership, and like, drama to show that they're— like this is the kind of thing I can imagine someone planning out their four year plan." Alexis concretely describes the anonymous student as having created a strategy to "fit the college profile." She indicates that colleges are interested in admitting students who are not only academically successful, but also "well rounded," as several of Alexis' classmates term it.

Many students hold the belief that top colleges are not interested in applicants whose personality is limited to academic excellence, rather colleges prefer to admit students who lead active and involved lives, who pursue talents and interests beyond academics, who socialize well with peers, and who make contributions to society. This belief is widely supported by scholarship on admissions to elite colleges (Golden 2006; Karabel 2005; Lemann 1999; Massey, Charles, Lundy, and Fischer 2003; McDonough 1994; Stevens 2007) and is particularly emphasized in guidebooks offering advice on how to get into a "good" college (Springer and Franck 2005; Van Buskirk 2007). For Alexis and many others at Elite Charter High, the *College Strategist* is a person who

conscientiously embodies a strong college candidate; someone who puts into action any information and inside knowledge he or she has about elite college admissions preferences.

Alexis continues her description of the anonymous student in Figure 3.2 by explaining that she sees not only a college strategy behind the report card, but also evidence of successful execution of that strategy: "They are taking AP classes and they're getting A's in them. So, like, they're obviously aware of like what classes they are taking and how they can achieve a good grade in them. They are like aware of everything…aware of what they are doing and how it's affecting their grade." As Alexis describes the anonymous student, I do not detect any criticism or jeering in her voice, on the contrary, it is clear that Alexis finds this person's "awareness" to be a valuable skill, and something to be proud of.

Students at all three schools in this study see college as an esteemed life path following high school, and this view is particularly weighty at Elite Charter High. Indeed, for many students I interviewed here, there is no other viable option except college after graduating high school; the only question is which college one will attend. The general attitude is that it is valuable and good to attend college; and it is the best available stepping stone to a valuable and good life. This attitude stands in contrast to students' concern at Comprehensive High, for example, that a having a respectable life rests on proving that one is at least "average" in terms of intelligence, effort, and success. For students at Elite Charter High, being average is too low a goal to be on students' radar. Instead, they focus on strategizing for college admittance as the highest

level of school success because it not only includes excellent performance during high school, but it also parlays high school success into future rewards, namely acceptance into top universities.

Conclusion

The local environment at Elite Charter High fosters perspectives among students that are distinct from those at the other two high schools in this study. At Elite Charter High the relationship between intelligence, effort, and school success is complex. The Effort Schema, the cultural schema which posits that success rests on a student's individual motivation and effort, is expressed in interviews. However, ultimately, it seems that students at Elite Charter High borrow the language of this cultural schema when they discuss school success, without giving much credence the fundamental notion of the schema. They do not actually describe effort as an independent resource for school success. Students I interviewed discretely affirm that school success requires effort in addition to intelligence. Yet careful consideration of the way that Elite Charter High students characterize effort reveals a distinct relationship between effort and intelligence. Students at this high school describe effort as a personal, internal desire for success, *wanting* and *caring*; and these feelings are seen as a byproduct of high intelligence. Elite Charter High students believe that intelligence engenders continual motivation to learn more and continual ambition to succeed. Therefore, the underlying perspective at Elite Charter High is that school success actually rests on intelligence; effort is its natural counterpart.

However, this does not mean that students wholly endorse the Intelligence Schema, the cultural schema which posits that school success rests on native intelligence, either. This second schema explains school success more straightforwardly as dependent on individual students' levels of intelligence. Those with high intelligence can expect high school success; while those will lower intelligence can expect lower school success. Students I interviewed at Elite Charter High do not claim or imply that one's intelligence level *determines* one's level of school success, even though they attest to the notion that intelligence plays a key role. In fact, only two students I interviewed at Elite Charter High assert that good grades are not attainable for anyone who is willing to try hard enough, which means that everyone one else I talked to believes that limited intelligence can be overcome. Many Elite Charter High students hold the perception that school success is available to anyone because if a student wants it badly enough, he or she will find a way to achieve it no matter how much one's limited intelligence makes it difficult. Finding a way to achieve school success might mean extra hours studying, hiring a private tutor, or even changing "how late you go to bed, how you eat, and how you let emotions take control of you," as Adam, a white AP junior suggests.

Of course, such intense wanting for success is understood to be motivated by high intelligence, thus the origin of effort creates a paradox at Elite Charter High. Effort is asserted to be a necessary ingredient for school success. Further, students claim that effort can even compensate for deficits in intelligence. Yet at the same time, effort is conceived of as a byproduct of intelligence, a desire that is naturally inherent to

intelligence. So the paradox lies in the notion that effort can affect school success separately from intelligence, while at the same time effort is only available to individuals who are highly intelligent. This paradox is created by Elite Charter High students' incomplete incorporation of the Effort Schema into their explanations of school success. At the heart of it, they do not view effort as mechanism for school success that is independent of intelligence, yet they employ the language of the Effort Schema to explain school success. They also do not embrace the Intelligence Schema unconditionally; they add dynamics of desire and ambition to the achievement of school success. At Elite Charter High, the two cultural schemas of Effort and Intelligence are mingled and warped into a model of school success that privileges intelligence, and makes effort a paradox. Again, students I interviewed use the terms "effort" and "intelligence" as though they are two different concepts, but through their descriptions of the two terms, it is clear that the local definition of effort is actually rooted in intelligence. Effort in school is more of an extension of intelligence rather than a separate resource for school success.

This insight into the local definition of effort at Elite Charter High helps explain why I do not find field stories here that depict a highly intelligent student who is not highly motivated in school. At Alternative High, I find the *Smart-but-not-trying* field story (see Chapter Four), and at Comprehensive High, I find *Average Joe* (see Chapter Five), but at Elite Charter High no similar field story emerges. This is likely due to the predominant belief here that intelligent people cannot help themselves but to put forth effort in school. Inherent to intelligence is motivation and desire to learn and succeed.

Instead, the field stories of school success that surface here embody Elite Charter High students' concerns with highest school success. Elite Charter High is an intense academic environment, due to both structured conditions of the school organization as well as due to fierce academic competition among classmates. Students here worry about the stress and distress involved in attaining excellent grades, and these concerns are illustrated in the *OCD Overachiever* field story. Students at Elite Charter High also worry about their post-high school futures. They worry about how well they are preparing themselves to be viable candidates for admission to top universities, just as scholarly literature would predict (Golden 2006; Karabel 2005; Lemann 1999; McDonough 1994; Stevens 2007). They are very aware that the grades and courses on their transcripts will be used as indicators of how intelligent they are, and how well-rounded they are, among other characteristics valued by college admission boards (Atkinson 2002; Springer and Franck 2005; Stevens 2007; Van Buskirk 2007). These concerns are embodied in the *College Strategist* field story. Elite Charter High is a place where school success is taken seriously, and a place where intelligence is implicated in one's emotions, commitment, current success, and life prospects.

CHAPTER FOUR

IT'S ALL ABOUT EFFORT

INTELLIGENCE, EFFORT, AND SCHOOL SUCCESS AT ALTERNATIVE HIGH

Students at Alternative High assert that school success requires effort. Unlike students at Elite Charter High and Comprehensive High, many students here are hesitant to affirm that intelligence is necessary for school success; they are confident that anyone has enough ability to perform well in school. Also unlike students at Elite Charter High, the students I interviewed at Alternative High do not describe effort as an internal desire to attain success. Rather, students at Alternative High use language of behavior to characterize what effort in school means.

Discussing the low performing report card in Figure 4.1, Samantha, a white sophomore gives a typical reaction: "I guess everyone can do better. I don't know, maybe the teacher is horrible, but they probably sit in the back, talking during class."

PE	B	2 absence	2 tardies
Woodshop	B	2 absence	0 tardies
Math	C-	2 absence	0 tardies
Science	C-	2 absence	0 tardies
English	D	2 absence	2 tardies
History	C	2 absence	0 tardies

Figure 4.1: Anonymous Report Card of Lower-Performing High School Student

Samantha does not approve of the low report card in Figure 4.1, but she also does not imply that the low grades are even partially due to the anonymous student's limited

intelligence, unlike at Elite Charter High where part of the explanation for low grades is intellectual inability. Recall Denise's suggestion in Chapter Three that the anonymous student "couldn't get any insight up in them" in English class. Instead, low grades are described by Samantha and other students at Alternative High almost exclusively as the result of *behaviors* enacted by students. One school behavior which comes up again and again in the interviews at Alternative High is not "listening" in class, as Samantha exemplifies when she suggests that the most likely cause of the anonymous student's low success is that "they probably sit in the back, talking during class."

Alternative High students emphasize that attending school is a key behavior toward achieving school success, but simply showing up is not enough. Lamont, an African American freshman asserts that in order to get good grades "you don't have to necessarily be smart…because teachers teach you plenty enough to do what you need to do on your own. And it's a matter of whether you listen or not. Because, well, [a student] can be smart, but if you don't turn your work in, you know, you are not going to be graded for your smartness." Lamont's and Samantha's comments are typical. Students I interviewed at Alternative High stress that listening to the teacher during class and turning in one's schoolwork are two of the most critical ingredients for success.

Again, Alternative High students describe effort in terms of behaviors that produce school success, unlike their counterparts at Elite Charter High for whom effort is an expression of internal desire for success. Also intelligence is much less relevant to achieving school success according to students at Alternative High compared to the

perspectives of students at Elite Charter High and Comprehensive High. Discussing the high performing report card in Figure 4.2, students at Alternative High tend to discount the notion that high intelligence is a necessary element to receive such great grades.

English AP	A-	0 absence	1 tardies
Physics	A	0 absence	0 tardies
Trigonometry	B+	0 absence	0 tardies
ASB	A	0 absence	0 tardies
Drama	A	0 absence	0 tardies
History AP	A	0 absence	0 tardies

Figure 4.2 Anonymous Report Card of High-Performing High School Student

When I ask Martín, a Latino sophomore, whether a person has to be intelligent to receive grades like those in Figure 4.2, he responds: "Well I mean you don't have to be like a super genius. Like I mean you can be like a regular student, like with like a regular mind and you can still get straight A's because I mean, even like when you just—what's it called? When you just do your work? Sometimes um, teachers give you credit for it." Clearly Martín understands school success, even straight A's, to be products of effective school behaviors such as turning in one's work.

Although currently, Martín does not enjoy straight A's, he does not see the route to attaining them as problematic, and he boasts of having had straight-A report cards in his previous years in school. He presently holds A's and B's alongside two C's and one F in his subjects. He is unsatisfied with these grades, but explains that he only recently was able to purchase a laptop computer for use at home, an item which will make it much easier for him to complete his online math and science assignments after school

and on Tuesdays and Thursdays after his internship. He expresses confidence that he will be able to raise his grades very soon by turning in his unfinished work from the previous quarter. In response to my question about whether one needs to be intelligent in order to receive great grades, Martín elaborates on the process by which enacting effective school behaviors actually results in effective learning. He claims that doing class assignments pays off because: "Even if you don't understand it thoroughly, over time you will eventually—you will start understanding because you are actually reading it and like putting in answers, so you will start learning it eventually. So when the tests come in or sort of stuff like that, you start catching on." Martín's understanding of the relationship between effective behaviors and school success is typical of students I interviewed at his school. At Alternative High there is a pervasive belief that simply making the effort of "actually reading" class material and "putting in answers" on assignments leads to effective learning and school success.

The relationship between effort and school success that is expressed by students at Alternative High is unmistakably the logic of the Effort Schema. According to the Effort Schema, school success does not rely much on one's intelligence level, rather, the key to success lies in putting forth whatever amount of effort is required to achieve success. Here at Alternative High, effort is defined by specific school behaviors. However, enacting effective school behaviors requires that a student make a decision to do so. It is a choice among other possible options; and a person must be motivated to make this choice and not another. This is a striking difference from the perspective I find at Elite Charter High, where students conceptualize effort as being motivated from

a person's natural inclinations toward learning. The more intelligent one is, the more one feels innately curious and passionate about learning new things. Couched in language of personal aspiration and natural ambition, it seems as though intelligent students cannot help themselves but to feel driven in school. It is not so much a choice, as it is a feeling, a desire. Alternative High students, on the other hand, conceptualize effort as concrete behaviors that a student must choose to enact.

The Environment at Alternative High

Alternative High does not follow a traditional school week schedule, nor does it follow typical instructional formats. Students attend school on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, they spend part of their day at internships, and the rest of the day is left to students' discretion. While they are at school, students spend an allotted amount of time receiving instruction from subject-specific teachers who come into homeroom classes to deliver material. So, for example, the physics teacher comes to a homeroom class for a 45 minute lesson during which time he explains the concepts the class is covering that week, perhaps reviews homework from the previous week's material, and helps students get started on their homework assignments. Students see their subject-specific teachers just once or twice a week. There are no honors classes, every student in homeroom participates in the same subject lessons, and homerooms are not stratified as ability groups.

For science and math subjects, the majority of the students' work is accomplished via online programs, which offer some internal software "help" features,

and students also have the option to visit their teachers during assigned office hours. However, most of the students I spoke to felt that office hours were either inconvenient, intimidating, or both. A portion of the school day is also spent on independent work time, during which students are free to select which assignments they want to work on. They often collaborate with one another during independent work time—sometimes they collaborate on schoolwork and sometimes they collaborate on distracting each other from schoolwork, thus, the homeroom environment is much like any work environment where colleagues are also friends.

The students spend all day in their homeroom classes; they do not travel around the school campus to attend courses in different rooms or buildings. This means that they are in the company of their 20 or so classmates plus their homeroom teacher for the entire duration of the school day. One of the goals of the physical arrangements of the school is to foster intimate, family-like relationships among classmates and the homeroom teacher. Indeed, I found through classroom observations that homeroom groups have rhythms and dynamics similar to families: they do not necessarily each get along with one another, arguments, bickering, and avoidance strategies are common elements, but everyone seems to know what to expect from everyone else. This is especially true in the sophomore class, which had already been together for a year and a half when I observed them. Each student seems able to carve out a comfortable place for him or herself in the space of the classroom. At the same time, everyone in the room is more or less aware of what the others are doing. One's work habits are visible to everyone in the "family."

This intimate classroom environment is more than just a backdrop for Alternative High students' beliefs about school success. It contributes to the widely-held attitude among students at this school that a critical ingredient for school success is support from other people. Monique, an African-American sophomore, describes this support as a "kick." Monique says: "I think everybody is smart they just need a little more help or support. Because some people, you just need to give them a little push or a kick and they rise back up. I have a friend who had an F in Chemistry, Spanish, everything. Gave her a kick and she's all the way up to the B's and C's, I think she may even have an A now." Monique's language is perhaps a bit violent, but it captures the sentiment expressed by several students at Alternative High: that students rely on people who care about them to keep tabs on them, and to ensure that they do not slide away from behaviors which bring school success. Often this support comes in the form of punitive measures for allowing oneself to have lapses in effective school behaviors. Several students mention immediate family members as people who provide strong support for them in this way; typically parents are described as motivators via punishments for poor grades, incentives for good grades, or both.

However, students' homeroom "family" members also keep one another in check. This happens among classmates who are friends, as Monique describes when she "kicked" her friend when she had F's. The homeroom teacher is also a central feature of support at Alternative High. One key way that the school institution creates the homeroom teacher role as a structural feature of support is that the homeroom teacher has control over students' grades in all of their subjects, even those taught by

other faculty. The rationale here is that the Spanish teacher, for example, only interacts with the students once a week or so, and has little opportunity to get to know them individually, so the Spanish teacher can only grade the students based on their assignments. Alternative High promotes a philosophy of individualized learning and comprehensive evaluation of how much each student has not only learned in their subjects, but how much responsibility and maturity they develop and exhibit. Thus, an important aspect of evaluation at Alternative High is how much responsible effort towards learning the student puts forth, not just how well the student mastered the material. So, the homeroom teacher takes the grades provided by each subject-specific teacher, say for example a C in Chemistry, and then adjusts the grade based on her assessment of the student's effort in that subject.

Students I interviewed express credence in Alternative High's personalized approach to assessment. For example, Jaynah, an African American freshman avows that if her homeroom teacher were to grade her and her best friend "at the same rate" it would not be fair. "Because she sometimes gets stuff faster than I do," Jaynah explains, "and that wouldn't be right because maybe I just hadn't gotten it yet or something like that." Additionally, students like Lamont, an African American freshman, feel that it is crucial for teachers to know their students personally so that they can factor students' outside-of- school circumstances into their expectations for each student's work. Lamont says: "if a teacher knows that student, then she will know why they got that grade, why they may have failed that class based on how—what she thinks, and what she knows about them. Therefore she can probably, like I said, give them a little

sympathy and grade them a little more higher." This is important for Lamont personally because he does not have internet access at home, and this puts him at a disadvantage compared to his classmates in being able to complete online assignments (math and science are all online in addition to any research needed for English or history assignments) on time. He does not live within walking or biking distance of a public library; so accessing the internet requires finding someone to drive him to the library or staying at school until his work is complete, which is not always easy to do since he relies on public busses to get home, and the city bus service is spotty at best.

By intentional design by the school, the homeroom teacher, then, is a person who is continual observer and participator in classroom life, someone who gets to know each of the students, both in terms of their individual rates of mastering material, as Jaynah indicates, and also in terms of their outside-of-school circumstances which boost or hinder their ability to accomplish schoolwork. This makes the homeroom teacher a prime figure of support, able to easily recognize when students need a "kick." The homeroom teacher for the sophomore class I observed is particularly effective at encouraging the entire class to take responsibility for keeping each other on track for school success. One of her strategies is to simply make poor grades public information among the members of the class. In multiple interviews with sophomores from this homeroom group, students tell me stories of classmates who are working to improve unacceptable grades. Tammy, a white sophomore makes a typical comment when she is discussing the low performing report card in Figure 4.1: "I know that if they [the anonymous student] apply themself, maybe they could get their grade up…If they work

hard, I mean I am pretty sure that they can get good grades. I mean, like four people in my class have D's and they raised them up. Like Samuel right now is turning in all his work and he's going to get good grades." Tammy's comment makes it clear that it is common knowledge around her homeroom class when individuals are dangerously close to failing, and the group is also keenly aware of whether these individuals, like Samuel, are responding by choosing effective school behaviors to rectify their poor grades.

Students at Alternative High assert that support from others is a key element of school success. Their descriptions of support are clearly aligned with their belief that intelligence is less central to school success than is effort, and that effort is defined as concrete behaviors such as turning in one's schoolwork. The support for which students rely on others is motivation to continually make decisions to enact effective school behaviors. This is a starkly different portrait of school success than I find at Elite Charter High, where students depict school success as the result of intelligence and the internal desire to succeed that is part and parcel to having high intelligence. According to the local understanding at Elite Charter High, motivation comes from inside a person; ambition naturally accompanies intelligence. At Alternative High, however, I find that students point to external forces of motivation rather than internal ones to explain school success; these differences are in line with what Wilcox's (1982) work would predict between lower and higher SES schools. According to the logic at Alternative High, a successful student relies on family members, teachers, and peers for not just encouragement, but punishment in times when they lapse in their effort. Making

responsible and respectable decisions to engage in effective school behaviors is the key to school success for students at Alternative High.

Field Stories at Alternative High

In this local context where students are deeply concerned with not failing, and where effort is seen as more critical to school success than intelligence, two distinct field stories emerge: *Smart-but-not-trying* and *Cheater*. As discussed earlier, field stories describe identity types, or depictions of a type of person who actors in a particular institutional context perceive as a character type within the institution. Field stories do not portray *actual* people, rather they describe character *types*, against which actors negotiate their own identities. Importantly, field stories portray characteristics which embody actors' concerns and experiences relevant to the local environment.

Field Stories at Alternative High: *Smart-but-not-trying*

At Alternative High, nearly all the students I interviewed suggest at one point or another in our discussions that: "everyone is smart." They do not endorse the notion that everyone is smart all of the time, or that everyone is smart in terms of all categories of intelligence (see Appendix A for a typology of students' definitions of intelligence). Rather, they tend to make distinctions by identifying actions that are "a smart thing to do" and others which are not. Sheena, an African American sophomore illustrates this view when I ask her whether the low-performing report card in Figure 4.1 indicates how smart the anonymous student is. Sheena replies: "I couldn't really base it upon

[grades]. I would think, like, "why did you get this?' or like, "what did you do to get this grade?" Like help yourself. I would ask this person: "did you ask for help? Because then if you didn't ask for help, then that was dumb on your part because you should ask for help." Because I don't think nobody likes to see a D, or like a C, but I wouldn't say that they are stupid…but I would be like, "you are kind of dumb because you should ask for help and you could have brought those grades up."

As I have demonstrated throughout this Chapter, students at Alternative High hold effort, specifically effective school behaviors, as the key to achieving school success, and that making the decision to enact school behaviors is a conscious choice. Sheena's comments here reinforce that perspective. Her comments also highlight how unwilling many students at Alternative High are to claim that lack of academic intellectual ability is even part of the explanation for low grades. Anyone can get good grades, perhaps not straight A's, but good grades, if they enact effective school behaviors such as requesting help on challenging assignments. Alternative High students are very reluctant to infer low academic intelligence from low academic performance. Rather, they invoke the field story of *Smart-but-not-trying*.

This field story is summed up well by its name; it is an identity type of a student who has greater intelligence than is visible from his or her academic performance. Students at Alternative High frequently articulate the field story *Smart-but-not-Trying* in their interviews with me. For example, Tonyah, an African American and Filipina freshman, calls up this field story when she explains why some students have low grades: "They may be smart enough, they may just not want to do [the work]."

Similarly, Oriana, a Latina freshman asserts: "just because you are smart doesn't mean that you have to get good grades, which probably means that you aren't trying...but you are smart." Like many others I interviewed, Jaynah, an African American freshman echoes this same sentiment when I ask her if we can tell whether a poor report card signals low intelligence. She responds: "I really can't say if they are smart. Because they can be smart and they just aren't trying." I describe this common perspective as a field story: *Smart-but-not-trying*. It refers to someone who is not putting forth enough effort in school to maximize school success.

It is important to remember that at Alternative High students strongly espouse the Effort Schema and largely dismiss the Intelligence Schema when they discuss school success in general. They do not assert that limited intelligence limits school success; instead they claim that anyone (short of having a learning disability) has the chance to do well in school by trying hard. We will see in Part III that when Alternative High students discuss their own personal school success that they hold the Effort Schema less tightly, nonetheless when Alternative High students describe school success for other people, effort is given full explanatory power.

Natalia, a Latina freshman, invokes this field story in her responses to the anonymous report cards, in a typical way. Describing the low-performing student in Figure 4.1, Natalie says that the report card "seems kind of bad," nonetheless, she suggests that the anonymous student "might be a smart kid, but it depends on effort, you know, that he puts into it." Natalie can easily imagine that the low grades in Figure 4.1 could happen to someone who is highly intelligent. This logic supports the Effort

Schema wholeheartedly: if one can overcome intelligence deficits through hard work, one can also hide intelligence's potential success through lack of hard work. Effort is seen as being required for school success at Alternative High, even for intelligent students. Samantha, a white freshman, expresses this view when she tells me that highly intelligent students do not have to put in less work and effort in school: "I think everyone has a lot of work to do, it's just that they [highly intelligent students] do it."

The *Smart-but-not-trying* field story is not an enviable character. It is clear to the students I interviewed at Alternative High that if a student is not putting much effort toward school then he or she is not making responsible and respectable decisions regarding school behaviors. However, as Sheena articulates above: "I wouldn't say that they are stupid…but I would be like, 'you are kind of dumb because you should ask for help and you could have brought those grades up.'" Allowing oneself to receive low grades is not a "smart thing to do," yet, overall, Sheena is reluctant to assert that the anonymous student—or anyone for that matter—is all-around stupid. The *Smart-but-not-trying* field story allows a low performing student to salvage some dignity by acknowledging that behavior, not intelligence, is the cause of his or her poor performance.

Field Stories at Alternative High: *Cheater*

A second field story which emerges in my interviews with students from Alternative High is *Cheater.* Of the myriad ways in which cheating can be performed in school, the *Cheater* at Alternative High is specifically someone who copies work

from a classmate, or perhaps from the internet, although the internet rarely offers ready-made answers to fit a given class assignment. What is relevant to the concerns of students at Alternative High is the *Cheater* who receives a good grade for schoolwork that he or she did not produce him or herself. Angelique, a Filipina sophomore offers a typical perspective at Alternative High when she declares that grades alone are not a clear indicator of how intelligent a student is. "What if they were cheating?" she asserts, "People in my class cheat and get good grades." Angelique has had firsthand experience with cheating classmates, and this fuels her suspicion that good grades on a report card might be fraudulent success as easily as good grades might be honest success.

Angelique is very proud of her 4.0 GPA, as she feels that she works hard to achieve perfect grades. Hence, she was offended and frustrated to discover that some of her classmates had been copying her Chemistry notebook without her knowledge and improving their grades in Chemistry as a result. It seems that in the term previous to our interview, the class' Chemistry teacher collected the students' notebooks once a week to grade their work and gauge their progress through the assignments. The notebooks were due on Thursdays, a day convenient for the Chemistry teacher to come by and collect them, which meant that students who had internships needed to complete their work and place their notebooks in the Chemistry basket by the end of day on Wednesdays, since having an active internship means that a student does not attend school on Tuesdays and Thursdays. To Angelique's dismay, she found out that her classmates who were in-between internships routinely pulled her notebook out of the

Chemistry basket and copied it word for word in their own notebooks. Apparently the Chemistry teacher never caught on, but Angelique caught wind of it herself. Angelique's experience sums up neatly the identity type *Cheater*. For students at Alternative High, the *Cheater* is someone who receives good grades by coping another person's work, while putting forth little to zero effort on their own in an attempt to accomplish the assignments.

Even students who do not claim to be victims of their classmates' taking advantage of their hard work invoke the *Cheater* field story. Tonyah, for example, who is quoted above, responds to the high performing report card in Figure 4.2 with admiration. However, such great grades also strike her as suspicious. Immediately upon looking at the report card Tonyah responds: "It looks pretty. Because there is a lot of A's and there is only one B—but you never know. Because they may have been copying. I know a lot of people who used to copy in my class." Tonyah goes on to admit that the previous year, as a middle school student, she, herself, engaged in cheating, though she delicately avoids any incriminating stories about herself since attending Alternative High as a freshman. However, she is very comfortable recalling how she and her friends in previous years would cajole classmates into complicity in their cheating efforts. "We would make sure that we would sit by the smart people," Tonyah tells, giggling, "so it was just like (whispering) 'Can I see your answers?' It was funny because some people in the class actually paid them to copy off of their tests." Judging from Tonyah's descriptions of her disastrous middle school report cards—she was in so much trouble with her father one year over grades that he refused

to allow her any Christmas presents—her cheating exploits did not garner much school success. Nonetheless, the *Cheater* is such a pervasive field story at Alternative High that one glance at the anonymous report card in Figure 4.2, and Tonyah and others I interviewed immediately suspect that the high grades might be due to copying rather than to legitimate, honest effort.

The *Cheater* field story is reinforced at Alternative High from another direction as well: teacher expectations. While each class' homeroom teacher is well situated to make appropriate expectations for each student's performance, the arrangement of instruction time for other teachers makes it rather difficult for those subject-specific teachers to know what to expect from the individuals in the class. During my classroom observations I witnessed a striking example of a teacher expecting her Alternative High students to be *Cheaters*. During their sophomore year, students at Alternative High prepare for and take the California High School Exit Exam, an exam that every student must pass in order to receive a high school diploma upon graduating. It is standard practice for students in California to take the exit exam during their sophomore year so that any student who does not pass the exam the first time has two years in which to study and retake the exam before his or her scheduled graduation. To help Alternative High students meet the goal of passing the exit exam on their first attempt, sophomore classes have a special exit-exam-writing teacher on their faculty roster, and their math is also geared specifically toward exit exam concepts and objectives.

One Wednesday I observed the exit-exam-writing teacher visit the sophomore class. The teacher returned graded essays to the students, and reviewed common

mistakes with the group. The essays were written in response to a mock exam question where they were asked to write about a famous person they admire. The students were told they could expect this type of question on the actual exit exam. The teacher had an overall unfavorable view of the group's essays and had compiled a list of eight pitfalls in their collective work, which she detailed out for the class in an unmistakably dissatisfied tone of voice. The teacher had scored each essay according to the exit exam number system, to help the students get accustomed to the scoring rubric, but two students received a "P" rather than a score, so they raised their hands to ask what "P" meant. The teacher informed the class—publicly invoking the *Cheater* field story—that "P" was not a score at all, it stood for "plagiarism" and that plagiarized essays would be given F's.

There was some confusion among students over the term plagiarism, and once it was sorted out that it meant that the students had copied the essay from the internet or a book, one of the two students in question, Monique, loudly contended that she had not copied her essay. The exit-exam-writing teacher gave Monique a heavy dressing down in front of the class, demanding that she was not naïve, and could recognize plagiarism when she saw it. It was obvious to the teacher that Monique had copied information from somewhere despite the teacher's explicit instructions that the essays were to be written off the top of the students' heads, without any research whatsoever. Monique had written about Harriet Tubman and had provided details such as her birth date and year, her hometown, and other pieces of information that she could not possibly have known without research, according to the teacher. The teacher contended it was too

well written and too informative to be done without copying. She refused to listen to Monique's protests about remembering the information from a report she had written the previous term, and the teacher insisted that the "P" grade would stand. It seemed, from my standpoint as an observer, that the exit-exam-teacher had come in to the class prepared to be lied to or bullied by the students, and prepared to stand her ground, which Oakes (1985) tells us that teachers often do when readying themselves to face low-curriculum, difficult classes.

The following school day (Friday), I observed Monique appeal to her homeroom teacher about the situation. Monique reported that her mother was very upset with her low grade, and Monique felt she was unfairly accused of copying the essay. The homeroom teacher willingly accommodated Monique's position, allowing her to write a second essay on a different famous person. Overall, however, the homeroom teacher supported the position of the exit-exam-writing teacher, saying "Look, I know you, I know you are good writer, and I know that you did a whole report on Harriet Tubman just last quarter. But she doesn't know you." The homeroom teacher suggested that Monique choose to write about a person with whom she is less familiar to avoid any suspicion of plagiarism on the make-up essay.

In this example, the *Cheater* field story is reinforced not only by the public accusations of the exit-exam-writing teacher, but also, more subtly by the homeroom teacher. Of all the possible responses that the homeroom teacher might have given, it is telling that she chose to encourage Monique to write a lesser essay rather than demonstrate to the exit-exam-writing teacher that she is indeed capable of writing an

informative, detailed essay off the top of her head. Also, rather than assure Monique that the real exit exam essay portion is written on the spot, so there is no chance that she might be accused of copying anything, the homeroom teacher instead reinforces the notion that people in authority are likely to expect Monique to be a *Cheater*, and this is something that Monique can manage by altering her performance to fit within believable boundaries.

Conclusion

Students at Alternative High are heavily concerned with avoiding failure. They find the minimum level of acceptable school success to be a rather vague threshold of avoiding any association with failure. Usually this translates to not failing any courses, i.e. F's, and also not appearing to be dangerously close to failing, i.e. D's or too many C-minuses. Many of the students I interviewed at Alternative High come from poor or working class, and/or immigrant families who are much less able to pave the way for school success for their children than are the families of most of the students I interviewed at Elite Charter High. Multiple students I talked to will be the first person in their families to graduate from high school, and the majority of them would be the first person in their families to graduate from college, should they follow that path.

Given these students' concern with avoiding failure, it is not surprising that the most prominent local field stories I find here at Alternative high are identity types who enact negative behaviors: cheating and not trying. Students are skeptical that good grades might be fraudulent—the results of copying, and they are skeptical that poor

grades might be inaccurate representations of a student's true intellectual abilities. These worries surface in field stories at Alternative High, and they are rooted in the local understanding of the relationship among intelligence, effort, and school success.

The route to school success is perceived to be a rather clear-cut endeavor at Alternative High, one must simply maintain motivation to complete all school assignments on time. This view wholly supports the Effort Schema, which posits that anyone can achieve school success by trying hard enough. The Intelligence Schema, which posits that one's native intelligence determines one's level of school success, is largely dismissed at Alternative High. It is brushed aside by a pervasive belief that "everyone is smart." Yet at the same time, the local perspective is more savvy to some of the complicated dynamics of effort which the Effort Schema glosses over. Students I talked to wholly endorse the Effort Schema, but they add at least two extra tenets. One is that they understand teachers to play an important role in students' school success by reconciling performance expectations for individual students based on each student's abilities and available resources. Grading all students by the same expectations is considered unfair and misguided by both the students and the philosophy behind Alternative High's mission.

The local version of the Effort Schema at Alternative High relies on the teacher to know each student in the class well, and to take his or her personal circumstances, available resources, and talents into consideration for academic grades. The school organization fosters this perspective by providing a homeroom teacher for each class of approximately 20 students. The intention is for the homeroom teacher to be able to

interact with and build a personal relationship with each student in the homeroom class. Further, the homeroom teacher is charged with mediating students' grades from subject-specific teachers. The homeroom teacher is purposefully given the power to adjust other teachers' grades based on the homeroom teacher's more intimate knowledge of the student's abilities and personal circumstances.

The second extra tenet added to the Effort Schema at Alternative High is that students do not take the position that effort is entirely up to the individual student. They understand effort to be specific behaviors rather than an internally generated desire; and they recognize that individual students need to rely on other people, people who care about them, to help keep up their motivation and effort. As Monique says: "I think you always need somebody to help, either, like I said, the teacher, a friend if they are good enough, somebody at home…"

At least some of students' reliance on other people for support is created and encouraged by the institutional arrangements at Alternative High. Through the intimate class sizes and long hours in a single shared space, at Alternative High students are encouraged to think of their homeroom teacher as a source of feedback on their effort, and a source of motivation to stay on track. Their homeroom classmates become a second "family" for keeping tabs on each other's effort toward school success. While the Effort Schema lays the onus of responsibility on each student's own shoulders, students at Alternative High distribute that responsibility around to trustworthy others. School success is simply not viewed as something that needs to be accomplished on one's own.

With this heavy focus on effort, defined here at Alternative High as effective school behaviors, it is not surprising that the most pervasive field stories I find are identity types who fail in effort. The *Cheater* is portrayed as successful in school, but his or her success is a fraud. The *Cheater is* highly disrespected because he or she bypasses the work involved in school success and this offends the local sensibilities at Alternative High. They believe that trying hard is respectable and admirable, and that the just reward of trying hard is school success. The *Cheater* is something of a thief who steals the moral value out of school success.

The *Smart-but-not-trying* field story is also a disrespectable character because, again, trying hard is honorable. However, *Smart-but-not-trying* is less offensive to the logic of the Effort Schema, and less offensive to students at Alternative High than a *Cheater*. *Smart-but-not-trying* could easily be the result of a student's support network failing, meaning the people on whom a student relies for motivation "kicks," as Monique phrases it. *Smart-but-not-trying* gives the benefit of the doubt to a student with low grades. It offers a way to salvage one's dignity; this character could begin putting forth effort in school and then be able to prove that he or she is indeed intelligent.

It is important to recognize that the field story *Smart-but-not-trying* is unlikely to exist in a place like Elite Charter High, and indeed I do not find it there. As Chapter Three demonstrates, Elite Charter High students take a lack of effort in school as a more general signal of lack of intelligence overall. For Elite Charter High students, academic intelligence sparks internal motivation to succeed in school, a belief that is incompatible

with the notion that a student might be *Smart-but-not-trying.* The field stories and the perspectives I find at each school are distinct products of local interactions among local actors, the arrangements and logics of the particular school organization, and available cultural schemas.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCORDANT SCHEMAS AWKWARDLY COEXIST

INTELLIGENCE, EFFORT, AND SCHOOL SUCCESS AT COMPREHENSIVE HIGH

Students at Comprehensive High affirm that school success is the result of a combination of both intelligence and effort. While many students at Comprehensive High feel certain that effort explains school success much more than does intelligence, similar to the attitude I find at Alternative High, the more pervasive perspective I find at Comprehensive High is an underlying notion that one's intelligence level does in fact play a key role by determining the parameters of school success which are available to an individual student. This means that students of limited intelligence are thought to be able to attain limited school success. It also means that students of high intelligence have a wider gamut of school success open to them via AP courses' weighted grades and potential college credit. Thus, both the Effort Schema and the Intelligence Schema are supported here at Comprehensive High, but students do not outwardly articulate the Intelligence Schema as strongly as they do the Effort Schema in the interviews.

Sandra, a Latina sophomore in general ("college prep") curriculum, gives a response to the low performing report card in Figure 5.1 which embodies the overall perspective I find at Comprehensive High. When I ask Sandra to describe the anonymous student to whom the report card belongs, her first reaction is: "It looks like they are *kind of* trying."

PE	B	2 absence	2 tardies
Woodshop	B	2 absence	0 tardies
Math	C-	2 absence	0 tardies
Science	C-	2 absence	0 tardies
English	D	2 absence	2 tardies
History	C	2 absence	0 tardies

Figure 5.1: Anonymous Report Card of Lower-Performing High School Student

I ask her to explain which details on the report card signal that the student is "kind of trying" and she answers that "the C's and D, the grades" make it seem like the student is not putting forth his or her best effort. I ask Sandra if she thinks it is possible that someone could really be trying her best and these are the best grades that student can get—or whether she thinks that anyone who tries a reasonable amount should receive higher grades than these. Sandra thinks about this for a moment and says, "That's a hard question because sometimes I've been like this, and I've tried really hard and can't get grades that great, and then when I try really hard in other subjects then I can. So, probably [the anonymous student] is having a hard time in some of the materials that's being covered in class."

Sandra does not have an initial impression that the anonymous student is trying her best, but neither does she indicate that the student is absolutely slacking off, the way that students at Elite Charter High typically react to the report card in Figure 5.1. Sandra implies that with greater effort on the part of the anonymous student, this report card would have higher grades. Yet, she is unwilling to declare that effort alone might be all the anonymous student needs to improve his or her grades. Sandra does not articulate it cleanly, but she expresses an understanding that is rather common among

students I interviewed at Comprehensive High: grades can be limited by a student's (limited) intelligence. Sandra offers personal experience as evidence that some classes are just too tough to get good grades in.

Sandra describes her experience as "trying really hard" yet not receiving "grades that great" in the end, but importantly, this is only true for Sandra in some classes. She asserts that when she puts forth strong effort in other subjects she is able to achieve good grades. For the students I talked to at Comprehensive High this is understood to be a common condition. Diana, a white sophomore in general ("college prep") curriculum sums up the notion well when she asserts: "everyone has a weak point." Not only do students expect that everyone has a subject or two that are not one's strong suit, but they also find it generally acceptable to receive lower grades in those courses. While students I interviewed at both Elite Charter High and Alternative High also express an awareness of individual strengths and weaknesses vis-à-vis math or writing, for example, at neither of these schools does the attitude embrace lower performance in the same way that I find at Comprehensive High. Here at Comprehensive High, the notion that "everyone has a weak point" is a cornerstone of the relationship among intelligence, effort, and school success. In subjects which are "a particular class you have never been very good at", as Flavia, a Latina junior in AP curriculum calls it, a student's school success is restricted to the limits of her intellectual abilities. Increased effort is unlikely to yield increased school success.

Students at Comprehensive High also express an understanding of effort that is different from the definitions I find at Elite Charter High and Alternative High. In a

way, their descriptions of effort lie in between those of the other two schools in the study. Comprehensive High students use the language of *caring* and *wanting* to describe the motivation behind effort, as do students at Elite Charter High, but Comprehensive High students' descriptions actually focus on concrete behaviors which are enacted by students who care, which echoes the responses of students at Alternative High. However, unlike their counterparts at Elite Charter High, students at Comprehensive High do not describe caring about school as a natural byproduct of intelligence. Instead they tend to focus on future life goals when they use the terms *care* and *want*, saying that low grades such as D's for example, are evidence that the person does not care about her future, or that such students must not want to make anything of their lives. Also, unlike their counterparts at Alternative High, students at Comprehensive High do not perceive effective school behaviors as a straightforward path to school success. Intelligence plays a more substantial role in the equation. As Stephanie, a white junior in AP curriculum affirms: "you can try as hard as you can and put in as much effort as you can and still not understand the material." One's intellectual ability to master course material sets the parameters of school success.

The Environment at Comprehensive High

Comprehensive High can easily be described as "average" for California in terms of its students' performance on Academic Performance Index (API) measures such as California Standards Test (CST) scores. Comprehensive High's API score at the time of this study is just slightly over 700, nearly one hundred points below the

state's goal of 800 for all its schools. By comparison, the average API in California that year is 687 (the index ranges from 200-1000 points), so Comprehensive High stands a bit above average state-wide, despite being well beneath the state goal. Comprehensive High is also typical in terms of the composition of its student body. It is close to state averages in terms of racial composition, percent of the student body that is socioeconomically disadvantaged, as defined by the state, and percent of the student body that are English Learners (see Chapter Two for more detailed comparisons). As a school, Comprehensive High is simply an average school compared to other schools in the state. This condition of average-ness in the aggregate perhaps contributes to Comprehensive High students' resounding concern in interviews with the notion of average. For students, grades—specifically C's—are outward markers of average-ness, not just average in terms of academic performance, but in a more comprehensive understanding of average. C's seem to be the mark an average *person* with average aspirations who achieves average success. C's are viewed at Comprehensive High as the minimum level of acceptable school success, a topic taken up in greater detail in the next section of this Chapter.

Not surprisingly, the administration at Comprehensive High does not tout the school's average characteristics, but rather emphasizes the progress the school has made in terms of API score increases over the previous years, and the structural changes that have been implemented to enhance learning and academic performance. One such implementation, pertaining to the structure of AP course selections, contributes to the students' local attitudes. Students at Comprehensive High who are eligible for AP

coursework have eight total AP courses available to them. The available AP courses in math/science and those in language arts/humanities are bundled, meaning that if a student is interested in taking an AP math course, he or she must also enroll in the corresponding AP science course. Similarly, if a student wants to take AP English, he or she must concurrently take AP history. Students express some frustration over the bundling, particularly in cases where an individual is interested in English, but not history, for example, but in general they accept the structure as sensible. They espouse the logic that if someone is good at math, he or she is likely to be good at science, but not necessarily good at language or humanities. They often reference the popular explanation of a right-brain/left-brain split in intellectual abilities as the rationale behind the structure of AP course offerings. However few of the students who offer this explanation are sure which side of the brain corresponds to which ability, which might suggest that they are simply agreeable to this sort of logic rather than convinced by a specific theoretical perspective.

While it is possible to enroll in both bundled sets during one year, many students I interviewed prefer to select one side of the brain to focus on, so to speak; they tend to take on the AP coursework of only one bundle. This structure of available courses certainly reinforces and contributes to the attitude I find at Comprehensive High that "everyone has a weak point." Not only is it expected that some students will be better at certain subjects than at others, but the school organization only allows students to pursue the academic subjects that the school believes are compatible. Of course, the student might be willing to have four of his or her six classes at the AP level and get

around the imposed choice, however, that is a course schedule which is considered to be very demanding. Meanwhile, the structure of courses prevents students from being able to pursue advanced instruction in specific subjects which interest them most, an experience which might lead more students to believe that they are "good at" a wider variety of topics.

My observations of classroom life at Comprehensive High give a strong impression that teaching practices are geared toward test performance. Both the AP English class and the general curriculum ("college prep") World History class I observed exemplify what is best characterized as a correct-answer teaching style. By this I mean that course material is delivered during instruction in a way that emphasizes what a correct answer would be to a test question on the material. However, my observations of teaching at Comprehensive High are limited to two classrooms, so I cannot claim that all teaching at this high school is similar. In interviews, students describe their experiences with teachers both in response to direct questions in which I elicit their opinions of what counts as "fair" and "unfair" teaching practices, as well as in other parts of the interview where they bring up teachers unprompted. Students' accounts do not focus on correct-answer orientations to teaching, the way that I characterize the teaching I observed. This could perhaps be because correct-answer teaching is a taken for granted, normal feature of Comprehensive High. Whether or not this is the case, students' own descriptions of teachers provide additional descriptions of the learning environment at Comprehensive High.

Students depict their favorite teachers as energetic adults who are interested in their students and willing to expend their energy and time carefully delivering material in class in a way that makes it interesting to learn, and conscientiously grading homework assignments and tests. These favorite teachers seem to be rather few and far between, according to the students I interviewed, however. The students I talked to relayed many more stories of teachers who they find lacking in these qualities than teachers they find inspiring. Several students express awareness that teachers' workloads are overwhelming and some students are sympathetic to the demands of the job, particularly when classes are crowded with 30-plus students, which is often the case. Certainly the AP English teacher whose class I observed would agree that she personally felt overworked and exhausted more often than not. Nonetheless, even sympathetic students are unwilling to excuse some of the teaching practices they encounter.

A few teachers came up in interviews over and over again as examples of teaching habits that students find lacking. One is a science teacher who is infamous for assigning daily homework, counting homework points toward the students' final grades, but never actually grading the homework for accuracy. To be fair, students generally do not disagree that having correct answers on homework is not nearly as important as going through the process of reading the assignments and answering the questions, in effect simply thinking about the topic and trying to come up with accurate answers is a valuable exercise. However, the students I talked to also want to be held responsible for the work. They feel justified in complaining about this particular teacher because the

teacher does not really even look at the homework even as she is cataloguing points for it each day.

Claire, a white freshman in honors curriculum, who is in the last few weeks of the year with this teacher describes her: "She is very unorganized…she would tell us to do notes on a chapter and they're due, whatever, tomorrow. So people would write. She never read them, ever. People would write about their dogs and stuff: 'I have a dog. His name is—' I mean really. Really, seriously, it would be about their dog or maybe talking about what they had for cereal for breakfast. She's weird." Claire finds this teacher's homework habits to not only be "weird" but disgraceful. She continues her description with a tone of disappointment and dismay in her voice: "I'm like, 'she is never going to check it, is she?' And she never did. Not the whole entire year. She never caught a single person." Generally when students discuss this particular teacher they offer the same detail of students writing about their dogs and presenting it as homework. At first I suspected it was a popular school legend, but then I found that even students currently enrolled in the course, such as Claire, describe it in precisely the same terms.

While several students comment that this teacher's homework grading method certainly makes homework much easier on them—they never feel that they have to complete it—they also express deep dissatisfaction with the low accountability of the class, as does Claire. Kristie, a white freshman in honors curriculum, takes a highly critical stance: "She is not really interested in [her job], she doesn't really care. She is just like, 'if you want to lie, fine, go right ahead, if you want to be honest, whatever."

Kristie and other students also report that this teacher often takes personal phone calls during class time and is generally distracted and "disorganized" as Claire describes it. On the one hand, Kristie feels some sympathy: "You can just really tell she has her own life and she wants to be there more than at school, which is understandable. I would probably be the same way if I were a teacher." Yet on the other hand, Krisite feels both disappointed and cheated by this teacher. She tells me: "If she did care, the class would actually be learning something. Especially because it is an honors class. This is coming from an honors class and I just think it is pathetic to see this happening…I guess it is understandable that she has a life outside of school, but how hard it is to read just a little bit of the [homework] questions and make sure? Maybe just one random question from a person's paper just to make sure [the answers] are real."

While this science teacher stands out as an extreme example of what students find to be "pathetic," to use Kristie's term, in the interviews students indict multiple other teachers for similarly lax and ineffective teaching practices. The typical complaints surround two practices in particular, both of which seem to be rather commonplace according to students. One is assigning homework and not grading it, as Claire and Kristie illustrate with their science teacher. Other teachers at Comprehensive High are criticized for assigning weekly essays, or perhaps worksheets or chapter notes, which the teacher collects, however, the teacher selects only a handful of essays/worksheets/notes at random to actually read at the end of the term, and those scores factor heavily into the students' final grades. This means that students receive little or no feedback on how to improve their work over the course of the term, and it

also means that neglecting just one assignment might wind up costing the student dearly in the end, which students generally view as unfair. As Claire phrases it: "you do like five hundred million [worksheets] and let's say you don't do one. If she luckily picks that one, it goes as you missing a fifth of your homework instead of being like a millionth, because she gives a TON."

Students I talked to at Comprehensive High indicate that they feel slighted by such practices. They feel that such teachers do not care enough about them as students to bother reading the schoolwork they assign. Students often respond to this injustice by reducing their own effort and dedication in these classes. This reduction of effort takes the form of submitting outlandish answers on assignments that are sure to never be read, as the case with writing about one's dog in science class. It is also common in such classes for students to copy each others' work, even to the point of arranging in advance who will write the first essay, the second essay, and so on, for a group of classmates to copy in advance. Not all students engage in copying, of course, but those who do tend to feel justified that they are simply matching the teacher's own level of involvement in the course.

A second practice which students often feel justified in taking advantage of is when teachers require the class to grade each other's tests. It reduces the teacher's afterhours workload dramatically to involve students in the grading, a task which is unquestionably burdensome on any teacher, let alone one who is perhaps already overworked. In just a few minutes the class can accomplish grading which might easily take the teacher well over an hour to complete on his or her own. However, students

view this as another sign of a teacher not caring about them enough to hold them accountable for their learning.

The usual method is for the teacher to ask students to pass their test answer sheets (multiple choice tests or math tests are the most common for this purpose) to a classmate. Then, the students are supposed to write their own name on the sheet that they are grading, so the teacher can keep track of who grades whom. Then the teacher reads aloud the correct answers while students score the tests. Kristie explains how easily this system is abused: "Well, we are supposed to switch, but I always just make up some fake name and write it on the side of the paper—who is grading my paper— and then just grade my own and fill in all the answers." Of course, as I noticed in the two classrooms in which I observed, it can also be effective to simply trade test sheets with a friend who will help fill in answers on your behalf, that way one can avoid being caught grading one's own paper. Although I did not sit closely enough over students' shoulders to witness any particular students "helping" their friends in this way, it occurred to me how easily this could be accomplished as I watched students grade each other's tests in both the AP English class and the general curriculum World History class.

Field Stories at Comprehensive High

In this environment at Comprehensive High, two field stories emerge: *Trained Dog*, and *Average Joe*. Despite all the descriptions of cheating, which students claim routinely takes place at Comprehensive High, a field story of *Cheater* does not exist as

it does at Alternative High. A field story is an identity type, a description of a character or personality. Cheating at Comprehensive High is not described as a personal characteristic, it carries very little stigma, and even students who adamantly claim to never copy other students' answers or essays generally admit that they cut corners on assignments that teachers are not going to grade, feeling confident that the teacher will never "catch on." In a nutshell, cheating is seen as a largely justifiable response to certain teaching practices, practices which signal to the students that the teacher is not invested in their learning. Unlike at Alternative High where cheating offends students' sensibilities of honorable school success, here at Comprehensive High cheating is not offensive, it is accepted as something students do with certain teachers. Thus, cheating is not an identity type here; it does not define an individual's approach to school success. Instead it is a behavior that students engage in response to particular teaching practices.

Field Stories at Comprehensive High: *Trained Dog*

The first of the two most prominent field stories I find at Comprehensive High is *Trained Dog*, an identity type who consistently achieves high school success, but not due to a brilliant, creative intellect. A truly brilliant student is referred to as a "genius", and is portrayed as a highly admirable character. However, *Genius* is described in superhuman terms, making to too unrealistic to be a very relevant field story of school success. For example when I ask Kathleen, a white sophomore in general curriculum, which is more important for grades: getting the material or working really hard, she

replies "I think working really hard because I don't think a lot of people actually get the material, and they have to work for it. Not a lot of people are born geniuses, they have to work for it." *Genius* is more of a myth; the students I interviewed do not seem to negotiate identities of actual people against the *Genius* character. However, students at Comprehensive High do take *Trained Dog* as a field story of viable "raw material" as Westenholz (2006) terms it, meaning that students invoke the *Trained Dog* identity when they are describing themselves and/or fellow students; it is a field story against which they position themselves and others.

The *Trained Dog* identity is a student who enjoys great school success simply by knowing how to execute assignments and tests according to the teachers' criteria. René, a Latino junior in AP curriculum describes this field story in his response to the high performing report card in Figure 5.2.

English AP	A-	0 absence	1 tardies
Physics	A	0 absence	0 tardies
Trigonometry	B+	0 absence	0 tardies
ASB	A	0 absence	0 tardies
Drama	A	0 absence	0 tardies
History AP	A	0 absence	0 tardies

Figure 5.2 Anonymous Report Card of High-Performing High School Student

When I ask René whether the anonymous student seems intelligent, he replies: "The problem with doing that from a report card is that it's so hard because they could be book smart, know how to take a test, be like a trained dog, and know the answers, and know what to give—but when asked themselves they may not know exactly what to

do." Unlike students at Alternative High who suspect that the anonymous student in Figure 5.2 might have garnered fraudulent school success by cheating, René's concern is that the anonymous student might have legitimate, yet not highly respectable, school success by mastering school skills in a similar manner to dogs mastering tricks. For René, memorizing material to score well on tests does not count as admirable intelligence. Shallowly acquired knowledge, meaning knowledge only retained in the format demanded by tests, is not as valuable as deeper learning for these students despite the fact that one's grades are tied to test performance.

Few students in general curriculum invoke the *Trained Dog* field story; it surfaces much more often in interviews with AP and honors level students. They do not consistently use the term "trained dog," as René does, however, they effectively describe the same field story. For example, Claire, a white honors freshman who is quoted earlier in this Chapter, gives a similar response to René's when I ask her whether the high performing anonymous student in Figure 5.2 seems intelligent: "I would say that they are smart, but I definitely think that if you—(pause)—I don't believe so much in being smart or stupid. I believe that if you go to class and you're there, and you're paying attention, it's not a matter of how smart you are, it's a matter of how well you know the information that the teacher is telling you and you can regurgitate it onto a test and get an A. So I think it's not a matter of being smart." Claire straightforwardly asserts here that shallowly acquired knowledge is not intelligence at all in the case of the *Trained Dog*.

Claire's initial response to my question is an assertion that the anonymous student is indeed smart. Just a moment before, Claire was discussing her impression of the anonymous report card, commenting on how impressed she is by the difficult curriculum the student has chosen for her academic courses. AP classes are a signal of high intelligence for Claire, a typical perception among students at Comprehensive High. Although students who are enrolled in AP courses often comment that the classes are not as difficult as they appear to be from the outside, even AP students acknowledge that at Comprehensive High the reputation of AP curriculum is not just "advanced" or "intensive", but that it is reserved for highly intelligent students. Thus, it seems that Claire's initial reaction to my question is perhaps more of an automatic response: " I would say that they are smart" which characterizes the common opinion of AP courses at her school. After a moment of thought, however, Claire is able to articulate a more discerning understanding of school success, in which she invokes the *Trained Dog* field story.

Claire claims that getting A's depends only on how well a student absorbs and "regurgitates" information on tests. Her description of the route to school success does not include admirable intelligence, but instead relies on executing behaviors that ensure strong test results. In fact, she goes so far as to say that she doesn't "believe so much in being smart or stupid," she implies that anyone can master the necessary skills. While Claire's use of the *Trained Dog* field story is typical compared to other students I interviewed at her school, her conviction that no student's intelligence is too low to preclude school success is not widely held at Comprehensive High. As I demonstrated

earlier in this Chapter, the more common understanding of school success at Comprehensive High includes intelligence as a critical ingredient in success because one's intelligence sets the parameters for the height of an individual's possible success. Claire demonstrates awareness of this belief in her initial reaction to the AP courses on the report card in Figure 5.2. She immediately called the anonymous student "smart." It seems that on some level Claire also holds this belief herself, even though she amends her certainty on how smart the anonymous student must be as she talks through her beliefs about what it takes to receive A's.

I use Claire as an example here to highlight the complex, sometimes even conflicting array of logics which students draw on to describe their views of school success. As I discuss in the conclusion to this Chapter, Claire's answer here seems caught between the Intelligence Schema and the Effort Schema. Claire's own experiences contribute to her understandings of school success as well. She holds a 3.85 GPA, of which she is quite proud. Three of her six classes are honors/AP level, and she confidently expects to take on more AP curriculum throughout her next three years of high school. She reports putting in ten to eleven hours of homework time each week outside of school, and her effort does not go unrewarded on test scores and final grades. She considers herself a high performing student. Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that she finds it difficult to imagine that limited intelligence might hold a student back from receiving A's despite that student trying very hard. This has never happened to Claire. She sees the possibility for a student to be a *Trained Dog* more readily than the possibility that one is unable to succeed despite strong effort.

Field Stories at Comprehensive High: *Average Joe*

While *Trained Dog* is a field story rather common among AP/honors students at Comprehensive High, a second field story exists which is ubiquitous across general curriculum students and AP/honors students alike: *Average Joe*. Students at Comprehensive High continually refer to the notion of "average" in interviews. Average is understood to be officially represented by C's in terms of grades, and students at Comprehensive High hold fast to this designation. For some students at Comprehensive High, it is important to demonstrate that one is at least average, and not below average. For other students, the more critical distinction is to prove that one is above average rather than simply being average. In all cases, however, the point of comparison is with a field story that I call *Average Joe*.

The field story of *Average Joe* refers to a student who receives C's in her academic classes. Importantly, *Average Joe* does not hold a C average, i.e. a 2.0 GPA, because a C average could include D's, for example, as long as they are counterbalanced by B's or A's. *Average Joe* does not receive D grades; D's are viewed as a mark of being "below average." Doug, a white junior in general curriculum, explains this distinction in his discussion of the low performing report card in Figure 5.1:

> **Doug:** He's passing all the classes at least by minimum, but it's not what you'd normally want to pass by.
> **LN:** What would you normally want to pass by?
> **Doug:** At least a C.
> **LN:** Why is a C better than a D?

Doug: Because it shows that you are average. Even average at least shows you're not one of the people that doesn't try. It's better being average than below average, that's logical.

Doug's concern with the distinction between C's and D's is very common at Comprehensive High. In fact, when Doug says that the minimum grade a student "wants" to pass with is a C, he is expressing a more precise threshold than I recognized at the time of our interview. I assumed that he was referring to all variations of a C, including C-plus and C-minus, which is why I contrasted C's to D's in my follow-up question. However I came to discover that at Comprehensive High the dividing line between acceptable and unacceptable grades lies precisely between C's and C-minuses.

Kristie, a white freshman in honors curriculum who is quoted earlier in this Chapter, is instructive on this point. Responding to the same report card in Figure 5.1, Kristie asserts: "…a D in English I also think is unacceptable because most teachers will at least give you a decent grade in writing, at least a C…and a C in History, again, it just depends if they are interested in the subject. I don't think that is as bad. And also because it is steady. It's not like a C-minus where you are close to getting a D. The C is more in the middle. So it's not like you are about to go right downhill. I think that's okay."

Students at Comprehensive High continually refer to C's as minimally acceptable grades and C-minuses as below acceptable; and this perspective is shared by students in both general curriculum and AP/honors curriculum.

Regarding the field story, it is possible that an *Average Joe* might receive a B or an A here and there, particularly in elective classes or PE, for example, classes which

are considered easier than core academic ones. However, *Average Joe* is a steady C's kind of character. Another characteristic of the *Average Joe* field story is that it is a person who cares about his or her future to at least the minimally acceptable degree. Kathleen, a white sophomore in general curriculum, condemns the D in English as "bad" on the report card in Figure 5.2. She explains: "because to work for what you want, you can't go by high school with D's. Unless you want to actually not go anywhere in life. Which means [assuming that is not the case] he or she will have to make up [the class], and that is unacceptable." Receiving C's, as opposed to D's in Kathleen's comments, is a signal then, that *Average Joe* does want to make something of her life, even if her aspirations are perhaps not higher than "average."

Conclusion

Descriptions of school success at Comprehensive High outwardly champion the Effort Schema. Effort surfaces quickly in discussions about school success. As Doug says in the previous section, C's are critical markers of "average" partly because "even average at least shows you're not one of the people that doesn't try." Trying is the first thing that comes to mind when Doug attempts to explain the difference between acceptable school success, C's, and unacceptable levels of school success, C-minuses. Students I interviewed often initially draw on effort to explain both high levels of school success as well as low levels of school success. At the same time, however, I find an underlying belief in the Intelligence Schema, but this perspective is revealed in bits and pieces in the interviews, in afterthoughts to initial responses, and in instances

where students draw on stories of actual people they know, rather than keeping the discussion hypothetical in reference to the anonymous report cards.

One can easily imagine how the Effort Schema and Intelligence Schema might be interpreted in ways that make the two schemas compatible. For example, they might be edited to fit an understanding that intelligence determines your starting place for potential school success, and effort determines how close you come to maximizing your potential. Of course, such a combination leaves out elements of each schema, but the idea of creating a coherent logic between the two is readily plausible. However, none of the three schools in this study create such tidy coherence, and Comprehensive High is the site of greatest incongruence within students' explanations of school success. By incongruence, I do not mean that some students' comments are incompatible with other students' comments, but that individual students awkwardly invoke both schemas discordantly in a single discussion.

Claire's quote in the previous section of this Chapter about the report card in Figure 5.2 demonstrates this discordant use of both schemas. Her immediate response to the report card is an acknowledgement that A's in AP courses are evidence of high intelligence. Claire calls the student "smart." Claire's first impression of the high performing report card is *not* that the student is "trying very hard." She clearly relies on the Intelligence Schema in this first response off the cuff. However, as she talks her way through an explanation of why the report card strikes her this way, she winds up abandoning the Intelligence Schema rather aggressively in favor of the logic of the Effort Schema. Just a breath or two after she recognizes the student as "smart," she

claims that anyone can master the skills for an A. She further claims that she does not "believe in being smart or stupid."

This awkward mismatch of explanations might be in part a product of conflicting messages the school organization of Comprehensive High sends to students. On the one hand, the school loads the school calendar with benchmark exams to gauge individual students' progress toward CST goals, which clearly implies that the harder one works at test-specific material, the better one can score on CST exams. Such practices support the Effort Schema wholeheartedly. On the other hand, the school tightly controls AP course offerings, which suggests that students of a certain level of intelligence are expected to pursue advanced curriculum in a particular trajectory. Directly in line with the Intelligence Schema, not everyone is deemed eligible for AP curriculum. Those who are eligible find themselves rather tightly constrained in terms of options, as discussed earlier in this Chapter, based on the school's understanding of how intelligence works (not on how effort works).

Additionally, some teachers' grading practices inadvertently thwart the Effort Schema, such as the infamous science teacher who requires that students complete daily homework assignments yet never grades the assignments for accuracy. While her daily homework assignments count for points toward the students' final grades, her lax monitoring of students' work allows the students in her class to bypass the effort component of the homework and rely instead on their cognitive talents to sail them through tests in her courses. In classes such as this teacher's, effort is *supposed* to matter much more than it actually does in the end. Hence, both in students'

explanations of school success and in organizational practices the Effort Schema and the Intelligence Schema coexist without being bent into compatibility at Comprehensive High.

Another example of how organizational practices influence students' attitudes and perceptions lies in the *Trained Dog* field story. The *Trained Dog* is generally described as a field story that seems born of the Effort Schema: any student can achieve school success by trying hard enough. The *Trained Dog* does just that: she tailors effort and tries precisely hard enough to carefully fit the criteria of assessment. Wider approaches to learning or deeper acquisitions of knowledge are not necessary to school success, thus are not pursued by the *Trained Dog*. Creativity and vivid personality are absent in the *Trained Dog* field story. This negative portrayal of legitimate school success might be seen as a response to the correct-answer and test-oriented teaching styles I observed at Comprehensive High. Particularly for honors and AP students such as René and Claire, students who consider themselves intelligent, it is not all that surprising that they might prefer to imagine high intelligence as a dynamic, vivacious source of curiosity and creativity as opposed to a dry, mechanical tool for producing correct answers, as conveyed by some of the teaching practices at their school. They disdain *Trained Dogs* perhaps in part because they feel frustrated by their own intellectual curiosity being channeled in school into correct-answer formatting. This would help explain why the *Trained Dog* field story exists chiefly among honors/AP students and not general curriculum students.

Students' perspectives are also influenced by their experiences with individual teachers. Based on the recurring stories of teachers who have students grade each others tests, and teachers who assign "five million worksheets," according to Claire, but only grade a few of them in the end, it would not have been surprising to find that students put little stock in effort as the key to school success, particularly in those teachers' classes. It would seem more likely that effort would be viewed as rather pointless. Some of these teaching practices superficially endorse the Effort Schema by demanding a high volume of assignments from students in order to receive high grades, yet ultimately, honest effort is not enforced by the teacher. Nonetheless, students at Comprehensive High proffer the Effort Schema quite overtly. I do indeed find that students also use the Intelligence Schema to explain school success, but students articulate the Intelligence Schema less avidly than the Effort Schema.

Interviews at Comprehensive High left me with the impression that students are outwardly convinced that trying hard is the key to school success, yet upon introspection, they often turn to the logic of the Intelligence Schema. Sometimes, as in the example of Claire discussed above, students' explanations move through multiple iterations of supporting the Effort Schema and then the Intelligence Schema, not seamlessly weaving a coherent logic from the two strands, but awkwardly compiling incompatible explanations side by side. Part III of this dissertation explores how these tensions between schemas play out when students negotiate their own intelligence identities as individual actors within their high school environment.

PART III

INTRODUCTION

INDIVIDUAL STUDENTS' CONSTRUCTION OF SUCCESS IDENTITY

We have seen in Part II how school structures help shape local beliefs and attitudes around effort, intelligence, and school success at each of the three schools in this study. Within each of the school contexts, different field stories emerge because students at these schools grapple with different kinds of concerns. Their concerns are embodied in local field stories, which are identity types that characterize successful and unsuccessful types of students. At Alternative High, students are concerned about avoiding failure, which gives rise to the *Smart-but-not-Trying* and *Cheater* field stories. At Comprehensive High, students are concerned about proving that they are "at least average," which gives rise to the *Average Joe* field story; and AP students are concerned about comprehensive learning as opposed to test performance, which gives rise to the *Trained Dog* field story. At Elite Charter High, students are concerned about making themselves eligible for admission to an elite university, which gives rise to the *OCD Overachiever* and *College Strategist* field stories. Students' concerns at each school are encouraged by locally pervasive understandings of the relationship between effort, intelligence and school success.

Part III of this dissertation explores how individual students construct their own success identities within the contexts of their local school environments. Just as Part II demonstrates that actors in each school interpret and modify larger cultural schemas— the Intelligence Schema and the Effort Schema—in ways that are specific to the

particular school environment, Part III illustrates a similar process at the individual level. Students draw on locally available field stories and local beliefs about school success as the "raw material" for their success identities (Westenholz 2006). This does not mean that they necessarily incorporate a field story wholly to into their identity. Instead, students construct their success identities in response to existing field stories and in response to local meanings of intelligence and effort.

Some students describe themselves in opposition to a field story, such as Denise at Elite Charter High and René at Comprehensive High. In other cases, individual students' understandings of success are tightly aligned with their local school's shared beliefs and the student finds it difficult to evaluate herself outside of those boundaries, such as Natalia at Alternative High. Other students assert that they agree with local beliefs about school success, but simply do not feel that the conditions apply to themselves, such as James at Elite Charter High. Of course, still other students also identify strongly with a particular field story and embrace it in their descriptions of themselves, such as Mario at Comprehensive High. Individual students mediate local beliefs and local field stories as they construct their success identities vis-à-vis school success. Nonetheless, the local beliefs and identity types available at a particular organization set the terms of negotiation for individuals' success identities, here it is in the context of school. This means that even when students do not define themselves according to a particular field story, they still tend to use locally available field stories as the key reference points for their descriptions of themselves.

In addition to demonstrating the role that local school environments play in students' processes of identity construction, Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight also discuss how outside-of-school influences affect students' success identities. For example, for Tonyah at Alternative High, family expectations have an important, negative impact on her perception of her intelligence and her success. Meanwhile Tonyah's classmate Natalia's positive family influence does not seem to override her doubts about her own intellectual abilities, similar to René's experience at Comprehensive High. For Denise at Elite Charter High, on the other hand, a close friendship with a classmate plays a critical part in the development of her success identity. Academic rivalry with her best friend colors Denise's perception of her own intellectual abilities, and by extension the limits of academic success that is available to her. Meanwhile for Sherie at Alternative High, it is her school history that helps shape her success identity. And for Stephanie at Comprehensive High, it is her ability to do cognitive tasks outside of school, such as help a neighbor with her "mortgage stuff," that informs her sense of her intelligence and success.

The cases I present in the following three chapters show that students' home life experiences, peer friendships, school history, and other outside-of-school influences affect success identity construction. However, I find that these three school environments are a powerful source of ideas and attitudes that provide the frameworks for success identity construction on which students rely. Differences in students' family lives, peer friendships, academic histories, and the like, are incorporated into the local school's framework for understanding oneself vis-à-vis intelligence, effort, and school

success. These factors, such as parents' expectations, matter to a student's sense of self, but I do not find that they challenge the school's local terms of negotiation for success identity. Rather, such experiences influence how and to what extent students apply local beliefs and field stories to themselves, without providing alternative frameworks of success identity.

Symbolic Interactionist Approach to Identity

I take a Symbolic Interactionist approach to understanding identity. George Herbert Mead (1934) lays much of the groundwork for this perspective. Mead theorizes that a person's self emerges only through social interaction. He posits that: "The self has a character which is different from that of the physiological organism proper. The self is something which has a development; it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity" (1934:135). A key feature of the self is that it is continually developing since a person is continually engaged in interactions with the social world.

Symbolic interactionists posit that not only the self arises and develops from social interaction, but also all meaning arises and develops the same way. Herbert Blumer explains: "symbolic interactionism sees meanings as social products, as creations that are formed in and through the defining activities of people as they interact" (1969:5). Applied to the research of this dissertation, this means that students learn the meanings of grades, intelligence, success, and so on through their interactions with other people. However, Blumer warns us that "it is a mistake to think that the use

of meaning by a person is but an application of the meaning so derived" (1969:5). That is to say that students do not simply learn a meaning for success and then apply it as a blanket meaning in all subsequent encounters involving the notion of success. Instead, individuals weigh new meanings against previous meanings they have learned, and determine how to make sense of it all in relation to the specific situation at hand. Blumer continues: "the use of meanings by the actor occurs through a process of interpretation...interpretation becomes a matter of handling meanings. The actor selects, checks, suspends, regroups, and transforms the meanings in the light of the situation in which he is placed and the direction of his action" (1969:5). Thus, we can expect that local beliefs—which are rooted in local meanings—about school success and local field stories will be important influences in individual students' construction of their success identities.

I use the term identity to describe an individual's description of her self. Mead says that one of the most critical elements of interaction that allows a self to emerge is the ability of a person to have inner dialogue, or to interact with oneself. Mead describes this as the self being both subject and object: "The individual experiences himself as such, not directly, but only indirectly, from the particular standpoints of other individual members of the same social group, or from the generalized standpoint of the social group as a whole to which he belongs" (1934:138). This means that an individual is able to recognize herself both as an actor-self (subject) and also as a self whom others see and react to (object).

Mead uses the term "I" to represent an individual's actor-self, and "me" to represent an individual's social self, or self that exists as other people perceive her—or more precisely, as she believes that other people perceive her. These two aspects: "I" and "me" together comprise the individual's self as "parts of a whole" (1934:178). Mead elaborates that the actions of the "I" are spontaneous and unpredictable, while the "me" is "the organized set of attitudes of others which one himself assumes," (1934:175) so that the "me" serves to hold the individual accountable for her actions, and attempts to rein in the unpredictable "I" in order to satisfy the expectations of the community around her. In inner dialogue, the "I" reacts directly to the "me", which allows an individual to debate with herself over whether or not to enact a particular behavior, for example.

Mead explains that an individual does not have a singular self, but many selves. He explicates:

> We carry on a whole series of different relationships to different people. We are one thing to one man and another thing to another. There are parts of the self which exist only for the self in relationship to itself. We divide ourselves up in all sorts of different selves with reference to our acquaintances. We discuss politics with one and religion with another. There are all sorts of different selves answering to all sorts of different social reactions. It is the social process itself that is responsible for the appearance of the self; it is not there as a self apart from this type of experience.   1934:142

Thus, I do not claim that the success identity that I investigate in this dissertation is in any sense the *one* identity, or *true* identity of a student's self. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, the success identity a student expresses to me in an interview

is one self among multiple selves, or as Goffman (1959) terms it: a single "presentation of self" among multiple possible presentations.

However, as more contemporary scholars point out, individuals do, in fact, experience themselves as having a consistent, core self (Frank 1995; Gagnon 1992; Gee 1999; Gubrium and Holstein 2000; Irvine 2000; McAdams 1993). Leslie Irvine argues that "selfhood is a narrative accomplishment. The self is the premise and the result of the stories people tell about themselves, especially those they tell *to* themselves" (2000:9). Irvine asserts that narratives, or stories, about oneself allow an individual to organize her experiences and feelings into a coherent, unified understanding of who she is. Irvine argues:

> the narrative self is "even better than the real thing." If a "real" self did exist, it would be inaccessible and incomprehensible, at moments so painfully intense and so raw as to offer no practical guidance for behavior. But the self-storyteller uses a set of narrative techniques that yield a product that is better than authentic. As a story, the self can be convincing, coherent, and have a satisfying ending. Self-stories can also have sufficient ambiguity to accommodate lives that are in progress and subject to change.
> 2000:11

Thus, Irvine reminds us that although the symbolic interactionist perspective on what a self is and how it is formed is a valid way for scholars to understand self and identity, it does not accurately characterize how individuals experience their self.

As identity is constructed through interaction, the process requires that other people participate in one's identity construction by acknowledging and ratifying the identity one asserts through narrative (or other interaction). Here, Irvine argues that an individual can be her own audience and ratifier, however the involvement of others is a

key dynamic of identity construction in this theoretical perspective. Irvine's claim that a self is a narrative accomplishment also supports interview methodology, such as that which I employ in this dissertation, as an appropriate method of investigating an individual's understandings of her own self: her identity. Since individuals experience themselves as having a core self, and their sense of this core self is accomplished through narrative—both in stories they tell to others about themselves as well as stories they tell themselves about themselves—listening carefully to how students' describe themselves in an interview is a legitimate point of access to their identities.

Further, Irvine emphasizes the role that institutions play in providing frameworks for individuals' narratives of self. "It is the unique capacity of human beings to meet both sets of requirements—to tell good stories that can also accommodate uncertainty—and it is the power of institutions that allows them to do so...Institutions make self-stories consistent and convincing by providing formulas, supporting characters, and opportunities to tell one's stories" (2000:11). Irvine defines institutions as "patterns of activities organized around a common goal" (2000:11) and looks carefully at the ways in which individuals adopt formulas for their self-narratives that are supplied by organizations such as Co-dependents Anonymous, a twelve-step self-help program that serves as her research site.

Similarly, we might expect to find that the students I interviewed at the three schools in this study draw on the field stories available in their particular institutional environment as they construct their own identities. While Westenholz (2006) uses the concept of field stories to describe the identity types that actors in an organizational

context use to identify and understand the behaviors and characters of *other people*, Irvine's work makes it clear that we should also expect individuals to use field stories as structures or formulas in their own self-stories as well.

Intersecting Symbolic Interactionism and Organizations Theory

Mead and other symbolic interactionists' theories on how the self and identity are formed are a critical starting point to understanding students' success identities. However, in order to appropriately contextualize the process of identity construction for the students in my study, we must bridge symbolic interactionist (including narrative explanations) of identity with theories of the middle range (Merton 1957), specifically local organization theories that focus on local culture (Fine 1996; Harrington and Fine 2006; Hirsch and Lounsbury 1997). Even in their micro-level focus, Mead, Blumer, Goffman, and other cornerstone theorists of symbolic interaction recognize the importance of the interplay between an individual and the structures of the social world surrounding the individual. Identity is constructed in the give and take between them. My study demonstrates that importance of local organizational forms in this process.

Students are situated in particular schools as they construct their identities of school success. Schools are not identical to one another, neither in terms of academic structures such as curriculum tracks nor in terms of local beliefs about what it takes to succeed in school. Recent organization theory encourages us to recognize that schools are "inhabited" by actors. Those actors actively shape and negotiate local meanings and local practices out of the larger institutional logics and cultural schemas that are

available at the society level (see Part II Introduction for a thorough discussion) (Binder 2007; Hallett and Ventresca 2006b; Westenholz, Pedersen, and Dobbin 2006).

As Harrington and Fine (2006) argue, investigating meaning-making and actors' creative action in "small groups" (bounded organizations) allows us to advance cultural sociology by employing an understanding of culture that: "recognizes the importance of locally situated meaning, embodied action, and the power of copresence. The background or known culture serves as a tool kit, from which participants draw to create meanings (Swidler, 1986). However, culture is not merely performed by active bodies but invented, negotiated, and contested. The small groups literature implies a feedback loop in which micro-levels and macrolevels of culture mutually influence one another (Hallet, 2003)" (Harrington and Fine 2006:8).

The students I interviewed actively invent and negotiate their own success identities in their high school contexts. This demonstrates the importance of individuals' creativity, or bottom-up processes in the ongoing production of culture. At the same time, students rely heavily on the cultural frameworks for understanding school success that are available to them in their local high school contexts, which demonstrates the importance of top-down transfer of ideas in the ongoing production of culture. Schools are excellent sites to investigate the multidimensionality of culture through students' construction of their success identities. As Harrington and Fine advocate, this dissertation emphasizes the "importance of locally situated meaning, embodied action, and the power of copresence" by demonstrating that schools modify cultural schemas at the organization level, according the local sensibilities, and those

local modifications (field stories and local beliefs) are in turn modified at the individual level as students use them in creative ways to construct their self identity.

Interviewing Students about Success Identity

Throughout the interview, I invite students to discuss their school success in a number of ways, some more concrete, and some more abstract. The data I present in the following three chapters include responses to questions about students' own grades; their experiences with teachers; students' opinions of what constitutes fair and unfair grading practices; the differences they experience between learning that happens inside of school and learning that happens outside of school; students' perceptions of the ratio between the effort and intellectual ability required for them to succeed in their subjects; and other topics.

While it took very little prompting to get students to talk about their effort in school, discussing their own intelligence was sometimes a more delicate topic. This is likely because intelligence is a highly valued trait, yet one that is widely seen as not under an individual's control, which makes it shameful for a person to admit that they do not have enough of it (Gould 1981; Richardson and Bradley 2005). In an effort to elicit students' perceptions of their success identities around the concept of intelligence, I include a question in the interview guide where I ask each respondent to rank himself or herself on a 1-10 intelligence scale. I am less interested in the number that the student ascribes to herself, and more interested in her description of *why* she thinks that number and not a higher or lower number fits her. I follow up the 1-10 intelligence

scale question with: "What was going through your mind that made you decide that was the right number?" To help clarify vague or confusing answers, I sometimes also follow with: "How do you know you are not a ten?" Thus, in the following three chapters I present students' responses to these questions, not as evidence of how smart they believe themselves to be based on the number they give, but rather, as an opportunity to hear their explanations and rationales behind their self rankings.

Further, I use students' self-rankings as a point of comparison with two other questions in the interview where I ask students to tell me where their friends would rank them on the 1-10 intelligence scale, and where their closest family members would rank them. Again, I do not put stock in the particular number that the students offer, instead I use these questions to elicit students' perceptions of how others see their intelligence in relation to how they see their own intelligence. It also provides a similar opportunity for students to give a rationale and explanation for others' views of them.

The following three chapters demonstrate that students draw heavily on local beliefs about school success and local field stories as they describe their own intelligence, effort, and success. I find that students construct their success identities largely within the framework of school success that is available at their high school. This illustrates the important consequences that school context has for an individual's sense of self vis-à-vis intelligence, effort, and school success.

CHAPTER SIX

AVOIDING OCD AT ELITE CHARTER HIGH

Elite Charter High is an environment of high academic achievement. Most of the students I interviewed here are enrolled in at least one AP or honors curriculum course. Even many of the students I met in their general curriculum ("college prep") Chemistry class study other subjects at the honors or AP level. The few exceptions to this tend to be students like Marie, a white sophomore who feels proud of her straight-A report card, and is convinced that non-honors courses is the location where she can maximize her school success.

Elite Charter High fosters a competitive atmosphere among students over academic performance. I witnessed instances of competition in the classrooms I observed during field research, particularly in the AP Chemistry course. Moreover, in interviews, many students at Elite Charter High also characterize their everyday school experiences as being fraught with academic competition among classmates and friends. In this environment of high achievement and pressure to outshine others, I find a local field story of the *OCD Overachiever*, discussed in detail in Chapter Three. The *OCD Overachiever* is characterized as a person who receives excellent grades, even straight A's in multiple honors/AP courses, yet must sacrifice all her free time and even her sanity to achieve those excellent grades. Students I interviewed are critical of the *OCD Overachiever* type, and several students assert that their goal is to avoid becoming

OCD, even though that means that their grades will be something less than excellent. This is a tradeoff they are willing to make.

Avoiding *OCD* creates a tension for these students, however, because a widely pervasive belief at Elite Charter High is that high intelligence engenders an internal desire to learn and excel academically. A common perception at Elite Charter High is that a student's passion for learning inspires dedicated effort toward schoolwork; thus the intensity of one's effort becomes an outward signal of the heights of one's intelligence.

This Chapter explores how students reconcile their perceptions of their own intelligence and effort vis-à-vis the field stories at Elite Charter High and local understandings of how intelligence and effort contribute to school success. I examine how students define themselves and explain their own school success, paying particular attention to how students invoke local beliefs about success and local field stories in their self-descriptions. This Chapter provides a careful look at students' identities as a product of their individual experiences and self-perceptions as well as their interactions with the social and academic environment of their school. Through such analysis we can see the powerful consequences of school context on a student's sense of self. Further, we gain insight into the ways that culture is produced from both top-down transfers of ideas as well as bottom-up processes where individuals creatively adapt and reinterpret cultural forms such as field stories.

Schools are organizational sites where cultural schemas are modified and interpreted in ways that fit the sensibilities of the students, teachers, and administrators

who inhabit the schools. Students construct their self-identities of school success in their local school context in a process that in turn modifies and interprets the local school's version of wider cultural schemas on a personal level. Students do not draw directly on the Effort Schema and the Intelligence Schema in their self-descriptions of their success identity. Rather, they draw on the field stories that are available at their own school and on locally modified beliefs about the relationship between effort, intelligence, and school success. Importantly, students do not passively accept field stories into their identities; students use them in a variety of creative and dynamic ways to affirm their understandings of themselves.

Admitting to OC, but not D: Alexis is Really a *College Strategist*

Alexis is a white sophomore whom I met in her AP Chemistry class. She draws on both the *OCD Overachiever* field story and the *College Strategist* field story in her description of her self-identity. However, she does not embrace the two field stories equally in her self-descriptions. Alexis admits to being "obsessed" with school, even somewhat compulsive, yet she does not feel any "disorder" in her life. I describe this as "admitting to OC, but not D." Overall, Alexis sees herself as a *College Strategist*, and proudly depicts herself in the terms of that field story.

Alexis enjoys excellent grades, straight A's in fact. She is currently enrolled in AP History, AP Chemistry, Spanish V, and Journalism, and holds a 4.5 GPA, the maximum GPA for her course load (A grades in AP classes are given extra weight; they count as 5 each in the grade point average instead of the usual 4). Elite Charter High is

organized around a four-courses-per-semester schedule to allow students greater depth in their subjects during each school week, compared to traditional schedules, which enroll students in six courses at a time. Elite Charter High students take different classes one semester to the next, and the school promotes this as the equivalent to eight full courses, again compared to the traditional six year-long classes offered by most other high schools. For example, next semester, Alexis' classes will switch to honors English, honors Algebra II/Trigonometry, AP Spanish, and she will continue in AP Chemistry, one of the few yearlong courses offered.

Alexis' school success is easily seen by others as a result of her being an *OCD Overachiever*. One of Alexis' best friends, Denise, depicts Alexis as an *OCD Overachiever* in her explanation of Alexis' impressive score of over 2000 on the PSAT they both recently took through a Kaplan test preparation course: "It's just that she—her tests are just like how much you like obsess over it while you're in the class. She remembers little stuff from class just because she...Like some of the math stuff, they would ask the tiniest little thing and it's the kind of thing that, if it was mentioned in class, she would write it down just out of fear that it might be on a test. And she would learn it, just in case. Because she can't afford not to get 100% on a test."

Denise is critical of Alexis in this regard. Denise does not hide her aversion to Alexis' tendency to "obsess" over small details of course material. She describes her best friend's efforts as driven by "fear" because "she can't afford not to get 100% on a test." This is a typical characterization of *OCD Overachievers* at Elite Charter High, that they are "scared" and "nervous" all the time; morbidly afraid of imperfect

performance in school. As we will see later in this Chapter, Denise's close friendship with Alexis is a prime source of tension for Denise's own success identity because Alexis consistently outperforms Denise. What I want to emphasize here, however, is not Denise's feelings of jealousy, but that Alexis fits the bill of the *OCD Overachiever* field story. She herself admits to obsessing about school. "I've always tried really hard in school," Alexis tells me, "and I've always been like obsessed with it. I don't know, it's like what I do. I don't know, it's just like—like my parents aren't even surprised at me anymore. It's just like what I do." When Alexis describes herself in comparison with her closest friends, she again invokes the terms of an *OCD Overachiever*: "I think out of all of my friends, I kind of like try the hardest. I don't know, that's just how it has always been since I don't know [when]. In the little group, like I am the one that like kills myself for school, kind of."

Even though she describes her dedication as "killing herself for school," Alexis does not see her life as unbalanced nor does she express a sense of feeling overwhelmed by schoolwork during our interview. In fact, she reports putting in fewer hours of homework time per week (eight to ten hours) than most of the students I interviewed who claim to be purposefully avoiding *OCD*, including Denise who reports fifteen hours a week on average. When I ask Alexis how she feels about her classes this semester, she responds: "I am pretty happy, actually. I was really scared about like the AP classes, that they were going to be like huge amounts of work, and that I wouldn't have time to do anything. But they're not so bad. Like it's—yeah, I'm pretty happy with the difficulty and the amount of time I'm spending on them."

Rather than feeling that her sanity is destroyed by her dedication to schoolwork, as is the case with *OCD Overachievers*, Alexis expresses a sense of pride over her school success as an accomplishment that will enhance her chances of attending a "good college." Discussing how she feels about her own report card, she says proudly, "they are the grades that could get me into a good college. Because colleges look at grades." Alexis repeatedly brings up her anticipation of a college future in the interview. Multiple times she describes herself as "college-bound."

Alexis draws on the field story of *OCD Overachiever* when she describes herself, but she does not wholly embrace the field story. Instead, I characterize Alexis' self portrait as "OC, but not D", by which I mean that she admits to being "obsessive," perhaps even "compulsive," but definitely not to having a "disorder." The element of craziness, imbalance, or being over the edge that students at Elite Charter High ascribe to this field story are not central to Alexis' self-descriptions. Rather, Alexis' self-identity is more tightly aligned with the *College Strategist* field story that I also find at Elite Charter High.

A *College Strategist* is a student who carefully charts out strategies that will enable her or him to have a competitive college application for elite universities. These strategies generally include taking high school courses that are college pre-requisites; maximizing one's GPA and scope of honors/AP courses; exhibiting leadership qualities and community service through extra-curricular activities, and ensuring a high SAT score through preparatory classes, practice tests, and by taking the exam multiple times.

A *College Strategist* is an admirable identity type according to students I interviewed at Elite Charter High.

Alexis' best friend Denise also confirms Alexis' efforts as a *College Strategist*, but Denise characterizes Alexis' college strategies as additional evidence of her imbalanced life. Denise uses the term "crazy" to depict Alexis' homework habits: "Her parents raised her to just be like 'get home from school, start your homework, and do it until you fall asleep in your book.' And she's crazy." Denise perceives Alexis' life to be dominated by her uncompromising commitment to school and to ensuring her college admission: "my best friend with the straight A's [Alexis], she just like listens to all my music, and likes all the same movies as me, and all my friends are her friends, and [she] doesn't really have a life outside of me—except for her charity and volunteer work, which she does for college. (laugh) That's it." Denise's perception of Alexis is colored by her feelings of frustration that she is unable to match Alexis' school success. I discuss Denise in more detail in the following section. However, her illustration of Alexis helps us to see that Alexis is precisely the kind of person that Elite Charter High students have in mind when they describe an *OCD Overachiever*. Importantly, Alexis does not see herself in quite the same light. She depicts herself in a much more favorable position: a dedicated *College Strategist* who enjoys excellent school success, and is happy with school even though she admits being a little obsessed with it.

Avoiding OCD: Denise Describes Herself as Sane, but Also as Less-than-excellent

Like Alexis, Denise is also a white sophomore whom I met in their AP Chemistry class. They sit next to each other and work together as lab partners. Denise draws directly on the *OCD Overachiever* field story in her self-descriptions, but uses the field story to define herself in opposition to it. Denise is one of several students whom I interviewed at Elite Charter High who describes herself as capable of receiving excellent grades (usually defined at Elite Charter High as straight A's in multiple honors/AP classes) but who claims that her grades fall short of "excellent" because she allows herself to live a balanced, healthy teenage life. In the language of the local field story, I characterize these students as "avoiding *OCD*."

Like others, Denise is adamant about avoiding *OCD*. During the interview she characterizes the lives of extremely high achieving students as pathetic and undesirable. We saw above how Denise applies these terms to her best friend; however, Denise is equally critical of straight-A students in general. She perceives them as overburdened by their pursuit of school success. In this section, I emphasize Denise's disdain for high achievement as a means for Denise to manage the frustration she feels over not being able to receive straight A's herself.

In the interview, I ask Denise if she believes that straight A's are possible for anyone who tries hard enough. In her immediate, off the cuff response she enthusiastically denies that straight A's are available based on effort alone. Yet, as she explains why, it occurs to her that she *does* believe that straight A's are *possible*. However they come at too high a cost:

> **LN:** Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: if a student tries hard enough, they can get all A's in school.

> **Denise:** I definitely disagree!
>
> **LN:** Tell me why. Tell me what seems wrong about that?
>
> **Denise:** I haven't gotten straight A's since 4th grade. (pause) I mean, I kind of agree in the sense that yes, you can go crazy and you can get straight A's, but you still have to go crazy. I mean I COULD have straight A's right now if I, after finishing like three hours of homework, I then reviewed for my chemistry test that was in two weeks, every night. Okay, so I guess I agree with it, this statement. Just personally, like I try really hard. People that have an A in AP Chemistry are not happy people. I mean, they're sad and they're depressed and they're insane...I don't want to be that. That's what I was afraid of for this year, that I would turn into a robot student. And I have like all A's and one B. And I try really hard. I could get that A, but there's a certain point I think...I mean, if you're going to have straight A's, with like more than one AP class, then you spend more of your life like going the extra limit than you do just like working on yourself, kind of. I mean, in high school it seems that the people who do that are more like giving in to the system...they're just like—their own personality is just like thin and watery.

Here, Denise's negative portrayal of straight-A students in AP classes goes beyond "depressed and insane," as would be fitting for an *OCD Overachiever*. She also claims that they are uninteresting people, robots even, with personalities that are "thin and watery." Her aggressive, disparaging depiction of students who attain excellent school success turns out to be a strategy for allowing herself to see her own imperfect school success as a virtue rather than as a failing.

Denise receives great grades. In the quote above she announces that she currently holds all A's and one B. Her B is in AP Chemistry, a course that many students struggle in, and she holds an A in AP History and in two other, non-honors courses. Her GPA is 4.25 and at multiple points in the interview she asserts that she is proud of her school success. When I ask whether GPA is a concern for her, she responds: "Um, it hasn't ever been, really, except for when I had to get a certain GPA to get a cell phone. I mean, I guess so. I don't really think about it. I don't like base my

classes around how high I can get my GPA. But I like having a 4.25. It's nice. It's the first—it's always been like a 3.26 and now it's getting up there...Yeah, and I can even get a C in one of my classes and still have a 4.0 which is pretty cool. I don't plan on it, but it's secure."

Even as she expresses her satisfaction with her current school success: "I like having a 4.25. It's nice," Denise also downplays how much excellent grades mean to her. She says, "I don't really think about it. I don't like base my classes around how high I can get my GPA." As discussed above, taking classes that maximize one's GPA is a common strategy employed by *College Strategists*, a field story that garners respect at Elite Charter High. However, Denise forgoes association even with the positive characteristics of a *College Strategist* in her response above, in an effort to separate herself entirely from someone who is obsessed with excellent grades.

Yet in many other points during the interview, Denise gives the distinct impression that she *is obsessed* with excellent grades. This demonstrates the tension Denise experiences because she feels unable to achieve them. Not three minutes into the interview, Denise volunteers a description of her emotional distress over the fact that her best friend Alexis outperforms her:

> **Denise:** Like my best friend sits next to me in both my AP classes, and she blows me out of the park school-wise.
> **LN:** Do you mean in academics? Like she's better?
> **Denise:** Yeah, way better. Amazing. And she always has been. That's like how she was raised, really, and our parents are good friends. It's like an open subject between us...And I started out this year thinking "I'm going to beat her. I'm going to beat her." And every time I was viciously slapped down. And that gets annoying because I've been best friends with her since kindergarten, and she lives around the block, and we spend every minute together. And it's always like I try really hard and I make a big

deal about it, because I'm kind of lazy. And she's like—tries as hard as I do plus does extra credit and just like brushes her shoulders off. That brings me down at school.

Denise sees herself as engaged in an open rivalry with Alexis over grades. However, for her part, Alexis never mentions any academic competition with her friends, nor with Denise in particular during her interview with me. This signals that perhaps the sense of competition exists much more strongly on Denise's side of the friendship. In general at Elite Charter High, I find that discussions of the tense, competitive atmosphere in AP courses arise in interviews much more often with students who are not victorious. Rather the rivalry among classmates over grades seems to be much more salient in the lives of those who lose out in the competitions, those who must admit to being second place: students like Denise.

In the interview, Denise identifies very strongly with the high performing report card (discussed at length in Part II). The anonymous report card shows nearly straight A's, including one A-minus and one B-plus. Denise focuses on the B-plus as the point she most closely associates with herself. Looking at the report card, Denise says:

> **Denise:** These are basically my grades and classes. So it's hard not to describe myself.
> **LN:** That's okay. Describe yourself.
> **Denise:** Alright. They do try really hard in school and they're one notch below the highest. Not one notch, but you know, just below that one student who every teacher thinks is wonderful.
> **LN:** The A-plus-plus-plus kid.
> **Denise**: The A-plus-plus-plus student. They're kind of discouraged by those kids and they feel bad for them, but they kind of use that to like make themselves feel better.

Here she acknowledges that she makes herself feel better about her own performance by feeling bad for classmates who receive excellent grades. At Elite Charter High the

OCD Overachiever field story offers a ready framework for disdaining excellent school success. Denise, and others like her, can justify her own great-but-not-excellent grades as a result of being a happy teenager with a sane level of commitment to academics. She successfully avoids *OCD*, while at the same time claiming to be capable of achieving straight A's. She explains, "I'm not going to like stop listening to music and stuff, going to parties and stuff like that. I will try as hard as I can, but I'm not going to lose myself for school. I still have better grades than most of my friends do, and that's fine. I'm happy with my grades."

Yet, Denise's comments consistently carry an undercurrent of disappointment in her level of school success. Above, she describes herself as "just below" classmates who truly excel. In an earlier quote, Denise characterizes her unsuccessful attempts to "beat" Alexis this year in emotional and violent terms: "every time I was viciously slapped down." Although she asserts that she is "happy" with her school success and that her less-than-excellent grades are justified as evidence that she has successfully avoided *OCD*, she also experiences a profound tension between her not-quite-excellent school success and her sense of her own intelligence and effort.

Tensions in Success Identity: Denise and Alexis

Denise claims that Alexis is not more intelligent than she is. She says, "I pick and choose what I want to learn and what I want to remember [from classes]. And she doesn't. She tries to take in everything, and I don't think it's necessarily that she's smarter than me. I think it's just that that's all she's got going for her." At the same

time, however, Denise relies on her school performance to inform her understanding of her own intelligence. School success is *not* irrelevant to how she evaluates her own cognitive talents. For example, even though she holds an A in her Algebra II class, she describes her performance in AP Chemistry as limited by her low math abilities:

> In AP Chemistry, I'm, I think, one of like two kids in a class of 36 that's not in an honors math. I'm not very good at math. And I think that does kind of have to do with my ability to get it [chemistry]. And it's not that I don't try hard and not that that doesn't have anything to do with it...I mean, I can understand everything the teacher talks about, but I have to make it like work for myself because he is just—he goes and goes. I mean, you sat in the class and saw him, and he just acts like we should already know it anyway. He teaches like he's teaching review. And it's hard. And even if I am "just smart," I still have to put the pieces together. And I'm not that smart in that class, because a lot of it is math.

On the other hand, Denise has an alternative way to conceptualize intelligence, thanks to her father. He has impressed his view on her that intelligence is evident in other people who are "curious" about the world. "My dad says that he judges how smart people are by how curious they are. And I kind of agree with that, depending on what they're curious about," she says. Several times in the interview Denise refers to herself as person who is "curious." For example when I ask her whether she likes school, she responds: "I like school a lot. I like—what do I like about school? Um, there are some teachers who make it worth going every day...I like the whole thing. I like learning, like I'm interested and curious." Denise uses the measure of curiosity as a supplement to school performance as she constructs her success identity.

Denise's father's conceptualization of intelligence-as-curiosity is not too far afield from the widely shared understanding I find at Elite Charter High that high intelligence fuels a passion for learning. Hence, although Denise is unlike her

classmates in that she uses the notion of "curious" as a proxy for intelligence, her use of it does not reject prevailing understandings of intelligence at her school. Denise factors in her curiosity with her school performance when evaluating her own intelligence. The local belief about intelligence at her school poses an inevitable relationship between intelligence and school success. Highly intelligent students cannot help themselves but to feel driven to learn and excel in their schoolwork.

Denise acknowledges that she falls short on that measure of intelligence when it comes to chemistry: "When I think of intelligence, I think of like how knowledge—or how curious you are about one subject...But I don't know. I don't sit at home thinking about chemistry and stuff. I don't like look up extra chemistry problems to do on my own and stuff like that. I do okay in the class. I get a B." She indicates here and other moments in the interview that her lackluster *approach* to chemistry signals a deficiency in her overall intelligence. On the other hand, she is highly motivated to work on her writing skills in her free time. She invests a great deal of effort in her writing, whether it is for a class assignment or for her own pleasure. Both her parents are writers, and her father makes his living at it, so she gets a good deal of encouragement at home for her writing efforts. Denise is able to see her passion for writing as evidence that she is intelligent, as is fitting within the local beliefs at Elite Charter High, however that is diminished by her relative disinterest in chemistry and math.

When I ask her where she would place herself on a 1-10 intelligence scale, she responds: "I don't know. A seven? eight?" She explains her rationale: "there's tons of stuff that I don't know about yet that I could expand on and do something that could

make me known world-wide and THE smartest person ever, and I'd say like twelve on that scale. But, no. I'm fifteen [years old]. I do pretty well in school, try hard and am pretty interested. I like doing stuff…in English class I would say ten. In math class I would say seven." As we have seen throughout this Chapter, Denise asserts that she tries hard in school, and holds back greater effort only as a safeguard against becoming *OCD*. Yet the underlying tension for Denise's success identity seems to be that she does not *want* to spend her energy learning more about chemistry, or math for that matter. If she did, she might be able to consider herself to have truly high intelligence, a nine or a ten on the 1-10 scale. Incidentally, this is where she assumes Alexis places herself: at nine or ten. If she did *want* to spend her free time "thinking about chemistry" and looking up "extra chemistry problems" to solve, her grades would reflect it. Her grades would look like Alexis' grades, the grades of a motivated, ambitious learner, signaling high intelligence and high school success. However, Denise's lack of "curiosity" and passion for learning about both math and chemistry prevent her from considering herself to be among the highly intelligent. She often describes it as avoiding *OCD*, terms that are available and make sense in her school environment. Yet it is not that she has to forcibly hold herself back from spending all her time and energy on schoolwork; the internal desire to learn about some subjects is simply absent.

Although Alexis achieves excellent school success, she is not free from tensions in her success identity either. Denise is sure that Alexis would place herself "at a nine or ten" and that Alexis would place Denise at "a seven or eight." From Denise's perspective, Alexis sees the intelligence-difference between them as black and white,

and that Alexis enjoys the higher position. "Yeah. She thinks it's all about grades. It's all about grades to her. She thinks that the other stuff is bullshit. She's all about the cold hard facts. And my grades are one notch below hers, and therefore I'm one notch below her on the 1-10 scale," Denise explains.

However, Alexis is much less certain about her own intelligence level than Denise imagines. Despite her stellar school success, Alexis is unsure how much stock she can put into her high school grades as evidence of how intellectually capable she is. When I ask her where she might fall on the 1-10 intelligence scale, she hesitates and falters repeatedly in her response: "I guess, you know, (pause) like I'd be kind of on the upper half, I guess...I think I'm (pause) like I guess I'd have to say (pause). Do I actually have to pick a number?...I don't know. seven? eight-ish? nine? I don't know. Just because like I get good grades and I understand a lot, I don't know. I can hold a conversation with someone about something—not mindless. So, I don't know. It's weird. I've never had to say that before." At the end of the interview, Alexis requests that we return to the subject of the 1-10 intelligence scale:

> **Alexis:** Just the thing we were talking about earlier, asking me to rank myself. Like I know I get good grades, but I don't—like I haven't figured out yet like how intelligent I really am. I don't know.
> **LN:** Well, what would you need to know in order to figure out how smart you are? What kind of information is missing, or what could help you?
> **Alexis:** College, really. Because like now everyone takes basically the same classes. Like I guess I am taking more AP's than some people might, or I will be. But like being challenged more, like in a situation where you're actually there to—like college. You're in the classes and you're actually (pause) I don't know. I just think you are challenged a lot more probably. And I might be able to see like how well I actually do. And I think college is a lot more (pause) it's harder to like BS your way through. I don't know. I am still trying to figure that out.

Alexis indicates that she is waiting for the rigor of college academics to help establish the proper guidelines for evaluating her intelligence. She feels that high school has not posed a strong enough challenge for her to accurately measure herself. It is not that high school has been easy so far, on the contrary, Alexis' success demands hours on end of dedicated effort. According to the prevailing belief at Elite Charter High, Alexis' intense effort and excellent school success should allow her to see herself as highly intelligent. However, in this case the local belief fails to confirm Alexis' intelligence for herself. This is an example of how individual students construct their self-identities in response to the attitudes and beliefs they encounter in their school settings, but those school-level attitudes and beliefs do not *determine* an individual's identity. Rather, the individual also brings her personal thoughts and perceptions into her interactions with the school organization, allowing her to filter, dismiss, or embrace information that she encounters. An individual's identity is an ongoing development, a product of the interaction between the individual and her social world. For Alexis, her school success does not confirm her level of intelligence. She thinks that until she encounters the challenges of college academics, she will not know anything concretely about her cognitive abilities except that she is above average.

One thing that Alexis is clear on, however, is that she believes that even extremely intelligent students have to put in their fair share of effort in order to attain excellent grades. When I ask her whether highly intelligent students have it any easier or tougher in school, she says, "I don't think there's a huge difference, I mean...like maybe people who already have kind of just an internal understanding of the concept

will have to study less for tests and will have to—like, won't have to make as much of an effort to do well in a class. But everyone's going to have to study. It's not like people who are really smart are just going to be able to breeze through things…Everyone studies and everyone tries." On that point, she might be rather surprised to discover that a few of her AP classmates devote little to none of their after school lives to homework, yet they consistently receive straight A's.

Above the Fray: Students of Unquestioned High Intelligence Feel Tensions Too

A small handful of students I interviewed at Elite Charter High find school success to be easily attainable. They do indeed "breeze through" courses, contrary to Alexis' impression above. Brandon, for example, a white junior, sits in the front row in AP Chemistry without a pen or notebook anywhere on his desk. During the three weeks I observed in his class, I rarely saw him ask a question to the teacher or interact with classmates outside of laboratory experiments when partner work is required. Meanwhile, most of the other students in the class frantically copy down formulas and conversion strategies, and eagerly collaborate with classmates when the teacher allows them to work on homework or review together in groups. Brandon explains to me in his interview that he "stopped taking notes" early in the semester in AP Chemistry because the course material is "easier than I thought it would be." According to Brandon, all he has to do is listen to the teacher's explanation during class and he is able to master the homework and tests with ease. He tells me that he spends approximately 45 minutes a day on his homework for all of his classes combined, but none of that time

is after school. He finds his AP Calculus work to be "easy" and squeezes calculus assignments into his first period class time. Similarly, he finds time during his other classes to accomplish any other homework for the day. He tells me: "it's working pretty well. I don't really like doing homework."

Brandon is not alone. There are others I interviewed in the AP Chemistry class, albeit very few among the 36 students enrolled, who "breeze through" not just AP Chemistry, but through school in general. I characterize this small category of students as being "above the fray" because they do not have to worry about competition among classmates over grades. Academic rivalry at Elite Charter High does not define their concerns. They are unquestionably intelligent, and their cognitive talents free them from both the stress many of their classmates feel over pursuing excellent grades as well as from the oppressive time commitment that many of their classmates give to that pursuit. These are students who do as they please outside of the school day, almost entirely unencumbered by homework assignments and studying for tests. The *OCD Overachiever* field story does not enter these students' self-descriptions in the slightest way; dedicating obsessive amounts of time and effort to the pursuit of school success is simply outside of their realm of experience. In this section, I focus on two best friends in particular, who sit next to each other. Adam and James have similar experiences in school—they share all their academic classes and routinely work on assignments together—but they have very different success identity tensions that arise from their experiences.

James is a white junior who is largely quiet in the AP Chemistry class during the three weeks that I observe there. In his self-descriptions he depicts himself in terms of the *College Strategist* field story. James embraces the field story into his self-identity, but also modifies it to fit his personal circumstances. He places a premium on extracurricular activities for his college application; not to show that he is well-rounded or has leadership abilities, but instead as an effort to demonstrate to elite college admissions committees that his intelligence surpasses others', even those who have a comparably high GPA.

James considers himself highly intelligent. My field notes indicate that he is often attentive when the teacher is giving instruction, but that he can also be found doing other things at his desk, including openly reading a fantasy fiction novel during class time. When I ask him how much time he spends on homework, he responds:

> I am really lucky, and one of the reasons that math is my favorite subject is because it comes easy to me, so starting last year and continuing to this year my best friend and I will collaborate, we'll bring the text books to school and do the homework during our math class, so homework wise, I technically do an hour to an hour and a half but it is never done at home...it usually takes me the whole period, but that's with pretty substantial distractions, like I do have to pay attention every now and then.

James receives straight A's, which he believes attest to his high intelligence, as his schedule is loaded with three AP courses this semester and four AP courses next semester (out of four total courses each semester). He explains that he received a B one quarter last year in his Band class because he neglected to turn in "practice reports", and another B-plus on one of last year's report card in honors English. Otherwise his report cards consistently show A's with a few A-minuses sprinkled in. James is quick to

explain that his B-plus in honors English was not due to his inability to achieve an A, but rather a lapse in addressing the course material. He volunteers: "and the B in English actually wasn't because I struggled in the subject. It was because I didn't read one of the last books, and I was like 88 or 89.3% in the class, which just wasn't enough to get the A."

Although clearly in his English class last year he was unable to attain an A without actually doing *anything*, James states several times during the interview that the effort required for him to achieve school success is minimal. When I ask him how much of his grades are a result of his smarts and how much of his effort, James replies: "For myself personally, most of my grades are based on my smarts. Because I've been very lucky in what comes naturally for me and how easy it is for me to pick up learning. Why I'm like that, I don't know. It could be genetics, it could be because I like to read alone since I was a young child. I've been very lucky in that I learn things typically very fast."

The ease with which James is able to "pick up learning" has helped him to attain excellent grades throughout high school, and long before that as well. However, in the interview, James recalls the specific moment when he began investing himself in the pursuit of school success. He tells me that in the sixth grade he got a C on his report card in writing and it "triggered something." He explains: "Like I used to be fine with A's and B's and now I definitely want to get the straight A's." I ask him what made him stop feeling content with A's and B's and he responds: "Um, partially because I realized I'm in middle school now, I have to get to the point where colleges are going to

start looking at my transcript. That was a big play because I do want to get into good colleges." James continues with his explanation of the turn-around moment he experienced in sixth grade and how it matters to his college aspirations:

> I realized that the way the system is judged, you aren't really proving that you're smart at something in the school system unless you get ALL the A's when you're in all the honors classes and everything. Now because so many people are trying harder and getting into the honors classes and doing well in them, to prove that you are smarter, you have to do well in ALL of the honors classes, you can't just say, "oh I hate English, I can accept a B in that." You have to kind of adjust to realize that the people you are being graded against probably the ones who are going to get into the really good colleges, the ones who are really going to be looked at for "wow, these kids are really smart" probably care about all of their grades, not just one subject. So it used to be that I would only really look for the grade in math, and I wouldn't care about the rest. I got the C in writing and realized I'm going to start getting C's in English—which to me, a C was unacceptable, and a B was fine. Then I got the C and realized, you know, a B really isn't fine anymore. So I just wanted to start getting the A's.

James expresses enormous concern throughout our interview over his future college admission, as the quote above illustrates. His concerns do not revolve around being academically qualified for college; his excellent grades and his range of honors/AP classes ensure that he will meet and surpass university pre-requisites. Instead, James' college concerns center on being able to demonstrate to elite college admissions boards that he is not only highly successful in school, but that he is also far and away more intellectually talented than other students who have achieved equally impressive school success.

Continuing the conversation above, James expresses his dissatisfaction with the limited ability of course grades to signal high intelligence to colleges: "Because you can get a grade on 90% effort, and for me, I'm not really sure where I stand on that. I'm not

sure it's right for them to be able to get an A with just effort and not smarts, whether the

A should only go to the people with the smarts. I'm not sure where I stand on that yet."

James has come to a solution to this problem that he identifies in the ability of

his high school transcript to accurately signal his intelligence to colleges. He tells me:

> **James:** One of the other ways that you can prove that you're really smart
> is if you have extra-curriculars that go with it.
> **LN:**	How do extra-curriculars signal smarts?
> **James:** Um, basically if they have a bunch of extra-curriculars and they
> have a bunch of really hard classes and they are still getting all A's,
> there's only so much time in a day, only so much effort that they could put
> into each thing. So if you look and they are doing pretty good in their
> extra-curriculars, and they are still getting the A's in school you can kind
> of make the connection that they are pretty smart and they get the subjects
> pretty well.

James' list of extra-curricular activities includes recently becoming an Eagle Scout at

age 17; intentions to earn a black belt in his Tae Kwon Do practice; and learning

computer programming in his spare time. He expects college admissions personnel to

be able to make the connection between his time-intensive extra-curricular

accomplishments and his transcript: "so that, just the fact that I persevered and got the

Eagle Scout along with still pulling A's in school, should—I hope—infer that I'm

generally pretty smart in the subjects. And I can—I get the concepts well...I'm doing a

lot of stuff that shows that I've done a lot of work to get to certain levels [in Tae Kwon

Do and Boy Scouts]." This is a different perspective than I typically hear in interviews

with students at Elite Charter High. The more common explanation for why extra-

curricular activities are important to have on a college application is to demonstrate that

the student is "well-rounded" or exhibits "leadership qualities," to show that the student

participates and excels in more arenas than academics alone. James', however, hopes his extra-curricular accomplishments signal that his A's prove his high intelligence.

James does not hint in the interview that he feels any tension in his success identity between his cognitive abilities and his school performance. He feels very smart and he feels that his grades reflect it. Nor does he invoke any elements of the *OCD Overachiever* field story to describe himself. However he does make himself out to be an ardent *College Strategist.* The tension that James feels about his grades lies in his feelings of superiority over his less talented classmates:

> Now that the honors program has become more effort based, the clash is starting again a little bit...This clash is basically the difference between people who are smart, and therefore need the accelerated classes, and the clash between the people who are smart but take longer to learn things. And they slow down the accelerated classes...I used to hate my math class sometimes because people would ask so many questions about what to me was the simplest subject. And I used to realize that I'm not seeing it from their perspective at all I'm just hating them because I'm irritated, because it's irritating me.

James goes on to explain that he decided to modify his attentiveness in math class in order to better manage his frustration with classmates. The less he follows along with the teacher's instruction, the less "irritated" he feels. His classroom experiences contribute to his anxiety over his transcript; he is well aware that some of his "slower" classmates earn A's that look identical to his A's. He badly desires a way for his college application to capture his intellectual superiority because his transcript cannot.

Meanwhile, James' best friend, Adam takes a different strategy for managing feelings about the slow pace of his classes. In their AP Chemistry class, Adam is one of the most vocal participants during the lesson period. The teacher allows a great deal

of freedom for students to openly ask questions—with or without raised hands—and to engage in discussions with the teacher, even if the topic is only tangentially related to his instruction. In my classroom observations I watched Adam use this open atmosphere to offer insights he had about the material or to call out clever chemistry jokes, often bantering back and forth with the teacher. Whatever frustrations he might have about the pace of instruction, Adam is able to relieve them through these verbal expressions, in which his intellectual faculties are displayed for the teacher and the rest of the class to witness. Where James is largely quiet during AP Chemistry lessons, Adam is continually percolating, nearly bounding out of his seat on some occasions with his excitement to deliver a witty, good-natured, chemistry jab.

Adam is a white junior and, like James, he enjoys straight A's on his report cards with only modest effort toward schoolwork. Adam does not draw extensively on the *College Strategist* field story in his self-descriptions, although his college future is an important part of how he defines himself, as he looks forward to the intellectual challenges he expects to meet in college. Instead of anchoring himself to a field story, Adam centers his success identity on the local belief at Elite Charter High that school success is rooted in intelligence.

Adam reports spending about 45 minutes a *week* on homework outside of school. Most of his homework is accomplished during "down time" in his classes, by which he means both independent work time granted by the teacher as well as moments when the teacher is offering further instruction to the class on a concept Adam has already mastered. This often happens in his first period class: "Me and James, we

carpool and then we collaborate on which books we're going to bring that day. Like 'I'll bring chem. and calc. and you bring history.' But then we switch books and then we're done with each other's [books'] homework and we're basically done during the first class and we don't have any homework that night." In many respects James and Adam have similar school experiences. They are enrolled in the same classes; they both attain school success with relative ease; and they both enjoy freedom to pursue whatever they please in their outside-of-school lives because they are not burdened with time-consuming homework. For Adam, that free time allows him to pursue Tae Kwon Do, in which he earned a third degree black belt six months earlier; active participation in religious life at his temple, spending time "talking with the rabbi" and "doing music with the cantor."

Yet the tensions that arise for Adam regarding school success are quite different than James' acute concern with his college application. James' understanding of his own intelligence resonates easily with the local belief I find at Elite Charter High that school success rests heavily on one's intelligence because high intelligence engenders an desire to achieve in school. James describes himself as a person who has ambition and motivation to excel in school—recall his turning point in sixth grade when B's no longer felt acceptable. He also indicates that his school success is a reflection of his intellectual talents. While others at Elite Charter High, such as Denise and Alexis, focus on the element of effort in the relationship between intelligence and school success, James does not. The requirement of dedicated effort in the recipe for school success simply does not apply to him. In fact, he perceives this as further evidence of his high

intelligence, not as a missing element in his case. For example, he does not think that A's garnered through intense effort are as valuable as his A's, which he believes are garnered largely through cognitive ability alone. He hopes that colleges will be able to tell his A's apart from others'.

Adam, on the other hand, feels a tension in his success identity precisely over the effort element of the local belief about intelligence at Elite Charter High. Where James feels immune, Adam feels conflicted.

> **LN:** How much of your grades would you say are based on effort and hard work, and how much is based on your intelligence or ability?
> **Adam:** It's probably 80% intelligence, 20% effort. I could probably succeed more easily if I put forth more effort. That's a weird statement, I mean, I could go further than I am now with more effort, I think it's because I'm dividing my effort a lot in my life.
> **LN:** What do you mean that you could go further?
> **Adam:** I could get better grades, be esteemed higher by my teachers and peers, if I put forth the effort for those higher A's.

Adam sounds a little disappointed in himself as he tells me that he does not extend his maximum effort toward schoolwork, that he does not push for "higher A's," meaning 98% or 99% in his classes. He echoes this sentiment later in the interview, and he compares his mediocre efforts in school to my dissertation research, a project he sees as worthy of more than a minimal amount of attention:

> **Adam:** Even me, I could try so much more and last quarter I barely got by with the A's that I—just—I had all 91's and 92's. I could have said "okay, I'm going to set aside this time for some work" and you know, I've told you that I've spent so much time at school doing my homework and I come home and play computer games or I come home and talk with friends.
> **LN:** Were the 91's were okay with you?
> **Adam:** 91's were okay with me. But if I were a sociologist and doing a huge project, I would be putting forth the effort to go to someone's school

and ask for interviews like you are instead of what I'm doing now in my classes.

At that early moment in the interview, I interpreted Adam's comparison between his coursework and my dissertation research to be an expression of modesty. Prior to the interview Adam struck up a couple of short conversations with me in his AP Chemistry classroom. He was very interested in my status as a graduate student and in the process of conducting research. So, the comparison he makes in the quote above sounded like he was perhaps trying to acknowledge—in the presence of a graduate researcher—that high school academics are less demanding that graduate research, in an expression of humility. However, as the interview continued I began to interpret his comment in light of other remarks he makes about his expectations of college curriculum. Instead of modesty, Adam is expressing here that he wants a reason to strive harder, but he cannot come up with one in his high school circumstances. Adam is somewhat disappointed that he does not feel an internal drive to do more than "barely get by" with low A's, yet he indicates that he would expect himself to be giving it his all if he were doing something like doctoral research.

Another example is when he tells me that he expects college will: "provide me with an environment where I can become an elite and be able to exercise my intellectuality." I ask him why that is an appealing goal, and he responds: "It's one of the most noble paths, even if it lacks certain monetary rewards, I think it's just the most noble—and I can, through the academic and concrete learning I may get in college, I of course will learn a lot about myself." Adam seems to be waiting for college to supply him with curriculum worth dedicating himself to. His high school courses have been

unable to provide a forum where he can "exercise his intellectuality" and feel internally motivated and passionate about academics to the fullest extent.

This creates a tension for Adam's success identity. Unlike James, Adam takes to heart the effort component of the relationship between intelligence and school success that is perceived at Elite Charter High. Adam sees himself as very intelligent. His easy success in school could easily confirm for him that his intelligence is top notch, as it does for James. If not school experiences, Adam's outside of school experiences in Tae Kwon Do and in temple life could also confirm his intellectual talents. He says that compared to school, where he is "surrounded with people who are just as smart as me or smarter...outside of school I feel I'm little bit more revered in the big picture." Yet the fact that he does not devote his maximum effort toward schoolwork gnaws away at Adam's perception of himself as truly intelligent. When I ask him where he would rank his own intelligence on a scale from 1-10, he responds: "A nine I think. It's not perfect. I would consider myself to be much more intelligence if I actually did always do my best."

Adam confirms again and again throughout our interview the local belief that high intelligence engenders ambition to learn and succeed. Since he falls short of mustering up the motivation to pursue the highest possible A's in his classes, Adam feels unable to perceive himself as intelligent as his excellent grades and easy school success would indicate him to be. Instead, his lack of maximum effort makes him question his intelligence, never mind his stellar GPA of 4.75.

Conclusion

As students describe themselves in interviews they draw heavily on elements of the field stories that are available at Elite Charter High. Alexis' excellent school success can easily be seen by others as the result of her being an *OCD Overachiever*, indeed, her best friend Denise aggressively characterizes her in those terms. However, Alexis does not recognize any "disorder" or psychosis in her life, although she does admit to being "obsessive" about schoolwork. While Denise wholly applies the *OCD Overachiever* field story to Alexis, Alexis only applies a part of it to herself. Instead, Alexis pulls from the *College Strategist* field story when she describes herself. She perceives her tendency to "obsess" over school as a means to achieve the kinds of grades that will "get her into a good college." Alexis innovatively incorporates both of the prevalent field stories I find at Elite Charter High as she constructs her success identity, demonstrating that while field stories provide powerful frameworks for identity construction, individuals use them in creative ways.

Unlike Alexis, Denise focuses entirely on the *OCD Overachiever* field story when she describes herself as a student pursuing school success. Denise constructs her success identity in opposition to the field story; she does not apply any element of the field story to herself. Instead, she adamantly claims that her great-but-not-excellent school success is a result of her conscious attempts to avoid becoming an *OCD Overachiever*. While she rejects any association with aspects of *OCD*, she concretely uses the field story to define herself, which demonstrates the important role that field stories have in shaping students' self identities, even though students do not necessarily

adopt the field stories directly into their sense of self. As I demonstrate in this Chapter, Denise's portrays her successful avoidance of *OCD* as a virtue, yet this virtue does not make her immune to feeling disappointed that her grades are only great-but-not-excellent. She describes her school success as "blown out of the park" by the success available to *OCD Overachievers*, namely her best friend.

Several students I interviewed at Elite Charter High use the *OCD Overachiever* field story to define themselves in much the same way Denise does, claiming that they purposefully avoid *OCD*. However, anxiety over attaining school success does not characterize the lives of all students at Elite Charter High. Students such as Brandon, James and Adam enjoy excellent grades in multiple AP classes with only modest effort toward their schoolwork. Their strong intellectual abilities allow them to "breeze through" school in a way that students like Denise and Alexis can hardly imagine is possible.

James and Adam benefit from easy success, but they also feel tensions in the relationship between their intelligence and their academic performance. For James, the tension lies in his awareness that his transcript, impressive as it may be, looks a lot like the transcripts of his classmates who are "slower" than he is to understand concepts but are able to attain A's through intensive effort. He is deeply concerned that colleges might not be able to accurately recognize the heights of his intelligence from his transcript alone. The tension James feels is between his college ambitions and the inability of his school performance to adequately represent his success identity. He

invokes aspects of the *College Strategist* field story as he justifies his "irritation" with "slower" classmates.

Although James' best friend Adam similarly "breezes through" school, the tension he feels is remarkably different than James' concern with his college application. Adam does not rely much on either the *OCD Overachiever* or the *College Strategist* field story to describe himself or the concerns he has with his school performance. Instead, Adam draws on the local belief at Elite Charter High that high intelligence engenders a natural feeling of passion for learning and ambition to attain school success. Although he holds a 4.75 GPA with only 45 minutes a week of homework effort outside of his school day, Adam worries that he might not be truly intelligent. Adam expresses some disappointment that he does not put forth his maximum effort toward school, that he does not feel a passionate drive to learn more about his subjects. Importantly, he understands this to signal a deficiency in his intelligence. James, on the contrary, dismisses this aspect of the local belief about school success at Elite Charter High, which allows him to be immune to the Adam's concern. James' perspective is that individuals of superior intelligence are simply exempted from having to exert serious effort in the pursuit of school success.

These four cases demonstrate the powerful influence that local understandings of the relationship among intelligence, effort, and school success, and local field stories have on the process of identity construction. When they describe themselves, students I interviewed draw on available field stories and prevalent understandings of school success at their school and adapt them to fit their own circumstances.

In this Chapter I focus primarily on two pairs of best friends: Alexis and Denise, and James and Adam. Examining the differences that best friends experience in their construction of success identity is useful because it demonstrates that each individual's success identity is a discrete product of the individual's interaction with the social world. Literature on peer influence tells us that friendship circles have powerful influences over individuals' attitudes, perceptions and ambitions (Epstein 1983; Furman and Buhrmaster 1992; Hallinan and Williams 1990; Lee 2002; Moody 2001; Riegle-Crumb, Farkas, and Muller 2006). Friends encourage each other to be more alike in attitudes and behavior. Thus, exploring differences between the tensions that arise for pairs of best friends helps emphasize the individual in the process of identity construction, even though they are situated in the same school context. Even best friends do not share identical perspectives on the other's identity, for example, Denise considers Alexis an *OCD Overachiever*, while Alexis considers herself a *College Strategist*. Moreover, best friends do not feel the same tensions between their school success and their success identities.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SMART-BUT-NOT-TRYING AS A REFUGE AT ALTERNATIVE HIGH

The previous chapter illustrates how some students define themselves in opposition to a field story, while other students embrace a field story into their identity—or they embrace only selected parts of a field story into their identity. This Chapter illustrates another way that students use field stories and local school beliefs about success as frameworks for understanding their own identities. In the first part, I show how students use a field story as a refuge, a way to hide their private doubts about their cognitive abilities. They wear the field story as a mask at moments when they worry that they might be exposed as unintelligent people. In the second part of this Chapter, I demonstrate that local school beliefs about intelligence's and effort's roles in school success—that is, locally modified versions of the Intelligence Schema and the Effort Schema—provide influential frameworks for understanding one's own self. Like Adam in the previous Chapter, Sherie and Angelique at Alternative High draw most heavily on local school beliefs when they describe their own intelligence. Sherie and Angelique both understand themselves to be modestly intelligent people, even though there is ample opportunity for them to define themselves as highly intelligent based on their excellent school success and feedback they receive about themselves from others.

This Chapter explores tensions students experience as they creatively construct their success identities at Alternative High. Students' tensions arise directly in reaction to local beliefs about school success—that it is "all about effort"—and the local field

stories at Alternative High. At Alternative High it is widely believed that everyone possesses the requisite intelligence to do well in school. As Chapter Four details, school success is understood to rest on a student's effort rather than on his or her cognitive talents. This belief at Alternative High influences students' understandings of their own school performance; many students I interviewed assert that their grades would be higher if they dedicated more effort toward their schoolwork. This claim is particularly common among students who hold D's and F's in their subjects. Yet, at the same time, some of these students do not feel very intelligent.

Posing as *Smart-but-not-Trying*

Alternative High students such as Tonyah and Natalia are not convinced that dedicating enormous effort toward their assignments will automatically yield good grades because they struggle to understand the concepts and the assignments. Hence, while such students claim, in general, that effort is the key to school success, they do not exert much effort themselves, in subjects or assignments that overwhelm them intellectually, because they do not perceive a realistic pay off for their efforts. Yet in their behavior and descriptions, they also draw on the *Smart-but-not-Trying* field story, using it as a refuge for their doubts about their intellectual abilities.

Of course, it is a difficult thing for a student to come out and say that she is not smart; it can even be difficult to admit to oneself. I draw my conclusions out of very close readings of expressions, word choice, volunteered explanations, and immediate reactions in their responses to interview topics. Unlike "avoiding *OCD*," which Denise

and others at Elite Charter High justify as a virtue rather than a failing, there is no virtue in not being smart at Alternative High. Nor is there virtue in not trying. These students do not happily describe themselves as intellectually incapable of school success. If nothing else, the belief that school success is "all about effort" is too strong at Alternative High for a student to be able to contradict it cleanly; but also, feeling intellectually inadequate for academic success elicits feelings of shame.

Tonyah and Natalia illustrate this position. These two freshman explain their low school performance as a consequence of their lack of hard work. In some moments during their interviews, they assert that they could probably receive great grades (understood at Alternative High to be A's and B's) if they really dedicated their time and energy toward school, and they claim that they are smarter than their grades reveal them to be. However, in other moments during their interviews, they acknowledge that they feel unmotivated to give much effort toward some subjects because those subjects are hard for them. They often do not understand what they are supposed to do and how to do it. They indicate that they do not feel very smart; in fact they do not feel that they are smart enough to master the demands of some of their subjects. In an environment where it is widely believed that everyone has enough intelligence to do well in school, Tonyah, Natalia, and others are not sure that they do in fact have the cognitive abilities to succeed.

I chose Tonyah and Natalia as examples here because they come from two very different homelife environments. While Tonyah has a contentious and emotionally distant relationship with her father (her parents are separated), Natalia has a warm and

nurturing relationship with her parents and siblings, especially with her mother and older sister. While Tonyah receives mixed messages from the adults in her life about whether or not she is "dumb" and whether or not she has what it takes to complete high school, Natalia, on the other hand, is continually reminded that she is amazingly intelligent and that she has a bright future ahead of her. This contrast between Tonyah and Natalia allows us to see that even though families contribute to a student's understanding of her self as an intelligent and successful person, students nonetheless rely more heavily on the field stories and local beliefs about school success that are available at their school when they describe their success identities.

The prevalent field story of *Smart-but-not-Trying* at Alternative High provides a refuge for students like Tonyah and Natalia who do not feel very smart. By visibly exerting little effort in subjects that they find cognitively challenging, they have a chance of being seen as *Smart-but-not-Trying* by their classmates and teachers. This is not a virtuous position, however it is preferable to openly trying one's best and being exposed as genuinely not smart enough to perform well.

For Tonyah, an African-American and Filipina freshman, school success has frequently been a point of contention at home, between her and her father. Although Tonyah seems to have turned over a new leaf in her last year of middle school and this current first year of high school, she has a history of purposefully failing in school as a way of acting out against her parents.

My brief encounter with Tonyah's father offers a peek at her homelife frustrations. When Tonyah scheduled our interview, she suggested that we meet

somewhere other than her home, and we agreed on a library very near her school that has private study rooms. Her father dropped her off that morning at the curb where I was waiting to meet her. He was talking on his cell phone and did not pause in his conversation as Tonyah got out of the passenger side and shut the door behind her. Tonyah and I quickly realized that she had forgotten to have her father sign the permission forms for the interview, and she dialed his number to ask him to return to the curb and sign some extra copies of the forms I had brought with me. She did not get through on his phone, and decided not to leave a message, and just as we were about to give up on the interview, we saw his SUV pull back into the parking lot. It seemed that he had registered her call even though he did not answer it. He was still engaged in his phone conversation, but lowered his window so that Tonyah could communicate with him while he continued his phone call. She silently handed him the forms and a pen through the window. He signed, rolled the window back up, and drove away, all without a word exchanged with either Tonyah or myself. In most of my fieldwork in classrooms and in locations where I interviewed students, I felt decidedly conspicuous; a researcher looking in on others' everyday lives. In this instance, however, I felt entirely invisible.

My short exposure to Tonyah's father that morning adds some credence to her descriptions of him as emotionally distant and difficult to get along with. We talk about him during our walk to the library and throughout the interview. I remark that he seems to be a very busy man, and she tells me that he routinely picks her up from school late in the afternoon or even in the evening. Recently, she says, she had to wait until 7:00

pm for him to collect her from school. When she complained about this, she says he reminded her that she has nothing more important to do than her homework, and the library is a perfectly good place to do it. End of story.

Tonyah's relationship with her father is tense. Although she says that he does not offer much encouragement, he does provide strong external support for her academic success. Two years previous, when Tonyah entered middle school, she "went on strike" from schoolwork, a decision which did not go unnoticed by her father. "It was science and math and language and I got an F in those," Tonyah recalls, "and my Dad he just had a heart attack. He was like, 'How could you do this to me?' and I was like, 'um, I did not want to go here [to this middle school].'" Tonyah giggles, "I had an F –minus-minus-minus-minus."

Another year, as punishment for poor grades, her father refused to allow her any Christmas presents, a strategy which convinced Tonyah in the end to try harder in school. She recalls: "he didn't get me anything for Christmas because I had gotten bad grades. So that like really affects you. Because your friends and your cousins get all this good stuff, and you don't get anything from your parents. And that year I was just like, [exaggerating her voice for comic effect] 'man I don't even like Santa, he couldn't even gave me like some coal or something.'" I follow up by asking Tonyah whether that motivated her to get better grades. She replies: "Yeah. He told me that if I didn't get good grades then I wasn't going to get anything else from him, so I was like, 'hmm, what should I do? Should I get my grades up or should I just not get anything at all?' and I was like, 'oh I should get my grades up' (laughs)."

In addition to her stressful relationship with her father, Tonyah's home life has additional strain at the moment because her aunt and cousins (the aunt's adult sons) are living in Tonyah's house too. Her aunt sleeps in the extra bedroom and her sons sleep on the couches. Tonyah's descriptions of the arrangement make it sound like she feels crowded out in the house, though she gets some relief during the weekends that she stays with her mother. It is not just crowded space that causes extra stress for Tonyah, however, Tonyah's descriptions of her aunt depict her as a source of negativity that affects her even during the school day when she is away from her aunt's presence:

> Everybody always has a crazy person in their family, and my Aunt Maggie—it is like pressure because everything gets to you. Like my Aunt Maggie, she is just like pure evil. She talks about everybody. She talked about me, grr [growl], she talked about me like right in my face, like I was driving in the car with her, she would just be like, "Yeah, you're, you're going to drop out of school" and blah, blah, blah. And I was just like "yeah, okay." But then it is like you go to school and you want to have fun, but all that stuff that has happened at home gets to you. And then, I don't know, it's weird because then you bring it up in school. I don't know. It's complicated.

By Tonyah's own admission, she has used low school performance as an act of rebellion against her father. Her descriptions of "going on strike" in the seventh grade fit coherently within the definition of effort that is pervasive at Alternative High: that doing one's schoolwork (or not) and trying hard in school (or not) are conscious decisions made by students. Unlike the notion that is prevalent at Elite Charter High, where effort is understood to be a natural embodiment of intellectual curiosity, students at Alternative High consistently depict effort as a choice that must be made every day. Now, as a freshman student at Alternative High, Tonyah is taking academics more seriously, however pursuing school success is not always a straightforward endeavor in

Tonyah's life. Elements of her home life loom over her experiences at school, as she describes in the quote above. She expresses some anxiety in our interview over her father's disapproval, her aunt's low expectations for her, and her track record of failing on purpose. These things contribute to the "pressure" she feels to prove that she is capable of achieving school success.

Another important aspect that complicates Tonyah's pursuit of school success is that she does not perceive herself as very smart. She is not confident that effort will actually yield good grades, especially in subjects that are challenging for her.

> **LN:** On an intelligence scale, a smarts scale, from 1-10, where would you fall?
> **Tonyah:** Uh, I would say a six.
> **LN:** When you were just thinking about which number to choose, what crossed your mind that helped you figure out which number was the right one?
> **Tonyah:** Because I'm not, I'm not like dumb, you know. Hello, I'm not dumb. But I'm not like, a brainiac. I don't know mostly everything. I know I have to try and work at it, and even if I try and work at it, I still don't get the material. And it's hard.

In multiple moments in our interview, Tonyah describes herself as unable to achieve good grades. Importantly, in these instances she does not depict her current attitude as unwilling to try hard, rather she admits to garnering only minimal success even when she does try hard. For example, when I ask her whether she thinks that students can make all A's in school if they try hard enough, she responds without hesitation: "No. I don't." I ask her why not and she answers: "Because I've tried. I've tried before and I didn't get any A. Like with my math right now—no, with my science. The way that that webpage is set up it's hard. And I have tried and I have gotten like a D in science." In this response, Tonyah quickly moves the discussion away from her frustrated

attempts at success in science and proceeds to bemoan the heavy workload that Alternative High requires: "Now it's like, you have to be kidding me, because there is so much work that we have to do, and it is like—they make it seem like we don't have a life here because they give us, no seriously, they give us all these assignments and I am just like, "oh my gosh." But I would rather go here than a normal high school because if I go to a normal high school I know that I am going to have a lot of work...and have to worry about all the other kids at school—no."

Tonyah does not have a history of trying her best in school, so we might be reasonably skeptical of her willingness to honestly dig in and get her work done. It is tempting to read her descriptions of the difficulty of her coursework as convenient excuses that explain away her low effort and subsequent poor performance. However a close look at Tonyah's responses indicates that her self-perception that she is unable to grasp course concepts easily works as a de-motivating force.

For example, she tells me a story about her experience in math during middle school. In this story she attempts to describe herself as *Smart-but-not-Trying*. Looking at a low performing report card of an anonymous student (See Part II) during our interview, Tonyah disagrees with my suggestion that the student who owns the report card might be trying his best, but is just perhaps not smart enough to understand the concepts being taught in the classes. Tonyah retorts: "No. They may be smart enough, they may just not want to do it. Because that's how I was in math. I was just like, sha, [sound of exasperation] I don't get this, I'm not going to do it. So, then I got my report card and my dad started yelling at me and I was like 'oop,' changed my mind."

Although Tonyah portrays herself in this story as *Smart-but-not-Trying*, a key point in her description is that she decided to stop trying after realizing, "sha, I don't get this." After bringing home an unacceptably low report card, her father convinces her to apply herself. Her increased effort on her math assignments seems to have improved her grade enough to satisfy her father, however, as Tonyah adamantly states above: "I've tried before and I didn't get any A." Hence, it is clear that Tonyah did not have the experience of unveiling her hidden intellectual talents simply by trying harder in school. Trying harder helped her grade, but it did not seem to help Tonyah perceive herself as possessing high intelligence.

Tonyah masks her low estimation of her own intelligence behind the field story of *Smart-but-not-Trying* at several points in the interview. This identity type, available at Alternative High, offers a refuge for Tonyah's concerns over her ability to achieve school success. An example of this occurs when I ask Tonyah, "Do you think that your grades give a good picture of how intelligent you are?" She answers: "No. I don't think that they do. Because I could slack back most of the time. I could just be in class, you know, acting like this (hides her head) and then I just doze off." In this response, Tonyah's language constructs the possibility that she is not putting much effort into school, however, she does not actually claim to behave this way. She says: "I could slack back most of the time," and that she "could" sleep during lessons. She does not say that she makes a habit of doing either at Alternative High.

My field notes from observations of Tonyah in her class note that she follows the class norms of generally engaging in homework assignments during independent

work time. In her class, this includes some chatting with neighbors, lapses into staring off into space, and the like, what I describe in my field notes as "mostly working." While two of Tonyah's classmates notoriously squander class time without accomplishing much work, usually by goofing around with each other, drawing pictures instead of completing written tasks, and sitting idle behind computer screens, Tonyah is not part of that (in)activity.

However, on a couple of occasions, I also witness Tonyah employing the strategy of visibly "not trying" in an effort to mask her feelings of incompetence. She masks her self as *Smart-but-not-Trying* in her behavior as well as in her self-descriptions. Although it is not her habit to flagrantly "not try" in school, there are moments I see her do just that in response to feeling "dumb." This happens subtly during group math instruction when Tonyah's focus on the math teacher's explanation changes from body language of intent listening, to a facial expression of confusion (narrowed eyes, cocked head), to complete disengagement. Tonyah begins shuffling through her backpack and distracting herself with other items on her desk or at her feet, visibly "not listening" to the math instruction. Tonyah's confusion over the teacher's explanation seems to prompt her to give up on following the math lesson. Instead of raising her hand to ask the teacher for clarification, she enacts behaviors that would signal to anyone who might happen to notice her that she is not paying attention. This can be seen as an invitation to her homeroom teacher or classmates to expect her to do poorly on the subsequent math assignment since she is clearly not listening to the instruction material.

Another example of Tonyah engaging in visible behaviors of "not trying" as a refuge for feeling intellectually incompetent happens in a class discussion one morning at the start of the day. The homeroom teacher asks an open question to the group, and Tonyah calls out an answer with gusto. Multiple other students also call out answers at the same time that Tonyah does and the homeroom teacher disregards Tonyah's response (which was the loudest) with a brief "no," in Tonyah's direction, and then turns the group's attention toward a classmate's quieter, but correct answer to the question. Tonyah's perky body language deflates. She immediately disengages from the group discussion, even though a moment earlier she was avidly interested in the topic. Tonyah begins to rearrange her neck scarf and buttoned jacket with elaborate gestures. It is clear that she is embarrassed at having shouted out a wrong answer. After finishing with her clothing, she turns her body around in her seat and stares off blankly into space. Her behavior is a clear signal to the rest of the class that she is not only not participating, but also not listening. Her open display of disengagement is likely to be noticed in this case because the homeroom desks are arranged in a circle to facilitate the class discussion, and everyone can easily see everyone else.

I draw the conclusion that Tonyah presents herself as "not trying" in moments such as these in an attempt to allow the field story *Smart-but-not-Trying* to shield her from being exposed as intellectually incapable. She relies on the ubiquity of the field story to make classmates and teachers assume that her lack of effort is the cause of her poor academic performance. Under the prevailing logic at Alternative High, others will safely assume that she is smart, and if she only tried harder she would enjoy greater

school success.

Tonyah is not the only student I interviewed at Alternative High who uses the *Smart-but-not-Trying* field story as a refuge for not actually feeling very smart. Another example is Natalia, a Latina freshman and classmate of Tonyah's. Natalia enjoys more emotional support and encouragement at home than Tonyah does, however, she has similar doubts to Tonyah's about her own intellectual talents. When I met Natalia at a coffeehouse near her home, her mother and older sister, age twenty-three, arrived with her. Her mother greeted me warmly, and I watched her look me over, as though she were inspecting me to determine whether she felt comfortable leaving her fourteen-year-old daughter with me. Not that she actually went very far away. They politely refused my offers to drive Natalia home after the interview, preferring to wait for her in their car, parked just outside the coffeehouse in the adjacent lot. They assured me that they were not in a hurry and we could take as long as we needed for the interview.

All in all, both Natalia's mother and sister seemed happy that she had been chosen for a research interview; the older sister playfully chided Natalia not to "get any of the answers wrong." Before they left the coffeehouse, Natalia's mother discreetly asked Natalia in Spanish if she had enough money with her to buy coffee. Then she turned to me and joked in English that this coffeehouse was Natalia's favorite place in the world, so it was no surprise to her that Natalia had chosen it for the interview location.

Towards the end of the interview, when I ask Natalia who in her family knows her the best, she decides it is a tie between her mom and her sister outside in the car, although she also lives with her father, a twenty-six-year-old older brother, and another older sister who is nineteen. I ask Natalia where her mom and sister would place her on the 1-10 intelligence scale, and she says: "Seriously, my mom would give me a ten, she thinks that I'm—" Here Natalia seems at a loss for how to describe her mother's impression of her. I suggest: "really smart?" Natalia giggles: "yeah. And my sister, probably like a nine." These are higher numbers than Natalia gives herself on the 1-10 intelligence scale earlier in the interview. This indicates that her relationship with her mother and sister are a positive influence on her self-perception. These two family members give her complimentary information about her intellectual talents, even if Natalia does not take it to heart.

> **LN:**   Where would you fall on a 1-10 intelligence scale?
> **Natalia:** (pause) like (pause) I think a seven (laughs a little). A six or a seven.
> **LN:**   When you were just thinking about which number to choose, what crossed your mind that helped you figure out which number was the right one?
> **Natalia:** Well because I was going to give me a five, but then I thought, "I'm not that—" like because I was thinking in percentages, you know what I mean? Like a 50, oh, that's bad, you know.
> **LN:**   Because 50 percent sounds like an F?
> **Natalia:** Yeah (laughs) and then I thought—and then a ten, I thought "well, I'm not a genius." Well some things of course I don't understand, but then later when they explain it, I get it. So, probably like a six or a seven. Like a seven.

Natalia struggles in some of her subjects, but not in others, and she indicates in the interview that it is her limited ability to easily understand the material that creates the struggle. She also admits to not trying very hard in those subjects, however, like

Tonyah, Natalia describes her relationship with difficult subjects in a way that makes it clear that her difficulty in understanding assignments is the cause of her lack of motivation to work on them. This comes through, for example, when I ask Natalia to describe the relationship between effort and intelligence in her own school performance:

> **LN:** How much of your grades are based on your hard work or effort, and how much are based on your intelligence or ability to get the material? Is it a 50-50 balance?
> **Natalia:** Well in math, it depends on my effort. Because how fast I get it—I don't get math like really fast.
> **LN:** So it's all effort for you?
> **Natalia:** Hmm, well not all effort, probably like 75...no, I'm not that slow. (laughs) It's probably like 60-40.
> **LN:** That's for math, is it also true, more or less, for your other subjects?
> **Natalia:** Well, for English, I mostly understand all the assignments they give us and everything, so I put effort into it because I know how to do it. So it's like, "okay, just let me get it done." But then like math, I kind of like wait it off, and I'm like "oh, whatever."
> **LN:** So is English more like 50-50, or is it even more on the smart side?
> Natalia: I get it, so I like do it. That's like the best grade that I have. I have an A.

Natalia says that she puts effort into her English work because "I mostly understand all the assignments they give us." She contrasts this to math, which she is not able to "get really fast." Describing English, Natalia sounds confident: "I know how to do it. So it's like 'okay, just let me get it done.'" Her English assignments do not inspire the kind of dread that her voice implies when she describes math: "But then like math, I kind of wait it off, and I'm like 'oh whatever.'" Natalia's account of the effort she invests in English indicates that if she were able to easily grasp her math assignments,

she would be more apt to complete the work with the same diligence she applies to

English. She expresses this sentiment again in other parts of the interview, for example:

> **LN:** Let's imagine that I gave you brain vitamins that made you super smart, would school be easier for you?
> **Natalia:** Yeah.
> **LN:** What would be easier?
> **Natalia:** (pause)
> **LN:** Would you have to try less or something?
> **Natalia:** Try less and like you would already understand the concepts, so you really didn't have to take much time, you would just do it, and get it done with.
> **LN:** So, like how you are with current events [assignments] and English?
> **Natalia:** Yeah.

Just "doing it" and "getting it done with" is problematic for Natalia in subjects like

math. She finds it difficult to muster up the motivation to work on assignments that

involve concepts that she does not clearly understand. At Comprehensive High, being

"good at" some subjects but not others is a common situation for students. At that high

school, students see it as less of a predicament for school success and more of a fact of

life. Students I interviewed at Comprehensive High tend to simply accept the fact that

they receive lower grades in subjects they are "bad at." This is not an attitude that

Natalia has readily available to her at Alternative High, however. At Alternative High,

students express faith in the idea that every student is smart enough to succeed in

school, all subjects included. All students have to do is try their best.

Thus, by not trying her best, Natalia might be mistaken as *Smart-but-not-Trying*

because the default assumption at Alternative High is that if she were indeed

maximizing her effort, she would achieve school success in all subjects, including math.

Natalia portrays herself in the terms of the *Smart-but-not-Trying* field story in a few

places during our interview. For example, when I ask her whether her grades "give a

good picture" of how intelligent she is, she responds: "Well, not always because like in science I could probably do better, but I'm just not putting the effort into it." Also, when she is discussing the low performing anonymous report card, she describes her own situation of receiving low grades despite being capable of attaining higher ones: "probably I could get A's and B's, you know what I mean? But, you know, the effort I put into it." I ask if she means that she doesn't put in enough effort to get A's and B's, and she responds: "Well I think I could put more effort, but I don't know. I probably could get A's and B's, but I don't. So I don't put that much effort I guess." Natalia asserts here that she is *Smart-but-not-Trying* in science. She draws directly on the field story to describe herself: with more effort, she could be receiving A's and B's.

However, listening closely to this answer, I conclude that Natalia does not sound convinced that *Smart-but-not-Trying* accurately fits her. She says: "probably," "I think," "I don't know," and "I guess" as she explains her perspective on the potential for increased effort to yield great grades for her.

These responses illustrate the tension Natalia experiences between her sense of her own abilities and the prevailing logic at her school that effort—not intelligence—is the key ingredient for school success. The field story *Smart-but-not-Trying* offers a ready explanation for students whose low effort results in low grades. At Alternative High, it is not only an available field story, but also a plausible reason for poor academic performance, one that fits neatly within local understandings at Alternative High of the relationship between effort, intelligence, and school success. However, *Smart-but-not-Trying* does not capture the self-identity of students such as Natalia and

Tonyah, whose motivation to try hard in school is thwarted by feelings of frustration over their limited intellectual facility in some subjects. Nonetheless, *Smart-but-not-Trying* is an identity that is preferable to identifying oneself as intellectually incapable of good grades.

Tonyah and Natalia are able to manage their low perceptions of their abilities in school by not putting forth their best effort. While there are surely students in all schools who lose motivation for schoolwork that is too challenging for them, at Alternative High, such students enjoy the position of having others assume that they are smarter than their performance demonstrates based on the prevalence of the *Smart-but-not-Trying* field story. The pervasiveness of this identity type at Alternative High allows *Smart-but-not-Trying* to be a refuge for students who do not see themselves as very smart.

Successful, Yes—but Smart? The Counterfactual for *Smart-but-not-Trying*

Other kinds of tensions arise for students at Alternative High who achieve excellent school success. In this section, I discuss Angelique and Sherie who experience tensions which are particular to the local environment at Alternative High just as Tonyah's and Natalia's are. In this environment where effort is understood to be the key to school success, neither Angelique nor Sherie are convinced that they possess high intelligence, even though they receive excellent grades. The field story *Smart-but-not-Trying* implies that if a student were, in fact, to try his or her hardest, that student's smarts would become visible. It is lack of effort that obscures intelligence in the field

story, which would mean that if one puts forth maximum effort, others can see exactly how smart one is. This is precisely the danger for students like Tonyah and Natalia who are afraid that their best efforts might reveal them to be genuinely unintelligent because they would still receive low grades in some subjects. For students such as Angelique and Sherie, on the other hand, their tremendous school success via hard work should be seen as evidence of their high intelligence, evidence that their genuine smarts are shining through. However, they do not see it that way.

Even though they are the two highest achieving students in their sophomore homeroom class, neither Angelique nor Sherie views herself as being very high on the intelligence scale. In fact, neither student rates herself anywhere nearly as high on the 1-10 intelligence scale as she says her friends would rate her. Both Sherie and Angelique acknowledge in their interviews that teachers, friends, and family members see them as very smart, but these two young women harbor doubt about how intelligent they really are.

Sherie: Life History Matters in Success Identity

Angelique and Sherie are both sophomores at Alternative High, and they each claim to be the best student in their homeroom class. Sherie, an African-American student, is more often identified by other classmates as the smartest, most high achieving student in the class than is Angelique. Classmates I interviewed admire Sherie's success, however, their descriptions of her are not always flattering. She is notoriously "competitive" and "in your face" about her great grades. As described in

Chapter Two, the advisor of this sophomore homeroom class routinely makes students'

academic performance common knowledge. Further, the students in the same

homeroom classes at Alternative High take all of the same classes together at the same

time. Alternative High does not practice curriculum tracking, so the students who share

a homeroom share a common space for all their academic work (with a few exceptions

such as Spanish, which is taught at various experience levels in segmented groups).

Thus, the students are often aware of each other's progress and failings, even if an

individual student does not advertise her position.

Sherie currently holds a 4.0 GPA, which at Alternative High is the highest

possible GPA (unlike Elite Charter High and Comprehensive High where weighted AP

courses exist, allowing for a potential of up to 5.0). She reports spending an enormous

amount of time on her schoolwork, approximately 40 hours a week, claiming: "I spend

a lot of time on weekends doing homework." Sherie describes herself as "a school

fanatic" when I ask her whether she likes school. She continues: "Here at this school,

[Alternative High], I mean how many schools do you know where you get to know your

teacher on this level? And all your classmates, they are like a big dysfunctional family,

that's what I always say. I love school. I come here and have fun."

Mixed in with the "fun," however, Sherie also feels anxiety around her school

performance. This seems to be partly connected to the meaning of education for Sherie.

When I ask her why she goes to school, Sherie responds: "I go because not many people

in my family got an education. I want to be the first on in my family to do something

with my life." Later in the interview Sherie elaborates on her family: "My mom, my

mom, she raised us all by herself and she has different expectations for each of us kids. She knows that I am the only one of her kids who might graduate high school."

Although Sherie does not share many details of her home life with me during the interview, several of her comments and responses indicate that she does not enjoy a calm, stable environment when she is away from school. However, when she is at school, she is not carefree either; she experiences stress related to school success. For example when we are discussing learning new things inside of the context of school versus learning new things outside of school, she says:

> **Sherie:** When I am at home, or just not at school, I release the grades. The world is off your shoulders, like you know that guy who carries the world around on his back?
> **LN:** So does that mean there is more pressure at school?
> **Sherie:** Not more pressure, I mean there is pressure outside of school. The pressure of the adult world where there are consequences for the things that you do.
> **LN:** Which learning do you like better then, outside of school?
> **Sherie:** No, inside of school...because it is safer in school. School is my safe haven. Education is a constant friend that I can turn to. I will always be able to turn to education because you can never learn that much, I mean you can always go back and learn something more. Outside of school, there is a danger always lurking.

Comments like these, that there is a "danger always lurking" in the world outside of school, and that school is Sherie's "safe haven" give us some insight into Sherie's incredible devotion to her school life. School is clearly a place where she feels protected; it is a place she calls "fun," and she gives a great deal of her time and energy to it. She proudly admits that she has been given a nickname by her peers: "People call me the 'Alt High Pet' because I do everything for the school," she says. At the same time, however, Sherie also describes her school life as having the weight of the world

on her shoulders; she compares herself to Atlas, the Titan in Greek mythology who was forced to bear the earth and heavens on his back as a punishment.

Sherie's superb school success, i.e. her 4.0 GPA, indicates that her dedication to school pays off. She is nothing short of an excellent high school student. This was not always the case, however. From her descriptions of her middle school years, we might infer that the school stress Sherie currently experiences has more to do with overcoming her history than it does with concerns about being able to meet the academic demands of high school. For example, in seventh grade, Sherie was placed in an anger management program. This comes up in our interview when Sherie is describing her volunteer work:

> I volunteer at a place—well, I'll be straight with you, I started there because I was taking anger management class in 7th grade. But now I volunteer there and I help younger kids who are going through it as a mentor...I tell them all that I treat them on the same level as my niece or my nephew, they are up on a pedestal like my niece or nephew, and when I take them down off of that pedestal then that means that we have accomplished something. That they are not acting crazy anymore, not behaving like animals, but behaving like civilized people. There is no more violence and bad attitudes.

Her descriptions of the "younger kids" in the program as "crazy," "behaving like animals," with "violence and bad attitudes" offer a glimpse of how Sherie might have appeared to others when she was enrolled in the program herself three years ago. However, she chooses a different phrase to describe herself during those years, she calls herself: "a loud, smart ass kid." She tells me: "I have had my best years at Alternative High because my teacher really knows me. I have been with her since middle school and she knows my history and where I've been, and all of that. She knows how I used to

be a loud, smart ass kid. She really knows when I am having a bad day and when I have my best days."

Middle school seems to have been a time of transition for Sherie, during which she struggled to overcome many obstacles. She describes this in some detail when I ask her to tell me about a time that she received a grade that she did not feel that she deserved. She says: "I am going to go back to middle school. This one teacher thought that I was a bad kid, I had to sit in the front of the class, and then I had to sit up at her desk next to her, and then I had to take tests facing the whiteboard. I had to do extra credit like everyday just to get my grade back up to the average of the class." I ask her to tell me more about it, why this was unfair, and she responds: "She didn't even know me, she just thought that I was the smart ass, loud kid...The last quarter of the year she finally gave me a grade that satisfied me. I had brought my grade up from a D-plus, "your kid is about to fail out," to a B-plus, "your kid is one of the best students in my class." I was satisfied with that...in the end she showed that all my hard effort paid off big."

This close look at Sherie's school history helps us understand, at least in part, why she might feel the weight of the world on her shoulders regarding her grades at school. She has a lot to prove to both herself and others about what she can accomplish as a student, to show that she has overcome the anger and low achievement that she carried in middle school, and that she can graduate high school and "make something" of her life. These insights help explain why Sherie might not see herself as very smart,

despite her excellent school success; she has not always been successful and has not always felt smart.

Yet Sherie tells me that her friends think of her as highly intelligent. When I ask where they would place her on the 1-10 intelligence scale, Sherie responds: "Oh my friends would say I am a ten. And they would give me an eleven or twelve if they could, they would go off the chart." However, she does not view herself the same way, though she is uncertain how to place herself on the 1-10 scale. I ask:

> **LN:** On a 1-10 intelligence scale, where would you fall?
> **Sherie:** Oh I don't know. I am just an average person.
> **LN:** Okay, so what number would an average person be?
> **Sherie:** Oh I don't know. This is difficult to answer.

A bit later in the interview, we pick this up again, after Sherie tells me that her friends would rate her "off the chart." She continues to insist that she is "average," and eventually settles on the number seven for herself, saying, "I think the average person is like a seven." Then she estimates that her mother would give her an eight or a nine, a number that is "in between me and my friends." Sherie does not equate her excellent grades with high intellectual abilities. Instead, she describes her school success as a result of her effort. I ask her whether her grades give a good picture of how intelligent she is, whether her GPA is an accurate reflection of herself. She answers: "Yeah, it is a good reflection. I work my butt off to get those grades. I mean who stays after school when it isn't even necessary like me?"

Sherie's rationale here fits neatly within the pervasive belief I find at Alternative High that effort is the key to school success, and that cognitive ability is largely irrelevant because every student is smart enough succeed. She says that her grades are a

good reflection of herself because she "works her butt off" for them. At other moments in the interview, Sherie echoes the notion that intelligence is not critical to success, e.g. when she explains to me why she considers it fair to grade students only on test performance in Alternative High's online math and science programs. She says that everyone has a chance of receiving a high grade because "everybody is capable of remembering something."

Meanwhile many other students I interviewed at Alternative High disagree, saying that the online math and science programs are unfair. Several of Sherie's classmates, including Angelique, a fellow high achiever, struggle with the concepts and argue that the online instruction is not a viable substitute for a live teacher (the math teacher spends 2.5 hours a week with them in the classroom) who would be able to help them understand the material more clearly. The contrast between Sherie's ability to master math and science while so many of her classmates struggle and complain could easily be interpreted by Sherie as evidence that she is, in fact, quite smart. However, Sherie does not present her intellectual talents as anything more than "average." She is convinced that her grades are the result of her efforts, not her cognitive abilities. Although she could draw on the field story of *Smart-but-not-Trying* and apply the counterfactual to her own circumstances, she does not. Her academic history and former reputation as "a loud, smart ass kid" seems to overshadow the field story's counterfactual as a plausible meaning of her high grades.

Angelique: Definitions Matter in Success Identity

Sherie's classmate, Angelique, a Filipina student, is another example of someone who enjoys excellent school success at Alternative High, but who does not interpret her school success as evidence of high intelligence, even though other people see her as extremely smart. Holding a perfect 4.0 GPA, she proudly characterizes herself as an "overachiever," a term of disdain at Elite Charter High, but a compliment here at Alternative High. She admits: "I am competitive with a lot of people, but, like last year, no one could touch me. This year was the first time that someone else got the Superstar Award first. I got it yesterday, but when my classmate got it, I knew, 'oh I have some competition now.'"

Angelique is aware that Sherie is more popularly known as the highest achieving student in their class, but Angelique feels superior to Sherie in many ways. She tells me: "The people in my class call me 'Mini-Me Sherie' because they think that she is an overachiever and that I am like her. They acknowledge that I am smart, but they look at my kindness too. Sherie is smart, but she doesn't want to help anybody."

Angelique prides herself on her ability and willingness to help her friends and classmates with their schoolwork. She admits that they are convinced that she is intelligent: "the way we talk, they always say, 'man, you are so smart, girl!'" Yet her friends' compliments and high opinions of her do not make Angelique feel that she her intellectual talents are anything special. She gives herself a seven on the 1-10 intelligence scale with the rationale: "seven because I know I'm smart, and then I know I can learn more too." Further, she claims her friends would realistically place her at seven as well on the scale: "I'm not a ten because sometimes I tell them [friends] that I

have to learn the material before I can teach it to them. So they know that I have to learn things too."

Angelique draws on a particular definition of intelligence here and throughout the interview: intelligence-as-acquired-knowledge (see Appendix A). This matters to her development of her success identity because it excludes the categories of intelligence that would allow her to see herself as intellectually talented despite not already possessing an enormous store of information. For example, if she were to draw on the definition of intelligence-as-adroit-mental-processing, she might be able to perceive herself as highly intelligent based on the fact that she is able to understand course material faster than her friends can. Instead, Angelique limits her evaluation of her own intelligence to knowledge that she has acquired. Acquiring knowledge, of course, requires time and effort; this type of intelligence is not something one is born with.

Angelique's reliance on only this definition of intelligence affects how she feels about her school performance as well as her own abilities. When I ask whether her grades "give a good picture" of how intelligent she is, she responds: "No. Because I felt like I didn't learn anything last year. It was the school's inaugural year and we didn't really have classes we just kind of did whatever we were given to do. I didn't learn anything in geometry, that's why I am having such a hard time in algebra this year." At another point in the interview she describes her intelligence as having diminished rather than improved over the last year: "Like me last year. I went from so smart to not knowing anything. If you don't review and keep your skills up, you'll go down."

In these responses and throughout the interview, Angelique completely disregards any notion of intelligence that is not concrete knowledge stored in one's memory banks. This affects how she constructs her success identity. She does not count herself among the highly intelligent because she has not been able to acquire an impressive amount of knowledge in her life yet. This allows her to fit her school performance neatly in the framework of success that prevails at Alternative High: she has to work hard to garner school success; she cannot rely on her mental talents. Further, in Angelique's reckoning, it is not only school success that requires effort, but even the heights of one's intelligence is dependent on effort, dictated by how intensely one learns and stores new information.

Angelique's perception of how her parents view her intellectual abilities is similarly shaped by her strict understanding of intelligence-as-acquired-knowledge. She tells me in the interview that she is very close with her parents, her brother, and her sister, "My whole family," she says, "they know me inside and out." When I ask her where her family would place her on the 1-10 intelligence scale, she says: "Compared to what?" Angelique goes on to explain that with different reference groups, they would rate her differently: "They would say ten. Because my brother and sister are struggling. My sister got kicked out of high school, now she is in continuation high school, and my brother wants to go to the bad side. My parents are back in school because they know there are things that they need to learn. So compared to them, they would say I'm a ten. In the context of the world, they would say I'm a seven."

Unlike Sherie who insists that her intelligence is "average," Angelique is comfortable describing herself as "smart," but never *very smart*. She considers herself to be among the top performers in her class, if not the very highest achiever, but her excellent academic performance has not provided her with enough acquired knowledge to legitimately see herself as intelligent as her peers and grades make her out to be. For Angelique, her definition of intelligence overrides the implied counterfactual of the *Smart-but-not-Trying* field story. Of course, the definition of intelligence-as-acquired-knowledge fits well with the overarching belief at Alternative High that effort is the key to school success, not intellectual talents. She sees herself as able to attain impressive levels of school success without an impressive level of intelligence.

Conclusion

The cases of Tonyah and Natalia demonstrate that students at Alternative High who do not feel intellectually equipped to master their schoolwork do not have an available rationale for their low academic performance in challenging subjects. The pervasive belief that school success only requires effort de-legitimates Tonyah's and Natalia's (and others') struggle to comprehend course material. If Tonyah and Natalia were to vocalize their concerns that they are not smart enough to perform well academically, their teachers, principal, and classmates would undoubtedly encourage them to simply try harder, to stick with it, that eventually they will understand it. Not being smart enough is not a viable excuse for low school success at Alternative High. I find that this leads Tonyah, Natalia, and other similarly positioned Alternative High

students to hide their low estimations of their intellectual talents behind the only available field story that offers a way to salvage some dignity: *Smart-but-not-Trying*. Although Tonyah and Natalia claim that they do in fact exert effort toward schoolwork, they also pose as *Smart-but-not-Trying* at points when they attempt to reconcile their low grades and the local belief that school success is all about effort.

It is important to note here, that students are constrained by the field stories and local modifications of schemas of success that are available at their schools. If Tonyah and Natalia attended Comprehensive High instead of Alternative High, they would have access to the *Average Joe* field story and would be able to draw on the local logic of success that "everyone has a weak point." Neither Tonyah nor Natalia express the kind of attitudes about school success that I find to be commonplace at Comprehensive High, even though it would better fit their assessments of their own intellectual abilities. For example, if she were a student at Comprehensive High, Natalia would not need to feel so much tension over her lack of enthusiasm for science nor over her low grade in it. At Comprehensive High it is expected and *accepted* that each student simply is not "good at" some subjects. Natalia could set her aspirations for her science grade at "average," a more reachable goal. If she aspired to a C, befitting the *Average Joe* field story, she might be able to attain it without the sense of dread she expresses over her science work now. If she were a student at Comprehensive High, she would not need to compare her low grade to the "A's and B's" she says she could "probably get" in science if she put in more diligent effort; instead she could aim for a C and feel satisfied with it.

It is not only field stories that shape students' descriptions of themselves, local school beliefs about school success also serve as powerful frameworks for understanding who one is as a successful student vis-à-vis effort and intelligence. Surprisingly, the counterfactual for *Smart-but-not-Trying* field story does not serve high achieving students such as Sherie and Angelique in the construction of their success identities. The field story posits that a student can hide his or her intelligence by not putting forth effort in school. Therefore, a reversal of the logic of the field story should yield the notion that students who achieve excellent grades are revealing their high intelligence through their effort. Yet 4.0 students at Alternative High express little confidence in their intellectual talents. Instead, the belief that school success is a result of effort and that intelligence is irrelevant dominates high achieving students' understandings of themselves. They do not identify their high grades as evidence of their high intelligence, only as evidence of their dedicated efforts.

In the absence of a local understanding of the positive role that intelligence plays in school success, Sherie and Angelique piece together rather individualized portraits of how they see intelligence and school success as overlapping. For Sherie, her life history as a "loud smart ass kid" and her outside-of-school circumstances where "there is a danger always lurking" shape how smart she feels. Her current success in school does not overshadow these other facets of her life. For Angelique, her strict definition of intelligence-as-acquired-knowledge prevents her from counting many of her cognitive victories as "intelligence." As the local environment at Alternative High offers no guidelines for how to conceptualize intelligence's effect on school success,

students like Angelique and Sherie have difficulty constructing their success identities in direct relation to their intellectual talents, even though friends see them as spectacularly smart.

This demonstrates again how central local school beliefs are to students' construction of their success identities, even as students use them in innovative ways. Here at Alternative High, where the Effort Schema eclipses the Intelligence Schema, students are left on their own to determine how to incorporate their cognitive abilities into their identities as successful students. Were Sherie and Angelique students at Elite Charter High, they would likely identify themselves as highly intelligent *because* they exert such great efforts in school. Effort is not understood to be separated from intelligence at Elite Charter High the way it is at Alternative High. Sherie is a "school fanatic" who spends an enormous amount of time each week working "her butt off" for her good grades, even spending extra time at school "when it isn't even necessary." At Elite Charter High, this would be seen as evidence of her high intelligence, because according the local belief about school success at Elite Charter High, the more intelligent one is, the more eager one is to learn and to excel in school. Yet, at Alternative High, both Sherie and Angelique are left with doubts about how intelligent they truly are because school success is understood to rest solely on effort, not on cognitive talents.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SMARTER THAN A TRAINED DOG AND PASSING WITH AVERAGE JOE AT

COMPREHENSIVE HIGH

At Comprehensive High, two incompatible understandings of school success coexist. On one hand, students express credence in the logic of effort to explain school success: great grades are due to a student's hard work and low grades are due to a student's lack of hard work. On the other hand, often the very same students assert that one's intellectual abilities set the parameters for school success that is available to that person. This means that individuals of high intelligence are believed to have the potential for high levels of success, but individuals of modest intellectual talents are limited to only modest success. These two understandings could be modified to fit together coherently, but at Comprehensive High they are not. For example, students do *not* say that intelligence determines the heights of possible success for a person, and effort determines how close that person comes to reaching her personal limits. Instead, students assert at some moments that effort can yield limitless success, and at other moments they acknowledge that "everyone has a weak point," a subject or two that they are not "good at" and therefore can only achieve modest school success in those classes. With both of these explanations for school success readily available, students at Comprehensive High can draw on either as they construct their own success identities.

Students at Comprehensive High also draw on local field stories of school success when they describe themselves in interviews with me. The two most prevalent

field stories I find at Comprehensive High are *Trained Dog* and *Average Joe.* The *Average Joe* identity type characterizes a student who passes each of his classes with the minimally acceptable grade of a C, but not a C-minus. *Average Joe* is a person who wants to make something out of his life, but does not pursue stellar school success in order to do so. He has modest, but honorable life aspirations. He is average, and average is acceptable at Comprehensive High, albeit the minimum level of acceptability. Among honors/AP students at this school, a second field story surfaces repeatedly in interviews: *Trained Dog*. A *Trained Dog* is a student who receives great grades, perhaps even straight A's, by being "book smart" and dutifully memorizing information from courses in the precise format demanded by assignments and tests. Honors/AP students I talked to are highly critical of *Trained Dogs* because they do not engage in creative, comprehensive learning, but are instead "machines" who "regurgitate" course material on tests.

Smarter than a *Trained Dog*: René Claims Intelligence Beyond School Assessment Criteria

René, a Latino junior, is an example of a student who describes himself in opposition to the *Trained Dog* field story. René feels superior to students who garner good grades simply because they are: "book smart, know how to take a test, be like a trained dog, and know the answers, and know what to give—but when asked themselves they may not know exactly what to do." René expresses disdain for *Trained*

Dogs. He feels that his intelligence is more legitimate than theirs because he has a creative intellect.

However, René experiences tension between his academic performance this year and his sense of his own high intelligence. René is currently enrolled in two AP classes and one honors class (out of six total classes). In our interview, he expresses concern over the fact that this year he is receiving the lowest report card grades of his high school career. He says that, "up until now I've had like almost straight A's. Except for the one B in PE, and then my freshman year I had straight A's; sophomore year I had straight A's except for a semester [when I had] one or two B's."

René is proud of his academic track record, which is part of the reason why his current grades cause him some distress. At the time of our interview, more than halfway into the spring semester, René is holding a C in his math class, Trigonometry-Free Calculus, and a C in his Spanish II class. He received his first C grade on a report card the previous semester in Trigonometry-Free Calculus, and has been unable to raise the grade this term. "It's a harder year," René explains, "it's the hardest one, and the one thing I don't like about it is it's the year that colleges look at the most—so I've been told—they look at your junior year, and it's my hardest year." René has concerns about college eligibility, but he does not use any language or descriptions that invoke the *College Strategist* field story that I find at Elite Charter High. He is aware that his C in math will not look good to colleges, but he does not discuss any strategies for rectifying the low grade or for trying to make up for it in other parts of his college application. His dissatisfaction in the C on his transcript is vaguely connected to

anxiety over his future college application, but he does not discuss any specific information about college admissions (fact or lore) that would suggest that he has much insider knowledge about college admissions' preferences. In fact, in the quote above, he says: "it's the year the colleges look at most—so I've been told," which implies that he is not entirely confident in the little information that he does have about college admissions.

René expresses some ambivalence about his current grades. He continues, "I don't know. It's not really too bad, I mean as an average, but since that's the year that colleges look at the most, so...(trails off)." He gives the impression at this point in the interview of being unsure whether disappointment is an appropriate response to C's or not. This likely has to do with the common perception at his school that C's are acceptable grades. C's are the *minimum* of acceptable grades, but they are generally viewed as acceptable. Of course, many high achieving students at Comprehensive High hold themselves to higher standards, but they also tend to acknowledge in interviews that C's are considered "average" and therefore acceptable for others. To be less than average crosses the line into unacceptable territory, starting with C-minuses.

Toward the end of the interview, René makes it clear that his grades eat away his confidence in his intellectual talents, and this has consequences for his success identity. When I ask him where he would fall on an intelligence scale from 1-10 he responds that he would "probably" be an eight because: "I'm definitely not a five because my grades—well with grades, I've never been average, so I'm higher than that. But I've never had totally straight A's all the time, so I wouldn't say that I'm a one.

But that's by book smarts and if maybe for *real* intelligence...I'd say I'm definitely more intelligent than average, but honestly I don't know what number I'd be past the second half. I'm somewhere in the second half, but don't know where I'd really fall."

He has difficulty identifying himself vis-à-vis intelligence outside of school assessment, yet he believes that there is a critical distinction to be made between the book smarts of a *Trained Dog* and "real" intelligence. *Trained Dogs* receive great grades, but their grades are not evidence of genuine intellectual talents, according to René. Later in the interview, René articulates what he believes "real" intelligence to entail: "I don't remember who said it, but it was like: you're not really—those who are the mot intelligent are those who realize how much they don't know. It *is* that way. Because there are different kinds of intelligence, because there is the book smart where you can read things and grasp the concepts and stuff, or there are those who can come up with a concept. Those who get the bigger picture with bigger ideas."

René experiences tension in his success identity because he believes that "real" intelligence is not captured in grades at his school, yet at the same time he relies on his grades as a key piece of information about his cognitive abilities. This tension is difficult for René to reconcile in his success identity. He explains later in the interview that his grades *are* an accurate reflection of his intelligence level because: "It's not so much that I'm not trying, it's that I don't get it, which I guess shows that I'm not so smart in [math class] maybe." He expresses this conclusion tentatively. He says: "I guess" and "maybe." Part of the reason that it is not a straightforward conclusion for René is that his C's confront him with information about himself that is incongruent

with what other people in his life believe about him. René says that his family and friends consider him to be very intelligent. "I have always had this reputation of being really smart and really, like, good at everything almost in a way." He elaborates: "It's like everyone—so I don't even know, even when I don't do so good in school, it's like people don't even see that. It's weird, they're just like—I don't know, I don't know how to say it, it's almost like they don't see it or they don't believe it. Not so much that they don't believe it, but that they don't see it. They only look at the good, at what I'm doing. Almost. So I always have this reputation of being so smart, so good at stuff." I ask him how he feels about that. René responds: "I like it. It's a positive reputation, so I guess that's good. Maybe sometimes it's not so deserving, like when I'm not doing well [in school] but people tend to look past that."

Again, René's rationale returns to grades, using them as evidence of his intellectual abilities. He characterizes his family's and friends' high estimation of his cognitive talents as "not so deserving" in light of his lower grades this year. He treats his grades as a more powerful indicator of his abilities than the assessment of people who are closest to him, those who he says "know me the best."

This is an awkward position for René. On one hand, he does not trust that school grades genuinely demonstrate true intelligence, because a *Trained Dog* might have perfect grades without "real" intelligence. Nonetheless, he uses his grade performance to evaluate how intelligent he is. In fact, his current grades erode his sense of deserving the reputation he has earned as a "really smart" person. Despite his criticisms of school assessment, he takes his teachers' evaluations of his schoolwork to

heart. His success identity rests heavily on how smart his grades show him to be. Meanwhile, he experiences ambivalence in how to manage the tensions in his success identity, how to make sense of what these contradictory factors mean. When I ask him where he would fall on the 1-10 intelligence scale, he says: "I wouldn't say I'm not a ten." After a pause he continues: "But if I averaged, I'd probably get an eight overall."

It is not only family and friends who make René feel that he is seen as "really smart" by others. René describes the ways that some of his teachers treat him, some of the special privileges that they award him in response to his intellectual talents and his status as a "good student." When I ask René whether his teachers grade all the students in his classes equally fairly, he responds:

> **René:** It's definitely less and more fair, I'd say. Like some teachers seem to like have their favorites. There are definitely favorites.
> **LN:** Are you one of the favorites for some of the teachers?
> **René:** Yeah, I am for some of the teachers, especially in Art. I'm also the President of the Art Club, so he doesn't care what I do, or whatever project I want to do, or some of the things I want to use or whatever. He won't let just like anyone do that.
> **LN:** Sounds like you get some special privileges.
> **René:** Yeah. And like in English, me and the two girls who sit next to me, the teacher kind of likes us three a lot. She'll ask questions about how we feel about certain things, and she likes talking to us more. I don't think she grades easier on us, but she gives us more of a chance. She'll let me finish up something I didn't finish.

In my observations in René's AP English class I did not notice any special treatment by the teacher to René in particular. The teacher told me that she thinks that one of the girls who sit next to René is the smartest student in the class, and it is possible that she holds René in high esteem as well, even though she did not mention him by name to me. My field notes document that the teacher's non-academic

interactions with students tended to be largely addressed to Stephanie, who appears later in this Chapter, and a few other highly vocal students who regularly initiate personal conversations with the teacher. My field notes indicate that René and the girls next to him chat quietly amongst themselves during class time, but personal interactions with the teacher are absent from my notes. Nonetheless, René feels that he receives special treatment from his English teacher, as well as from his Art teacher, and his perception of it is more important to his success identity than whether or not my field notes confirm it.

In our interview, René goes on to describe favoritism that takes place in other classes, namely his Spanish class, where he is not among the teacher's favorites. He says: "In my Spanish class there is this one girl who the teacher like just lets her do anything. Or like if she is doing something she is not supposed to the teacher will seem almost like she doesn't see it and I don't think that's fair. I think it is definitely okay for teachers to be nicer to students because the students they are nicer to are trying harder or that they are nicer to talk to them, but I don't think like if those same students are doing something bad, I think the teacher shouldn't just let it go."

As contrasted to the teacher's pet in his Spanish class, René describes himself as being a good student, something that is good and valuable to the teacher, and something that deserves rewards such as special privileges. Interestingly, the special privileges that René finds appropriate for rewarding good students can be described as freedoms from the constraints of a *Trained Dog*. In the case of the Art teacher, René's good standing allows him to be released from requirements for particular art assignments.

While the rest of the class might be instructed to compose an art project with certain materials or within certain limitations, René has permission to expand the boundaries of the assignment to accommodate his creative appetite. In AP English, René enjoys leniency from the teacher for finishing assignments on time, but the aspect of being the teacher's favorite that he seems to relish more than extra time is being taken seriously by the teacher. He boasts that she solicits his opinion, along with his friends' opinions, and engages in personal conversations with René. In short, his AP English teacher treats him in a way that makes him feel like a respected person, not a *Trained Dog* or memorization machine. In René's description, these are the rewards of being such a good student that one wins the special favor of the teacher: freedoms from the constraints of *Trained Dog* school success.

René draws on multiple sources of information about his abilities as he describes himself in the interview: his family, his friends, his teachers, and his grades. The tensions he experiences in his success identity are rooted in ideas that are specific to Comprehensive High. He perceives himself as possessing a level of "real" intelligence as opposed to book-smarts-only like a *Trained Dog*. This creates tension for René because he feels intelligent, but at the same time his current grades—mediocre success—make him doubt that his intelligence is all that high. René has difficulty determining whether his C's mean that he is "not that smart" or whether a couple of C's are "not that bad" considering that the rest of his grades are much higher, and the accepted wisdom at Comprehensive High posits that "everyone has a weak point."

Smarter than a *Trained Dog*: Stephanie's Sense of Her Intelligence is Rooted in

Her Verbal Agility

René's classmate, Stephanie, also feels superior to *Trained Dogs*, but for slightly different reasons than René's. Stephanie, a white junior in AP curriculum, is in the opposite position of René in terms of current academic performance. At the moment, just more than halfway through the spring semester, Stephanie has a 4.17 GPA. These are the best grades she has received yet in all of high school. Stephanie explains that she has not always performed well in school, particularly in math. "I'm horrible in math, and I really don't like to do anything with that," she tells me early in the interview. Stephanie constructs her success identity around her strong suits of verbal communication and social interaction skills. She disavows the importance of math and science coursework as critical to overall intelligence and success with the rationale that "book smarts" and "memorizing things" are less valuable than the ability to "work with people" and to "function out in society."

However, Stephanie is not able to shield her success identity entirely from being negatively affected by her low academic performance in math and science. The previous year, her final grade in Algebra II was an F. Stephanie argues that she did not deserve the F because "the teacher, towards the end of the year, decided she wasn't going to help me anymore because she didn't feel that I wanted it enough." Stephanie feels that was unfair: "I don't think it's her job to decide whether or not I wanted it or not—rather it's her job to teach the students to make sure they understand it," she explains. Stephanie asserts that the teacher refused to help her one-on-one before school

and after school, and this is what prevented her from passing the class. She elaborates: "How I feel about math in general, it's just hard for me to understand and hard for me to grasp it. I'm not saying that in her class that maybe I would have definitely had an A [but]...I didn't ditch class, I did all my homework. She just decided." Stephanie was able to retake Algebra II during the summer and received an A in the summer course. This experience confirms for Stephanie that her original Algebra II teacher during the regular school year was the root of her problem in the class: "I just don't think it usually happens that you go from an F to an A. And I think it's harder in summer school because you have to be there at seven in the morning and it's five straight hours of the class. It's so hard to keep your mind going for five hours, but he's the type of teacher that didn't think that students were all horrible, and he decided to be a teacher and knew his job was to teach students."

Stephanie's math struggles are key part of the tension she experiences in her success identity. In other classes she is able to leverage her outgoing personality and verbal agility to highlight her intellectual talents by engaging in class discussions and initiating witty interactions with the teacher. In this way she sees herself as much smarter than *Trained Dogs* who are nothing more than "book smart." Nonetheless, she acknowledges that her limited ability to "grasp" math limits her overall school success, and it also limits how intelligent she can assess herself to be.

If not for her feelings of superiority to *Trained Dogs*, there might not be any tension at all in Stephanie's success identity; she would simply accept herself as smart in English and history, but not smart in math, and that would be that. However, she is

confident that the excellent grades earned by *Trained Dogs* do not reflect genuine intelligence, and this creates discord in her understanding of what grades mean. She comments on the fairness of her AP History teacher's grading practices: "My history teacher, I know, definitely factors in effort and attitude which is nice...it's nice to know that he recognizes that and puts [adds] in how much you're involved. Because you can have people who really understand the material, but they never say a word in class. So they are not really involved in what is going on in the discussions, but maybe are really good at memorizing things. It doesn't really mean they understand in history how certain things have affected people."

Here, Stephanie invokes the *Trained Dog* field story when she clearly articulates that we should be skeptical of students who are "really good at memorizing things" because they might not genuinely understand the material. Further Stephanie emphasizes that "effort and attitude" and being "involved" are evidence of authentic learning and understanding in a class. In my field notes, I characterize Stephanie's "involvement" as "verbally dominating class discussions," which I note that Stephanie does regularly during the three weeks I observed her AP English class. Vocally participating in class, for Stephanie, is a crucial element of demonstrating that one is engaged in learning the material, and she feels it should be counted alongside test performance. She is satisfied with her history teacher's method of factoring class involvement into grades. She says that her most recent history grade would have been a C-plus based on her test scores alone, but her participation raised it to a B; and she currently holds an A.

"My teachers talk to me in class," she says proudly, "I'm always putting in effort, always involved in the classroom discussions, and I'm always attentive and listening to his lectures. Whereas I may not study as hard for the test, I'm still very involved in the class—which I'm in five hours a week—so I think I do deserve the [A] grade."

She makes a similar comment about AP English: " You know, there are students in our [AP English] class that get good grades on the essays but that don't participate in class at all. They just kind of sit there...I think that should be factored into the grades." Stephanie does not like that her AP English teacher's grading method "goes on the grades that we get on papers and essays," she would prefer to have her verbal "involvement" in class discussions rewarded in her course grade. She asserts: "I don't think that grades [should be] how you do academically, it's how you perform throughout the whole class."

Stephanie constructs her success identity on measures of intellectual skills and effort that are not amenable to typical academic tests: verbal involvement in class. While Stephanie reports putting only a modest amount of time toward homework outside of school: one and a half to three hours a week. She describes herself as a hard working student by focusing on "effort" during the school day instead of homework time. She counts her verbal participation as both hard work and intelligence at once, which bolsters a positive success identity for herself despite having a relatively poor academic history.

Stephanie equates intelligence with verbal performance in arenas outside of school as well. When I ask her where she feels smarter, in her life inside of school or in her life outside of school. She responds:

> My life outside of school, definitely. Like, my parents' friends—I love it when they come over for dinner and we'll have big conversations about things and they'll listen to me talk...I like outside—working with people, getting to talk with people outside of school, and feel like—I know that people tell my parents [flattering] things like about my sister and I—and my friends will tell me and it just makes me feel a lot better than "Oh, I just got an A on my test"—which really does make me feel good, but at the same time it's like: that's a grade, but this is what real people actually think.

Her certainty that verbal agility is more valuable intelligence than a *Trained Dog's* book smarts contributes to Stephanie's conflicting understandings of whether or not grades signal intelligence, and by extension genuine success. At different moments during the interview, she argues it both ways. For example, when Stephanie is discussing anonymous report cards, she states: "I don't think having a bad grade in math makes you any less smart or intelligent." Here she is emphasizing the point that "outside of school, like common sense and stuff" is more valuable in life than the "book smarts" a *Trained Dog* has. Stephanie frequently refers to outside of school intelligence as being able to "function out in society," a skill which she continually contrasts with "book smarts." For example in the case of the low performing anonymous report card (see Part II), Stephanie says: "Looking at [this report card] academically, it wouldn't seem that they would be like book smart. But they have a B in woodshop, and that's considered like a practical arts, so it's not that they couldn't function out in society...but book smart, I don't think they would be that smart."

In the quote above Stephanie indicates that there is value in good grades, but also value in being able to "function out in society." Later in the interview I ask whether she thinks that grades correspond to students' intellectual abilities:

> **LN:** If we lined up all the students at your school according to their GPA—the highest GPA on one end, all the way down to the lowest GPA on the other end—would we more or less see the smartest students at one end and the least smart students at the other?
> **Stephanie:** Yeah. I definitely think so. Because regardless of how intelligent you are outside of school and how well you work with people and how easily it is for you to function in society, your GPA is based on how you do in class. It's based on how you take the tests, how much homework you do—and I do think that [a GPA lineup would be an intelligence lineup]."

Here, Stephanie asserts that grades are reliable indicators of students' intellectual abilities. Importantly, she describes grades here as result of "how you take the tests, how much homework you do," which are descriptions of book smarts. Whereas above, Stephanie is emphatic that a bad grade "doesn't make you any less smart or intelligent." In fact, she argues that students who are not "involved" in the class do not deserve high grades even if they have the book smarts to ace the class assignments: "in my English class there are students that just don't care, they have their ipods on the whole time in class. And they do good on the essays, and they do great in the class. But I don't necessarily think they should deserve the best grade." Book smarts should not be rewarded highly in the absence of an engaging "attitude" and "involvement," according to this statement. Stephanie holds conflicting notions of the relationship between grades and book smarts versus grades and more genuine intelligence, intelligence which is evidenced in verbal engagement in class and outside of school skills.

Regarding her own identity, Stephanie treats outside of school know-how as more powerful indicators of her intelligence and success than her school performance. Despite failing Algebra II last year and her "average" percentile score in math on the last CST exam, Stephanie claims: "I am plenty good in normal things I need to do in math. I mean, I could go out and be an accountant, and I'd have no problem. I know how to do stuff. A lady who works up the street, I helped her with mortgage stuff and I know how to do all that. I've got a very successful career in something very involved in math even though I did very poorly in Algebra II."

Later in the interview, Stephanie explains the relationship she sees between verbal skills and success in life. She declares: "learning how to work with people is, I think, the most important [thing] anyone can do. I think how to work with people in a group successfully, learning how to be a leader, public speaking is very important, and I think learning how to give a first impression is probably the most important thing you can learn." These skills are not book smarts, they are outside the expertise of a *Trained Dog*, and Stephanie is certain that they are "the most important" things to learn in life. She explains why: "if you make a bad impression, say you're going on a job interview and the person doesn't read you very well—you're kind of quiet, you're not really open in talking—you don't get the job." Stephanie is more concerned with success in life beyond school than she is with success in school. This allows her to maintain a positive success identity including high intelligence despite her mediocre academic performance in previous years. Although she currently holds a 4.17 GPA this year, her cumulative GPA is much lower. She admits that last year she did not even reach a 2.0.

Stephanie experiences tension in her success identity too. She is conflicted about the meaning of grades, even though she dismisses school performance as less valuable than "functioning in society" skills. She believes that she possesses the more important set of skills, yet she is also aware that book smarts have a pay off too. When I ask her whether or not intelligence matters in life, she responds:

> It's going to matter to college. It's going to matter to the people hiring you...your grades are everything to your life. If you get poor grades and don't get into college and you don't get a great job, you can be struggling your whole life—unless you invent something great. Whereas people who get really good grades and are involved in their community or involved in the school and stuff, you're going to do really good in college and get a really good job, be successful—not that success comes with happiness, but like you're not having to worry about certain things all the time. You're a lot happier, spend more time with your family. I think it does measure success in life, intelligence. You have to be intelligent—or at least be able to get the grades to seem that you're intelligent—to prosper in life.

Although Stephanie says that her parents and friends would rank her intelligence at nine or ten on the 1-10 intelligence scale, Stephanie places herself at eight, with the rationale: "I think I would probably be an eight because of math. I'm not very good at math and I know it's something that is important in high school and something I know I'll have to take in college. So that's unfortunate." Stephanie factors in her school success, here, despite her arguments throughout the interview that book smarts do not reflect genuine intelligence. Her current college plans also reflect a modest view of her intellectual abilities: she plans to attend a local community college for two years. Afterward she intends to transfer to a University of California campus, but she is confident that starting out at a community college is the right first step. It is not strategic for Stephanie to enroll in AP curriculum in high school since she plans to

attend community college rather than apply as a freshman to a four-year university, where her AP scores might count toward course credit. Yet AP courses make sense to her, as a validation of her success identity as a smart person.

Passing with *Average Joe*: Mario Embraces the Field Story

While Stephanie and René define themselves in opposition to the *Trained Dog* field story, other students at Comprehensive High draw heavily on the *Average Joe* field story as they construct their success identities. Mario, a mixed-race sophomore, is an example among multiple students I interviewed in the general curriculum track who largely embrace the *Average Joe* field story.

These students express content with receiving C's on report cards, claiming that C's represent effort on their part toward their schoolwork, resulting in an acceptable level of school success. Mario's favorite subject is math, and he is always able to complete his math assignments during class. He reports sitting down for homework in his other subjects "maybe two times out of the week" for "20 minutes to half an hour." Mario's most recent report card boasts two B's and four C's, and he says that he is satisfied with these grades: "They were pretty good. I liked them. They were like C or above, so that's pretty good." Throughout the interview, Mario makes reference to the dividing line between C's and C-minuses as the difference between acceptable and unacceptable grades, espousing the widely shared understanding at Comprehensive High.

Mario's parents seem to share this perspective as well. The previous year they punished Mario for poor grades, grounding him at home until he raised his grade in each subject to a C or higher. Since then Mario has been able to maintain a C minimum on his report cards, and he feels pleased with this progress. He admits that his parents did a good thing by grounding him: "because if they didn't do that, I wouldn't be able to graduate and get all my credits and stuff." Mario acknowledges that he'll need a high school diploma in order to get a decent job after graduation, though he also understands that higher education is the real key to a good job: "you need to go to college after that," he says, "but you still get better jobs if you get a high school diploma." When I ask whether he has any concrete plans for college, he responds: "I'm planning to go like part time. I don't want to go like full time. I won't be able to finish my work. It's too much." Mario desires a career in professional skateboarding, though he is unsure whether it will materialize for him. He admits that he needs an education for a back up plan, should skateboarding prove to be unprofitable. Mario's future plans are well aligned with the *Average Joe* field story, which includes a desire to make something of one's life, including working at a decent, respectable job.

Despite his satisfaction with his current level of school success, Mario does not feel that his grades are an accurate reflection of his intellectual abilities. "I think they [grades] are lower than I could be," he says. He asserts that if he tried harder in school he could "do better" and receive higher grades. The tension for Mario's success identity is not between his school success and his self-evaluation of how intelligent he is. There is not much tension here because his average grades are easily explained by

his putting forth only minimally required effort toward his schoolwork. His hour a week on homework is enough effort to yield acceptable school success. In this way, Mario fully embraces the *Average Joe* field story. The tension that arises for Mario's success identity lies in his understanding of how intelligence manifests in a person's life. He views intelligence as requisite for a successful life, and he worries that he might not possess enough intelligence to enjoy a successful life.

Mario's concerns surface in the interview in terms of not having enough ambition, which he connects to his intelligence. When I ask Mario whether or not intelligence matters in life, he agrees that it does, but is unable to immediately articulate why. It takes some additional probing on my part as the interviewer to uncover the relationship Mario perceives between his ambition and his intelligence:

> **LN:** Does intelligence matter? Is it better to be more intelligent in life?
> **Mario:** Yeah.
> **LN:** Yeah? What's better? What does it get me?
> **Mario:** Well, I don't know.
> **LN:** That's okay. Can you think of anything that's better about it?
> **Mario:** Just knowing more stuff, just knowing like what's going on. If you don't know anything, it sucks.
> **LN:** Okay, so if you took brain vitamins tomorrow and got smarter, how would your life be different?
> **Mario:** I'd probably like—I don't know. I'd probably like think about stuff more, like about skating. I'd probably be like, "I don't want to do this, I want to do something else" like stop skating. I don't know. It would probably be different—like I don't know. If you know more stuff, you'd just probably change a lot more.

Mario imagines that if he were more intelligent he would be a deeper thinker, and that activities such as skateboarding would no longer appeal to him. He has difficulty envisioning all the changes that would come along with increased intelligence, but the first change that comes to mind is abandoning his hobby and hopeful-career in

skateboarding. The relationship that Mario expresses here between his intelligence level and his ambition also fits neatly within the framework of understandings at Comprehensive High that intelligence sets the parameters for success. Mario's response above indicates that skateboarding is an appropriate pursuit for him, but it would not seem fitting anymore if he suddenly became more intelligent. Mario is content with his *Average Joe* school success and *Average Joe* life aspirations, but he would not be content with them if he were more intelligent.

Resolving Success Identity Tensions: Sandra Holds a Tight Adherence to the Local Belief that Effort Can Yield Limitless Success

While multiple students I interviewed at Comprehensive High in the general curriculum, like Mario, embrace the *Average Joe* field story, not everyone actually attains minimal school success, i.e. C's or better in every class. Mario himself was in that position last year when his parents grounded him. Flor, a Latina junior in Mario's World History class (this is her second time taking this class), was also grounded by her parents for her poor grades last year. However, since then she has found new motivation and ambition to achieve school success from the influence of her studious younger cousin and her boyfriend, who are both high achievers in honors curriculum. Other students, however, such as Sandra, a Latina classmate of Flor's and Mario's in general curriculum, are not success stories in the same way that Mario and Flor are. Mario and Flor were able to buckle down, get serious about their schoolwork, and then enjoy the fruits of their effort in the form of grades they feel proud of. Flor, for

example, was receiving mostly D's and C-minuses on her report cards during her freshman and sophomore years, and now she holds A's and B's thanks to the eight hours a week she is now in the habit of putting toward homework afterschool. She is proud to be outshining *Average Joes* at her school.

Sandra, on the other hand, claims a D in English and a D in Geometry on her most recent report card. A critical difference between Mario's and Flor's low academic performance last year and Sandra's current low academic performance is that both Mario and Flor matter-of-factly admit that they were not doing much schoolwork during that time, if any at all. They simply were not bothering themselves with the pursuit of school success. Sandra, on the contrary, describes herself as "trying very hard," and she has set high college and career goals for her future. The problem for Sandra is that her effort is not actually translating into much school success. In her self-descriptions she does not explicitly position herself vis-à-vis either prevalent field story at Comprehensive High, instead she draws on one of the two incompatible beliefs about school success that are available at her school: effort on its own can yield unlimited success. Sandra offers an example of yet another way that students creatively construct their success identities within the frameworks for understanding school success that are available in their local school context.

Sandra volunteers a story about her recent experience in Geometry class that explains how it happens that she winds up with low grades despite feeling like she has tried her best: "Sometimes you're actually trying really hard and you just fail the test if you get nervous before the test and you just forget everything so that's when you should

be allowed a retake...like it was last week Monday, we took a test, I got a C-minus on it. And it raised my grade a little bit because I had an F, but he said 'a lot of people got A's and B's so that shows that some people were paying attention in class.' And I was like, 'I was paying attention!'" Sandra continues her description of the surprise she feels over this recent test result: "I don't know why I got that grade, because I actually felt good about that test, and I thought, 'Oh yeah, I'm going to pass it.'"

At moments such as this during the interview with me, Sandra admits to having disappointing levels of success in school despite having put her heart into it. I quote her in Chapter Five saying: "sometimes I've been like this and I've tried really hard and can't get grades that great and then when I try really hard in other subjects I can." She is expressing awareness that her effort does not always yield success, and this fact implicates her intelligence as limiting the scope of academic success that is available to her. At Comprehensive High the belief that intelligence sets the parameters for school success is one of two dominating explanations for success. Despite her awareness that she is not very good at some of her subjects, Sandra does not incorporate a sense of having a limited intellect into her success identity. She thinks of herself as rather intelligent: an eight-and-a-half on the 1-10 scale.

Sandra maintains her positive success identity by focusing on the local belief about success at Comprehensive High: that effort alone can bring school success. She holds tightly to this notion when she describes her potential and her future goals. Meanwhile Sandra explains her lack of school success as flukes, of sorts, as isolated

incidents. She explains her D in English last semester, for example, as due to their temporary student-teacher using an unfamiliar grading scheme.

Sandra wholeheartedly agrees in our interview with the statement: If you try hard enough, you can make all A's in school. "I think that's true," she says. "Because if you are giving it all you have, and you really want to get that A, and you set a goal to get that A, then I think you can achieve it. There is nothing to stop you if you really want it." From an outside perspective, it is easy to find Sandra's claims surprising here, given the struggles and frustrations she faces in achieving A's herself. In the interview, I follow up Sandra's statement by asking her why more people aren't getting straight A's since anyone can do it if they simply try hard enough. She responds: "Probably because they give up. They think they are not going to get the A's or they start losing track of themselves, and forget what they set for themselves." Sandra steadfastly sticks to the notion that "giving it all you have" and "really wanting it" are the keys to school success.

I follow up again by asking Sandra what it takes at her school to get good grades. Her reply focuses on the ability to get help with difficult classes, which is another endorsement of the belief that effort can yield unlimited success. She says that getting good grades requires: "being able to get help in those kinds of [challenging] classes, and wanting to and actually going forward with your goals. Getting the extra help—tutoring if you are struggling in that subject." She explains that tutoring is readily available to her at Comprehensive High through AVID, and she expresses

confidence that good grades and bright futures are available to anyone who wants it badly enough.

For her part, Sandra has set high goals for her educational and career future. She tells me that she plans to pursue a career as a "parole officer for juvenile delinquents" from which she plans to move into a higher position as an "investigator, like for crime scenes, criminology." She explains that her career goals involve a good deal of higher education: "Before you can get the [crime scene investigator] job, I think it's five to six years of school." I ask how many years of school are required for a parole officer, and she replies: "I think it's just the four years and then right to it." I ask whether Sandra is planning to go to college, and she proudly says: "Yes. I want to go to University of California, Irvine. They've been telling me it has the best criminology department."

Sandra's college plans are undermined by her poor academic performance, yet this contradiction does not surface in her self-descriptions of her success identity. Sandra has concrete plans for a future education and a career that excites her. Yet she expresses no awareness that her low grades in high school might hinder her ability to pursue her goals at the University of California, at Irvine. Sandra holds a 2.33 GPA, and says that she is a bit disappointed because her GPA has gone down this year: last year she held a 2.5 GPA. However, even a 2.5 GPA is well below that of a typical freshman admitted to the University of California, at Irvine that year: a 3.72 was the average GPA (Oram 2007). As illustrated above in Sandra's description of her surprise at her low C-minus grade on a recent math test, Sandra does not seem to attribute

instances of poor academic performance to her intellectual abilities. Rather, she expresses some bewilderment at how she could feel so confident while taking the test, and wind up with such a low score. She reiterates the same belief when we are discussing whether she thinks that her grades are an accurate reflection of how smart she is. She says: "maybe on that test I wasn't very good, it doesn't mean how smart I am, just how prepared I was for it." Again, she dismisses the notion that her intelligence is implicated in instances of low academic performance.

Sandra describes herself as "trying very hard," however, when I ask her how much time she spends doing homework in a week, she admits: "Not a lot. Like maybe I'll start doing it the [class] period before [it is due]." She estimates that she spends "probably an hour reading" during afterschool time in a typical week, with a little extra time added in on Saturdays and Sundays. "Probably the whole weekend is an hour," she says. From an outside perspective, this does not sound like an enormous amount of conscientious effort that Sandra is putting toward schoolwork. Yet Sandra considers herself to be a hard working student, plodding diligently toward her college and career goals.

Her bright-eyed enthusiasm and the pride she exhibits while telling me about her future plans clearly indicates that Sandra is aware that she is aiming high in life, and this helps her maintain a positive success identity. She is not settling for average aspirations, as she critically claims that many of her fellow Mexican classmates are: "I think like the Mexican people, they just see that most of the other parents, their friends, their brothers and sisters, have just gone off to construction. Like the guys, they do

construction and think that's a career and they're going to make a lot of money in that line. They could actually be like the other people and go to class, be there on time, do their homework, turn it in, and actually be more than a construction worker."

The tension that Sandra experiences in her success identity is complicated. She is critical of low aspirations, and feels confident that her future is bright with the promise of a college education at a highly esteemed university and a meaningful career. She is confident that hard work and keeping track of her goals are all that it will take to achieve that future; in those terms, it sounds like a realistic ambition. Yet Sandra is not on pace in terms of academic performance to accomplish her goals. She does not express any tension over the discrepancy between her aspirations and her current level of school success. Indeed, she seems to hardly be aware of it at all. She considers herself to be "trying really hard" in school, even though she dedicates a very modest amount of time to her homework, approximately two hours a week. This creates another discrepancy in Sandra's school life. She wholeheartedly endorses the notion that hard work is all that is needed for a student to be able to receive straight A's, yet she does not put that theory into practice. She puts in relatively little effort even though she struggles considerably in her Geometry and English classes. This discrepancy also seems to be undetected by Sandra.

Where tension does clearly surface for Sandra in the interview is in her assessment of how intelligent she is. She spends much of the interview strongly asserting that intelligence has little to do with grades, when I ask her to explain what was going through her mind that made her decide that she is an "eight or eight-and-a-

half" on the 1-10 intelligence scale, she responds: "Like how good I'm doing in class. How much effort I'm giving into each class. Then Geometry came into my head and I was like 'I'm at a C-minus, oh yeah.'" Sandra's voice is sad, almost embarrassed at this admission. To be sure I understand her emotion correctly, I follow with the question: "Is that why you are not a ten?" To which she responds: "Yeah. Geometry and stuff." Sandra's first thoughts about her intelligence rest on her perceptions of her effort, however her low school performance sneaks into the picture, and she reduces her self-ranking to better reflect her C-minus in math class.

Sandra is not settling for *Average Joe* aspirations, but neither is she passing with *Average Joe*, as several of her classmates, like Mario, are proud of themselves for doing. In some ways, Sandra seems blinded by the Comprehensive High belief that effort on its own can yield success, but I suggest instead that she is using this local belief to her advantage. Sandra offers yet another example of the creative and innovative ways that students construct their identities within the cultural frameworks available at their local schools. She has constructed her success identity around her (arguably inflated) perception of herself as a hard working student, and she expresses pride in herself as a motivated person, who is bound for a bright future. She builds a positive success identity for herself by ignoring or downplaying any evidence to the contrary. Two beliefs about school success coexist at Comprehensive High, and Sandra strategically clings to the one that offers her hope and a positive self-image. When I push her to think about her intellectual talents, Sandra does not deny that they are reflected in her low performance, nonetheless, at multiple moments in the interview she

voluntarily asserts that her intelligence is not implicated in her own grades. Sandra might have a rude awakening coming when she applies for admission to the University of California, but in the in meantime, her success identity is free to soar.

Conclusion

Students I interviewed at Comprehensive High in both AP/honors curriculum and general curriculum reference the *Average Joe* field story in their interviews. However, students in general curriculum less commonly discuss the *Trained Dog* field story; it more aptly reflects the concerns of AP/honors students. As the cases of René and Stephanie demonstrate, AP students who consider themselves to be intelligent, but do not receive excellent grades draw on the *Trained Dog* field story as they construct their success identities. Both René and Stephanie feel smarter than *Trained Dogs*. They define themselves in opposition to the field story, although for different reasons.

In this way, the *Trained Dog* field story is somewhat parallel to the *OCD Overachiever* field story I find at Elite Charter High. AP students rely on the field story to justify and legitimize their less-than-excellent school success. However, at Elite Charter High it is understood that *OCD Overachievers* are highly intelligent students because at that school, the local understanding is that intelligence is the root of success, as it is the root of effort. The local beliefs about school success at Comprehensive High, on the other hand, do not tightly associate high intelligence with all cases of school success, as *Trained Dogs* exemplify. *Trained Dogs* achieve excellent grades by mechanically memorizing course material in the precise format demanded by tests and

assignments. Students such as René and Stephanie do not equate this kind of school success with legitimate intellectual talents, or "real intelligence," as René calls it.

Part of the disdain Comprehensive High AP/honors students feel toward *Trained Dogs* is likely borne out of the frustration they feel over having to channel their creative cognitive abilities in school into what I call correct-answer teaching formats and what students describe as mindless "busywork." At Elite Charter High, AP students are encouraged to engage in more comprehensive learning endeavors in their classes, so they do not share Comprehensive High students' concerns in this respect. Claire, from Comprehensive High, asserts that A's are based on how well a student "regurgitates" information on tests. Students I interviewed at Elite Charter High do not make similar claims in interviews with me. Therefore, it is not surprising that the field stories that emerge in each of these two schools carry different characteristics, even though *OCD Overachievers* and *Trained Dogs* are both identity types that similarly positioned students use in similar ways. This emphasizes the importance of a school's structures and daily practices in the development of local school beliefs about school success.

Regarding the field story of *Average Joe*, at neither of the other two schools in this study do students so widely endorse minimal success. At Elite Charter High, minimal success is understood as B's, rather than C's. Few students in my sample at Elite Charter High claim that they would be personally satisfied with receiving straight B grades. The more common situation I find at that school is for students to actively pursue A's. At Alternative High, students concerns are centered on avoiding failure; they do not express a precise threshold of grades that are acceptable. Students at

Alternative High instead say that a report card is acceptable if it avoids any association with failure, generally this means no F's, and not too many D's or C-minuses, which are seen as being "dangerously close" to failing.

Thus, at neither Alternative High nor Elite Charter High would a field story such as *Average Joe* resonate with the local sensibilities about school success. In fact, at Alternative High, I do not even find a prominent, positive field story of success, instead, I find widely articulated field stories that explain low school success through lack of effort or contemptible high success through cheating. The concerns of students at Alternative High would not be accurately embodied in a field story like *Average Joe*; *Average Joe* contradicts the hope inherent in Alternative High's local belief that school success is all about effort. Students at Alternative High believe that excellent grades are available to them if they work hard enough, so settling for average grades and average life aspirations would undercut the optimism in their school environment.

In Part III of this dissertation, I have demonstrated that as students construct their success identities, they rely heavily, if not entirely, on the field stories and local beliefs about school success that are available in their school environment. At Comprehensive High, Mario and others can embrace *Average Joe* with pride because at this school *Average Joe* is an acceptable character. At Elite Charter High, a student with Mario's grades and aspirations would be considered a "slacker," and his school success would be viewed as disgracefully below par.

As I argue throughout this Chapter, and throughout all of Part III, students I interviewed interact with available field stories in complicated ways as they construct

their success identities. Drawing on a field story to define oneself does not entail a blanket adoption of the identity type to one's own self-perceptions. Students are creative and innovative in the ways they draw on field stories and local beliefs. Even cases, such as Mario, in which students embrace a field story, these students still experience tension in their understandings of who they are as individuals of some intelligence who pursue school success. Similarly, defining oneself in opposition to a negative field story does not easily and cleanly provide an identity mold for an individual student to step into. Students such as René and Stephanie engage in complex interactions with the *Trained Dog* field story as they construct their understandings of who they are as intelligent and successful students.

Although field stories provide the "raw material" for identity negotiation, as Westenholz (2006) theorizes, field stories do not offer ready-made identities that individuals can simply put on unproblematically. Tensions and contradictions emerge for students as they continually figure out how they fit into their local landscape of school success. Thus, it is critically important to understand the local beliefs available in student's school environment in order to understand how and why that student defines her success identity in particular terms, just as it is critically important to recognize the agency individuals exert as they construct their identities.

CHAPTER NINE

CONCLUSION

LOCAL BELIEFS ABOUT SCHOOL SUCCESS BECOME (DIS)ADVANTAGE FOR

STUDENTS' COLLEGE FUTURES

This dissertation demonstrates that local school contexts matter. As Part II shows, each of the three high schools in this study interpret and modify cultural schemas in particular ways, creating local beliefs about school success. I focus on local understandings of the relationship among intelligence, effort, and school success. Part III of the dissertation focuses on the consequences those local beliefs about school success have for individual students' success identities. Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight illustrate how students draw heavily on field stories and local beliefs that are available in their school context as they construct their success identities.

This dissertation intersects symbolic interaction theory of identity formation with organizational theory, in line with a current focus on "inhabited institutions" (Binder 2007; Hallett and Ventresca 2006a; Hallett and Ventresca 2006b; Harrington and Fine 2006; Hirsch and Lounsbury 1997; Lounsbury and Ventresca 2003; Westenholz 2006; Westenholz, Pedersen, and Dobbin 2006). Situating students' success identities in the terrain of both these bodies of literature allows my project to offer insights into the multidimensionality of culture. Part II demonstrates the power of top-down transfer of cultural ideas. A school's local belief about the relationship between intelligence, effort, and school success becomes a powerful framework for how students at that school understand school success. School-level ideas constrain

individual students' perceptions of success. However, Part III demonstrates the power of individuals' creativity. This testifies to the importance of bottom-up processes in the ongoing production of culture. Students do not passively embody notions of effort and intelligence from their school's local beliefs about success. On the contrary, students construct their success identities in innovative ways, sometimes dismissing, sometimes embracing, and sometimes redefining aspects of local understandings of success at their school.

Thus, this dissertation investigates three levels of culture's multidimensionality: 1. Society shared cultural schemas; 2. Organizations' local modifications of those cultural schemas; and 3. Individuals' identity construction vis-à-vis those locally modified versions of cultural schemas. My research shows how both schools (organizations) and students (individuals) refine and adapt cultural ideas that are passed down to them from above.

Beyond Identity: Consequences of Local School Beliefs on Students' Futures

Local beliefs about school success greatly influence students' success identities. Importantly, these local beliefs have consequences on another level as well. Students' futures in higher education are boosted or compromised by the local understandings of school success at their high schools. In this concluding Chapter, I argue that the local beliefs at each of the three schools in this study serve to advantage or disadvantage the students at each school in the pursuit of higher education at elite institutions. Further, I find that the advantage and disadvantage inherent in each school's local beliefs about

school success reinforce existing patterns of advantage and disadvantage in education in the United States.

College education, namely attaining a bachelor's degree, is the key to accessing well paying professional careers in the United States. Low SES students, African Americans and Latinos are less likely to complete college degrees compared to their white and middle class counterparts (Mellow and Heelan 2008), and Latinos as a group are the least likely of all students of color to finish higher education (Nunez 2009). A main source of this discrepancy lies in high school. High schools throughout the United States prepare students unequally for advancement to higher education.

Unequal Preparation for College in High School

Greene and Forster (2003) demonstrate that across the United States, high schools are disproportionately under-preparing African American and Latino high school students for college futures. Using 2000 data, the authors find that only 70% of US high school students graduate, and only 32% of all students leave high school with the minimum qualifications to attend a four-year college. The figures for African American and Latino students are drastically lower than the national average. Only 51% of African American high school students and 52% of Latino high school students graduate, meaning that nearly half of these populations drop out and face severely limited economic futures without a high school diploma. Further, a mere 20% of African American students and 16% of Latino students nationwide leave high school

with transcripts that qualify them for four-year colleges. White students, by comparison, graduate at 72% nationally, and 34% are college-ready upon graduation.

Looking specifically at California, Greene and Forster report graduation rates for African American and Latino students to be slightly higher than the national average, at 58% and 56%, respectively, compared to whites at 77%. California's "college readiness rates," however, are slightly lower than national rates for Latino students and whites: 15% of Latino students leave California high schools with at least minimally college ready transcripts, as do 30% of white students. On the other hand, African American students in California graduate "college ready" at 22%, which is 2% higher than the national average. Thus, overall, California is not much different than the national figures.

African American, Latino, and low SES students are underrepresented on college campuses, despite the fact that most colleges actively desire diverse student bodies (Alexander, Bozick, and Entwisle 2008; Golden 2006; Massey, Charles, Lundy, and Fischer 2003; Sacks 2007; Stevens 2007). Greene and Forster, among others, argue that high school education accounts for the fact that so few African American and Latino students make it to the pool of eligible college applicants (Bailey and Morest 2006a; Waassmer, Moore, and Shulock 2003). Greene and Forester argue that rather than focusing on a lack of financial aid and lack of affirmative action policies in college admissions, it is critical to look at the lack of college preparation given to African American and Latino students by their high schools.

Rosenbaum (2001) also looks at students' high school experiences in relation to their college futures. He focuses on the availability of community college as a stepping stone between high school and four-year institutions, whereas Greene and Forster focus on high school graduates' qualifications to attend a four-year institution directly upon graduating. Rosenbaum finds that high school grades predict college degree completion, meaning that students who receive good grades in high school are the most likely to complete a college degree. Further, the better one's high school grades, the higher the degree one is likely to complete. Ironically, Rosenbaum finds that students believe that their high school success has little or no relevance to their future education and career goals. He argues that high schools' avid promotion of a "college for all" mantra inadvertently sets many students up for failure in their post-secondary educational pursuits because students are encouraged to set college goals for themselves regardless of their potential for college success.

Rosenbaum explains that community colleges' elimination of entrance requirements offers many high school students a false sense of security in their college aspirations. Indeed, there are now relatively few barriers to entering community college after high school, but Rosenbaum finds that a full 86% of C-or-lower seniors with plans to attend college never earn a degree (including Associate's degrees). Similarly, 63% of B-student seniors with college plans do not complete a degree within ten years. Meanwhile 64% of A-student seniors with college plans are able to attain a degree within ten years, and the figure is even slightly higher for A-student seniors who have

plans to earn a BA or higher, at 66%. Thus, high school grades are a strong indicator of who will finish a college degree.

While scholars and policy makers are very concerned about improving the low numbers of transfers from community colleges to four-year institutions by improving features of the community colleges themselves (Bailey and Morest 2006b; Grubb 2006; Herideen 1998; Mellow and Heelan 2008; Nunez 2009; Waassmer, Moore, and Shulock 2003), Rosenbaum emphasizes the importance of the ideas students have about college *while they are still in high school*. Rosenbaum argues that: "the high level of community college dropout arises because high schools offer vague promises of open opportunity for college without specifying the requirements for degree completion" (2001:56). He acknowledges that high schools are not purposefully trying to deceive their students, but that blanket encouragement to pursue college leads to unintended consequences. Rosenbaum asserts that: "if high school students were informed that they are poorly prepared for community college, they could either increase their efforts to prepare themselves or revise their plans to make them more realistic. In either case, cooling out would not be needed, and youths' plans would be less likely to fail" (2001:57). Rosenbaum's study further demonstrates that the students who are already members of disadvantaged groups (African-Americans, Latinos, and low-SES students) suffer the highest rates of failed college plans, a finding that is widely supported in the literature (Alexander, Bozick, and Entwisle 2008; Brint and Karabel 1989; Dougherty 1994; Hansen 1994; Nunez 2009; Trusty 2000; Waassmer, Moore, and Shulock 2003).

While scholarship argues that schools overall serve as a Great Equalizer for students, meaning that school learning helps minimize inequalities among students from various socio-economic backgrounds (Downey, vonHippel, and Broh 2004; Heyns 1978), nonetheless, students who start their educational experiences in positions of advantage consistently end up on top at the end of high school as well (Cookson and Persell 1985; Golden 2006; Johnson 2006; Karabel 2005; Lemann 1999; Stevens 2007). Leaving community college aside for a moment, the modest percentage of students who do graduate high school with transcripts that are ready for four-year institutions face another hurdle before becoming well-qualified college applicants: SAT scores. The SAT I is an "aptitude" test that promises to reveal students' intellectual abilities, a topic addressed in greater detail in Appendix A. Although the predictive power of the SAT I on college freshmen's grades all but disappears once family income and parents' education is controlled for (Atkinson 2002), it is still a widely used component for college entrance in tandem with the SAT II and SAT writing exams. While the SAT II is an "achievement" test, based on high school curriculum, the SAT I asks test takers questions that are unrelated to their high school courses. This means that students who prepare conscientiously for the SAT I must study relevant material on their own; their everyday school experiences will not help them perform better on the SAT I. It is not surprising that students who come from families with higher incomes and from parents with higher education are the students who devote greater time, energy, and other resources toward familiarizing themselves with the SAT I test. These students participate in what Patricia McDonough (1994) calls "admissions management."

McDonough explains that the college admissions "game" has dramatically increased in complexity and in stakes over the last two decades: college admissions staffs have grown at unprecedented rates and colleges and universities in the United States have grown increasingly stratified. This leads students and parents who are aware of the complexities of admission competition to increase their efforts to ensure admission to elite, selective colleges. Such behavior applies predominantly to upper-middle class students and parents, and their efforts include hiring private college counselors to advise on which college is "right" for the student and how to get organized for a strong application; enrolling in SAT preparation programs; participating in summer "experiences" such as international travel or wilderness camps that might impress colleges; and so on.

McDonough describes this process as the "social construction of the college applicant." By this she refers to the notion that "good" colleges and universities are looking for a particular type of applicant. Savvy parents and students understand that success in college admissions relies on a student presenting herself as an ideal candidate (or as ideal as possible) through her application materials. These parents and students are also well aware that the best inside information on what selective colleges really want and which colleges are realistic goals to aim for is available from private college counselors (see also Stevens 2007). Their professional expertise lies in precisely this knowledge. McDonough demonstrates that the business of buying professional help for college applications is so commonplace among upper-middle class families, that some students worry that if they follow every last bit of advice and instruction their

applications will "scream private college counseling" to the eyes of admissions officers, as Candy, one of McDonough's high school informants phrases it.

Elite Charter High, Alternative High, and Comprehensive High in the College Admissions Game.

The local belief about school success at Elite Charter High matches well with the expectations of admissions boards at elite colleges. However, for the other two schools in this study, Alternative High and Comprehensive High, both of which serve predominantly low income and ethnic/racial minority students, the local beliefs about school success become a disadvantage in admission to elite colleges because the local beliefs at each school promote attitudes and behaviors that are not recognized in the college admission process as related to "ideal" candidates.

How-to books such as *Winning the College Admission Game: Strategies for Students and Parents* by a former Dean of Admission at Franklin and Marshall College, and *Admission Matters: What Students and Parents Need to Know about Getting into College* by an Associate Chancellor at the University of California and co-author, provide a clear portrait of the "ideal" college applicant, and offer tips for high school students on how to ensure that they look as ideal as possible in their application materials. *Admission Matters* explains that admission officers look for evidence that an applicant has "sparkle." The authors elaborate: "They are looking for someone who is smart, intellectually curious, good hearted, talented, and energetic" (Springer and Franck 2005:35). Although *Winning the College Admission Game* does not use the

term "sparkle," the author lays out a similar list of desirable qualities that college admission officers are looking for. He says that admission committees want students who are "bright, motivated, high achieving, diverse in background, and 'givers'" (Van Buskirk 2007:72). The former Dean of Admission describes each of these qualities in detail.

By "bright" he means students "who have the capacity to learn at advanced levels of instruction" (Van Buskirk 2007:73). While "motivated" might sound like it refers to students' persistent effort toward their schoolwork—a quality promoted heartily at Alternative High—in fact, the author defines it as another facet of intelligence, rather than a dedication of effort. The former Dean of Admission explains what "motivated" means: "Colleges want to know how you demonstrate your passion for learning. Do you ask questions and press for greater understanding? Do you "push the envelope"? Do you stretch yourself beyond the requirements of the classroom? Professors are genuinely excited when students pose questions for which there aren't easy answers. Motivated students energize the classroom" (Van Buskirk 2007:73).

"Motivated," in these terms, sounds nearly identical to Elite Charter High students' definition of intelligence. Denise asserts in Chapter Six, that intelligence is evident in people who are "curious," a term she and her father both use to describe people who "ask questions and press for greater understanding," as it is phrased in *Winning the College Admission Game*. Daphne, an AP sophomore at Elite Charter High, explains how she can recognize that another person is intelligent: "if they show a passion for something then definitely they will have the knowledge of that, and there is

intelligence there…[if] they question—that's a big one. Thinking about it can intrigue them enough that they ask about it, then they have the interest and they want to increase their knowledge of that [topic]. So, there is intelligence there." What the former Dean of Admission at Franklin and Marshall College calls "motivated," students at Elite Charter High call "intelligent."

As I demonstrate in Chapters Three and Six, Elite Charter High students' understanding of intelligence also incorporates behaviors of effort. At Elite Charter High, the local definition of intelligence includes a spirit of ambition. The belief is that highly intelligent people cannot help themselves but to want to learn more and to excel in school, and they spend enormous energy doing so. They "strive for excellence," as Rebecca says, because smart people feel naturally compelled to achieve. At Elite Charter High, students criticize peers for devoting excessive amounts of time and emotion to their academic pursuits—captured in the field story *OCD Overachiever*—yet at the same time, that excessive devotion of energy toward school success is recognized as evidence that such students are highly intelligent. At Elite Charter High, it is understood that intelligence engenders effort and ambition, and this notion is precisely what *Winning the College Admission Game* characterizes as "motivated."

The next quality on the list of traits that colleges seek in ideal candidates, according to Dean Van Buskirk is "high achieving." This is yet another embodiment of academic intelligence. In addition to being "bright" and "motivated," the guidebook advises students: "Demonstrate your passion for learning. Colleges are always on the lookout for students who love to learn and whose passion takes them to the highest level

of challenge and achievement" (Van Buskirk 2007:60). The former Dean of Admission explicitly claims that the way to exhibit one's passion is through the high school transcript. He asserts that most admission officers begin reviewing a file with the transcript and "an experienced reader can tell within seconds whether you will be competitive" (Van Buskirk 2007:94). Elite Charter High students' understanding that intelligence naturally engenders ambition and success resonates perfectly with Dean Van Buskirk's claim that grades and coursework (on one's transcript) unequivocally reveal the student's intellectual talents and motivation.

Rounding out the list of traits in an ideal candidate, the former Dean of Admission at Franklin and Marshall College describes the quality that he calls being a "giver." As he explains this quality in detail, it turns out that he is not exactly referring to generosity or a noble character, with the term "giver;" rather, he is talking about having talent, including intellectual talents. The former Dean of Admission cautions students not to run out and participate in any and every community service opportunity they can find in order to pad their college applications. Instead, he encourages students to engage in activities that are meaningful to them personally, activities that are "natural extensions of you and your passions" in ways that "challenge your competencies" and "broaden your perspectives" (Van Buskirk 2007:77). Thus, the ideal college applicant is "gifted" with a gift that she can share with others, and that she has spent her time and energy cultivating through extracurricular activities. Importantly, intellectual talent counts as a "gift" in an ideal candidate, a gift that might be evident in "the expression of ideas" or "in laboratories," as Dean Van Buskirk notes. In the end, then, of the five

qualities that colleges such as Franklin and Marshall look for in ideal applicants, four of them can be fulfilled through high intelligence. That is, intelligence defined in a particular way: as ambition and passion for learning—the same way it is defined at Elite Charter High.

Elite Charter High is an environment where local understandings of school success and the role that intelligence and effort play in school success match seamlessly with the expectations of elite college admission boards. Intelligence is understood as an internal desire to learn, innate curiosity that organically sparks ambition in academic and intellectual pursuits. Intelligent people feel naturally motivated to "strive for excellence." When the former Dean of Admission at Franklin and Marshall College describes the ideal college applicant, he paints precisely the picture of what Elite Charter High students call an intelligent person.

Yes, an ideal candidate might have a talent that is outside the academic domain, such as dancing, nonetheless, the lion's share of ideal qualities revolve around being intellectually adept and enthusiastic at high levels of academic study. As for Alternative High and Comprehensive High, the local understandings of how intelligence and effort are related to school success are incongruent with the expectations of elite college admissions.

Further, despite the fact that student body diversity is a prized goal for admissions offices at elite colleges, simply being able to check a box other than "Caucasian" on one's application does not help one's application much in the post Affirmative Action era (Springer and Franck 2005). As Mitchell Stevens (2007) argues

in his participant observation study in the admissions office of an elite private college, class advantages in many ways overshadow the process of admissions decisions. Stevens demonstrates that efforts to make thoughtful decisions about whom to accept and whom to reject include careful, individualized reading of applicants' files. This individualized process *should* allow admissions personnel to find reasons to extend acceptance to marginal candidates who would bring valuable racial/ethnic diversity to the campus. However, Stevens finds that the process of thoughtfully reading each file individually winds up benefitting marginal applicants who are upper-middle class instead. These students tend to have experienced, admissions-savvy adults, including prep school counselors and family friends in high places, helping to bolster the application files with extensive letters of recommendation that provide a compelling, holistic portrait of the applicant as a person.

In contrast, applicants from comprehensive public high schools do not have access to adults with the institutional know-how to submit similar items on their behalf. Consequently, admissions personnel have a more difficult time constructing a "story," as Stevens calls it, about who these applicants are as people, and how, specifically, they might enhance their college community, thus rejection is the more plausible outcome. Susan, an admissions officer in Stevens' study, acknowledges this issue, despite feeling powerless to do anything to amend the inequality: "it is the case that kids from these good private [high] schools do have an edge with these counselors that the public school kids don't have...It just bothers me that here are these kids with so many advantages

already, and then they have these counselors who do stuff like this and it works" (2007: 206).

The one major advantage that students from Alternative High and Comprehensive High might benefit from is that they would bring racial/ethnic diversity to the college campus they attend. Unfortunately, this advantage does not pay off tangibly for minority students as easily as class-based advantages pay off for students from more privileged backgrounds.

Alternative High: "It's All About Effort" Does not Translate to "Sparkle" on a College Application

At Alternative High, students articulate a belief that school success is due to effort, and that intelligence is largely, if not entirely, irrelevant. The local wisdom posits that everyone is smart enough to master the demands of school; therefore the difference between those who reach high academic achievement and those who do not lies in the effort that each student puts forth. Students at Alternative High claim that simply enacting behaviors of effort, such as "listening in class" and "turning in work" are the key to school success. As Martín says, "actually reading" homework assignments and "putting in answers" leads to effective learning. "Even if you don't understand it thoroughly, over time you will eventually," Martín says, because effort is believed to bring about comprehension, and by extension, school success. This local understanding of school success does not benefit students at Alternative High who aspire to attend elite institutions of higher education. Instead, their focus on effort

better aligns Alternative High students with the expectations of community college, the lowest tier of higher education.

The belief at Alternative High that all students are intellectually capable of succeeding in school is a very positive and encouraging message. In light of the fact that Alternative High draws its students predominantly from low performing middle schools in a large urban district, and many of its students themselves were low performers before attending Alternative High, it is not surprising that the school's mission aims to build self-confidence in its students regarding their academic potential. To that end, the teachers and administration do an admirable job. During my weeks of observation, I regularly witnessed the principal sitting in on lessons, and interacting with the students one-on-one. She consistently reminded students that they are "brilliant," "amazing," and "intelligent." The teachers whom I observed also very consistently reinforced the notion that each student is fully capable of achieving school success at as high of a level as they are willing to reach for.

Alternative High's teachers and administrators encourage their students to develop not only self-confidence in their academic potential, but also to develop college aspirations. For example, the students are required to assemble "college binders" beginning in their freshman year, in which they collect information on a given number of colleges each term, and are graded on the content they compile. The rationale behind the assignment is to have students familiarize themselves with the world of higher education by researching the ways that different institutions are organized in terms of majors, enrollment numbers, tuition costs, social organizations on campus, and so on.

The goal is to help students figure out which sorts of colleges appeal to them. While guidebooks such as *Admission Matters* and *Winning the College Admission Game* advise high school freshman to begin preparing for their college applications by choosing their courses carefully, engaging in meaningful extracurricular activities, pursuing leadership opportunities, and planning a summer of enriching activities, students at Alternative High are just being introduced to the names of famous and nearby colleges and to the idea that they might one day apply. Compiling accolades to make their college applications "sparkle" is beyond the scope of discussion for freshman and even most sophomores at Alternative High.

Recall from Table 2.1 in Chapter Two Alternative High students' extremely low scores on the California Standards Test (a statewide standardized achievement exam). In science, only 6% of Alternative High sophomores demonstrate minimum proficiency, and in Math, only 3% do, as compared to state averages of 35% and 30%, respectively. In less than two years' time these sophomores will need to take the SAT, including the SAT II "achievement" test which is based on high school curricular content, not too far afield from the design of the California Standards Test. It is difficult to imagine that they will be able to gain enough ground in math and science to get scores on the SAT II that will make them competitive college applicants.

I have already discussed the importance of demonstrating one's intelligence through the high school transcript, and there is another important element of college applications that denotes a candidate's intelligence: SAT scores (or ACT scores in the Midwest). Dean Van Buskirk acknowledges that SAT (and ACT) scores have little

value in predicting how well an applicant will do in their first year in college, and this is affirmed by others including Richard Atkinson (2002). Atkinson, as President of the University of California at the time, went so far as to suggest that University of California campuses abandon use of the SAT. He became a major advocate for SAT reform, which helped result in the new SAT I and SAT II tests. Despite controversy over the usefulness of these tests in predicting a student's college success, elite private colleges and universities, including the University of California nonetheless send the unmistakable message that SAT scores are taken very seriously in college admissions practices, and low scores blemish an application (Golden 2006; Sacks 2007; Stevens 2007). Dean Van Buskirk explains that many schools have "conceded that your SAT score no longer holds any diagnostic value. It has become, however, a competitive credential" and students should do everything in their power to prepare well for the tests (2007:55). It is clear that whether or not the SAT and ACT scores are meaningful indicators of a student's intelligence or ability to succeed in higher education, college admission officers treat them as though they are. The ideal candidate has stellar test scores.

This presents a serious obstacle for Alternative High students who are unlikely to be able to perform well enough on the SAT to receive impressive scores. Moreover, very few sophomores (or freshman for that matter) whom I interviewed at Alternative High express awareness of what the SAT *is*, even when I ask them directly about it in the interview. Their immediate test concerns revolve around the California High School Exit Exam, which they are scheduled to take for the first time at the end of tenth

grade. Unlike sophomores at Elite Charter High, many of who are already taking preparatory classes for the SAT, sophomores at Alternative High are focused concretely on the task of graduating high school; college possibilities still seem a long way off in the distance.

The situation at Alternative High is a good example of what Rosenbaum (2001) worries about with high schools' promotion of a "college for all" ethos. He argues that without clear guidelines on what it takes to actually make it in college, many high school students are inadvertently being set up for failure because they are coached to pursue higher education regardless of their potential for success. Later, when they fail, Rosenbaum argues, they feel that they have no one to blame but themselves.

The point that I would like to emphasize here is not just that students at Alternative High have considerable obstacles to overcome if they are to enter and complete programs of higher education. The point that I would like to emphasize is that the local belief at Alternative High that school success is dependent on one's effort, regardless of one's intelligence level is incongruent with the beliefs and expectations of admissions officers at elite colleges and universities. Selective colleges are looking for "sparkle" in student applications. They are looking for students who are "bright," "motivated," and "high achieving," all of which describe intelligence and a zest for learning. In order to catch the interest of a college during the admissions process, an applicant must prove herself to be "competitive" during the first few seconds that an admissions officer peruses her transcript, according to the former Dean of Admissions at Franklin and Marshall College. That means that one's grades and course trajectory

over the four years of high school need to signal a high intellectual capacity parlayed into high academic success. The assessment process of application files focuses on whether the student's file demonstrates intellectual talent and passion. Files are not interpreted in terms of an effort-model of academic performance and success. Rather, they are interpreted in terms of an intelligence-model of academic performance and success.

Selective colleges do not agree with the belief at Alternative High that everyone has what it takes to master the intellectual demands of school. On the contrary, admissions officers' primary charge is to sort out who is cognitively talented enough to achieve success at their institution and who is not. Alternative High's local understanding of effort as the critical ingredient for academic success, then, is a liability on the transcripts and applications of students from Alternative High. These students are unlikely to build their transcripts and college essays around a demonstration of their intellectual abilities. It will likely seem more obvious and natural to them to build their college application materials around evidence of how hard they work, their sense of responsibility in meeting deadlines, and their perseverance in completing assignments and projects, seeing them through to the end. A demonstration of one's dogged persistence in school, however, will not be recognized by admissions officers as "bright," "motivated," and "high achieving," as Dean Van Buskirk defines it.

Alternative High: "It's All About Effort" Matches Community College Expectations for School Success

Instead of preparing students to meet the expectations of elite institutions of higher education, Alternative High's local beliefs about what it takes to succeed in school better prepare them for expectations befitting community college futures. Community colleges are founded on the goal of universal higher education for Americans. They are "the primary source of opportunity for ethnic minorities, immigrants, and low income students. They offer a second chance for students who attended poor high schools, or who did poorly in high school" (Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Person 2006: 1). The mission of community colleges is to provide accessibility to any American who wants a college education (Bailey and Morest 2006a; Brint and Karabel 1989; Mellow and Heelan 2008; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Person 2006). Therefore, the necessary model for success for such institutions is an effort-based model.

Community colleges' commitment to accessibility is supported by multiple structures such as very low fees and open enrollment policies, which help minimize barriers to success in higher education. One critically important feature of community colleges' commitment to accessibility is their wide range of course offerings in Developmental Studies, also known as remediation (Mellow and Heelan 2008; Perin 2006; Perin and Charron 2006). Developmental Studies target students who are underprepared for the demands of college-level academics. Through Developmental Studies community colleges are able to accept students no matter what their starting point academically, and bring them up to the point that they are ready for college curriculum. As Mellow and Heelan assert: "Developmental Studies is a significant part

of helping many groups of students achieve educational success and access to the American Dream...The community college dream is based on the belief that adults can learn, [if] given the right support system and enough time" (2008: 174). The authors acknowledge that a full 60% of Developmental Studies students are under the age of 22; they are traditional college-age students who are beginning their post-secondary educations, but they do not already possess college-ready academic skills.

Alternative High's low-to-average academic performance on California Standards Tests indicates that Alternative High students might be bound for community college futures because they are academically unqualified to meet admissions criteria at elite colleges and universities, and also because they might need to take advantage of Developmental Studies course offerings in order to be prepared for college curriculum, be it at an elite college or anyplace else. However, my emphasis here is on a correspondence between Alternative High and community colleges that is outside of academic achievement per se. The local belief at Alternative High about what it takes to succeed in school matches seamlessly with community colleges' belief about success in higher education: it's all about effort. If a student is persistent, and willing to invest time and energy (for as long as it takes), she can successfully achieve a college education. Like Alternative High, community colleges define school success as the result of persistent and conscientious effort—not as dependent on intelligence.

Comprehensive High: "Everyone Has a Weak Point" Does not Translate to "Sparkle" on a College Application

Similar to Alternative High, students at Comprehensive High carry invisible disadvantages on their transcripts and application to elite colleges and universities due to the understandings of school success that are pervasive at their school. Additionally, the local beliefs about school success at Comprehensive High are better aligned with middle tier state university expectations for success than they are aligned with elite colleges' expectations and demands.

At Comprehensive High I find two incompatible explanations for school success. As I demonstrate in Chapter Five, in some moments, students endorse the notion that effort on its own can yield success. Yet I find a stronger, underlying belief that one's intelligence level sets the parameters for school success. This notion is expressed in multiple ways throughout the interviews I conducted. Stephanie sums up the common perspective: "You can try as hard as you can and put in as much effort as you can and still not understand the material." As I have just discussed the liability (on applications to elite colleges) associated with the belief that effort on its own can yield success in the previous section on Alternative High, I focus here on the second, more resolute belief at Comprehensive High: that intelligence determines the limits of one's potential school success.

At first glance, this belief seems to resonate perfectly with the logic of admissions officers searching for the qualities of an ideal candidate. Not every applicant is intellectually capable of academic success at elite colleges. Some are more cognitively talented than others, and it is the job of the admissions officers to determine which applicants are "bright," "motivated," and "high achieving" enough to be worthy

of admission. However, at Comprehensive High, students do not act on the belief that intelligence sets the parameters for school success in the way that admissions officers at elite colleges expect them to.

Admissions officers use an applicant's transcript as a critical first indicator of whether the applicant is "competitive." As the former Dean of Admission at Franklin and Marshall College details, the transcript is interpreted on multiple points to assess the applicant's intelligence, "passion for learning" and pursuit of excellence. Both *Winning the College Admission Game* and *Admission Matters* continually emphasize the scope and depth of competition among applicants for admission to selective colleges. The guidebooks' advice revolves tightly around strategies for demonstrating that one is highly intelligent and also original or unique somehow. Admissions officers expect students to be looking for a competitive edge throughout their high school years, and to demonstrate that they have attained that competitive edge unequivocally on their transcripts and other application materials.

At Elite Charter High, students have a clear sense of the importance of competition in academics. It is evident in their *College Strategist* field story and in the intense rivalry in which AP classmates engage over grades. Recall Denise's boiling disappointment in Chapter Six over not being able to "beat" her best friend's GPA this year, and James' concern that "slower" classmates earn A's that are identical to his. Meanwhile, at Comprehensive High, students do not develop competitive academic agendas in the same way. While they express an understanding that intelligence is not evenly distributed among students, and that the higher one's intelligence the greater her

potential to excel in school, they do not act on that belief by jockeying for grades and course placements that will "set them apart from the competition" when they apply to college, as both *Winning the College Admission Game* and *Admission Matters* encourage students to do.

In short, there is not a *College Strategist* field story at Comprehensive High. That is because students at Comprehensive High use the understanding that intelligence sets the scope of school success to justify the common notion that "everyone has a weak point," as Diana, a general track student, phrases it. Both AP students and general track students attest to this idea. A weak point is "a particular class you have never been very good at" says Flavia, an AP track student. While students in the other two schools in this study also acknowledge that it is common for a person to be stronger in math, for example, and weaker in, say, English, at neither of the other two schools do students treat this as an acceptable, unalterable circumstance. At Elite Charter High and Alternative High, students, especially high achieving students, treat their "weak points" as challenges, areas to focus on developing their skills so that they can achieve success across the breadth of their curriculum.

At Comprehensive High, however, students see having a "weak point" as simply a fact of life. The way that Comprehensive High structures its AP curriculum contributes to the local understanding that students are naturally better in some academic subjects than in others. AP courses are bundled, meaning that if a student wants to take an AP history class, she must also take the corresponding AP language arts concurrently. In order to take an AP science class, one must also enroll in the

paired AP math class. While there are only eight total AP courses for students to choose among (compared to 22 at Elite Charter High, for example), their options are further limited by the bundle structure. It is possible for a student to simply take four AP courses and get around the imposed choice, though, at Comprehensive High a course load with four out of six classes at the AP level is considered very strenuous. Further, a student who might be interested in attempting math (but not science) and English (but not history) at the AP level is faced with a daunting scheduling dilemma. Most of the students I interviewed generally accept the wisdom behind the AP bundles, however. They agree that a student who is "good at" math, is likely to be "good at" science as well, and the same for language arts and social sciences. The students I talked to simply choose to focus on the AP bundle that suits them best or avoid AP coursework altogether.

How-to guidebooks on college admission warn that ideal candidates do not have this type of focused AP course work on their transcripts. Dean Van Buskirk explains that selective colleges look for applicants who continually "stretch [themselves] academically across all disciplines" (2007:60). Certainly Comprehensive High students have the option available to them to pursue AP course work in four subjects at once, which would meet these admissions expectations. However, the common understanding at Comprehensive High that "everyone has a weak point" and that weak points are to be expected and accepted in students' academic performance deters Comprehensive High students from pursuing AP courses broadly across disciplines.

Similar to Alternative High, the local belief about school success at Comprehensive High becomes a liability in students' prospective chances for admission to elite institutions of higher education. Students' understanding of the role that intelligence plays in academic performance promotes complacency with modest success in subjects that are not their strong suit. Admissions officers interpret AP course work that is limited to only a few academic disciplines as insufficient evidence that an applicant has the intellectual abilities and eagerness to achieve that is required for success at elite institutions. Modest success in some subjects is *not* part of the profile of an ideal candidate. Yet at Comprehensive High students confidently affirm that excelling in *either* math/science *or* language/social science is all that can be reasonably expected of even very intelligent and high achieving students.

Comprehensive High: "C's are Acceptable" Matches Middle-Tier State University Expectations for School Success

As students in the state of California, the populations at all three schools in this study have access to an extensive system of public institutions of higher education offered by the State. As established in the California Master Plan for Higher Education, three tiers of institutions are available to California students (Educational Relations Department 2007). The top tier is the University of California (UC), with 10 campuses throughout the state, is designed by the 1960 Master Plan to draw from the top 12.5% of high school graduates. The middle tier is the California State University System (CSU), designed to draw from the top one-third (33.3%) of high school graduates for its 23

campuses. The lowest tier is the community college system, comprised of 110 institutions, which are designed to accept all applicants 18 and older who can benefit from instruction.

We have already seen how Alternative High's belief that school success is "all about effort" is well aligned with community colleges' expectations for success. At Comprehensive High, a similar belief exists: that "effort on its own can yield unlimited success." This means that Comprehensive High students' understanding of what it takes to succeed in school also fits seamlessly with community colleges' effort-model of success. Indeed, several students I interviewed say that their post high school plans are to attend community college. This includes AP students such as Stephanie who currently holds a 4.17 GPA, as well as general track students such as Mario whose report card shows all C's or better.

However, community college is not the only institution of higher education with which local beliefs about school success at Comprehensive High resonate well. The belief I find at Comprehensive High that C's are an acceptable level of success matches the expectations for success in the CSU system, the middle-tier of California's higher education hierarchy. General admission to CSU requires that students complete required courses in high school with a grade of a C or better and that the applicant's overall GPA be no lower than a 2.0, which is a C average (California State University 2009). CSU is not regarded as an elite university, unlike the UC, which enjoys high status and prestige at the national level—particularly for its most selective campuses: Los Angeles and Berkeley (Oram 2007; Springer and Franck 2005; Teranishi, Allen,

and Solorzano 2004; Venezia 2000; Yun and Moreno 2006). Nonetheless, CSU is considered a decent university, where students can earn a respectable education—one that is perfectly befitting the *Average Joes* at Comprehensive High.

Reinforcing Existing Inequalities in Higher Education

It might be argued that admission to elite colleges and universities is not the most relevant point of analysis for all of these schools. Particularly in the case of Alternative High, many of these students will be the first in their families to attend *any* institution of higher education. Why does it matter how competitive they will be at selective colleges? The more relevant point might arguably be whether students at Alternative High and Comprehensive High have access to college futures, regardless of the prestige of the institutions to which they are admitted—and it seems that they do, via the community college route.

However, such a position neglects an important dynamic of higher education in the United States, and of young Americans' life chances more broadly. African American, Latino, and low SES students are underrepresented on college campuses across the country, and the imbalance is dramatic at more elite colleges (Golden 2006; Massey, Charles, Lundy, and Fischer 2003; Sacks 2007; Stevens 2007). In the state of California, the three tiers of higher education reflect racial/ethnic social inequalities as well. Sengupta and Jepsen (2006) report the enrollment figures in Table 9.1, which demonstrate that in 2003, Latinos and African Americans combined made up only 17% of the student population of the most prestigious tier, UC, despite the fact that these two

groups comprise 41% of the population of California (since 2003, Latinos' share of the

California population has grown).

Table 9.1: Racial/Ethnic Minority Enrollment in the Three Tiers of CA Higher
Education in 2003

	University of California	California State University	Community College	Percent of CA Population
Whites	44%	43%	42%	44%
Latinos	14%	24%	29%	35%
Blacks	3%	6%	8%	6%

The literature reviewed at the opening of this Chapter suggests that the key to

understanding this phenomenon is to look at students' academic experiences during

high school: how well do students' high school years prepare them for college—and for

which tier of higher education?

My study shows that high school level beliefs contribute to the conditions

through which racial minorities and low SES students graduate high school under-

qualified for admission to four-year colleges (Schulock and Moore 2005; Teranishi,

Allen, and Solorzano 2004; Yun and Moreno 2006) and under-prepared for the

demands of community college (Bailey and Morest 2006b; Dougherty 1994;

Rosenbaum 2001; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Person 2006). While much research

looks at students' anti-achievement attitudes to explain differences in school

performance, for example in the "oppositional culture" debate (Ainsworth-Darnell and

Downey 1998; Downey, Ainsworth, and Qian 2009; Flores-Gonzales 1999; Fordham

and Ogbu 1987; Matute-Bianchi 1986; Mehan, Hubbard, and Villanueva 1994; Tyson,

Darity, and Castellino 2005), I demonstrate that local beliefs in one's high school

environment create dissonance between underrepresented students' understandings of school success and higher education's gatekeepers' understandings of school success. Alternative High and Comprehensive High students' transcripts and applications are assessed by admissions officers according to definitions of intelligence and achievement that these students are unlikely to be able to anticipate given the local understandings of success at their school. As they are unlikely to be able to anticipate admissions' definitions of intelligence and achievement, they are therefore unlikely to be able to meet admissions' expectations for successful applicants.

The heart of the problem is that the logic underlying a "qualified" applicant, let alone an "ideal" one, in the mind of elite institutions' admissions officers is not logic that students at schools such as Alternative High and Comprehensive High have available to them in their high school contexts. Instead, the logics of success that are available to them are better aligned with middle and low tier institutions in California. On the other hand, at schools such as Elite Charter High, local understandings of intelligence and achievement reflect selective universities' admission officers' logic and expectations flawlessly.

APPENDIX A

DEFINITIONS OF INTELLIGENCE

Although intelligence is an aspect of personhood that is a recognizable attribute in others and in ourselves, defining intelligence has historically been a difficult task for scholars, and even for the pioneers of intelligence tests (Gould 1981; Lemann 1999; Mackintosh 1998; Zenderland 1998). In this Appendix I briefly review the historical treatment of intelligence as IQ in US society and current debates over how to define intelligence. I then draw on my interview data to compare students' implicit and explicit definitions of intelligence to current scholarship's definitions. Interestingly, I do not find systematic variation across the three school sites. It seems that this is not a case where local contexts uniquely shape local understandings of what intelligence *is*. However, as Part II of the dissertation demonstrates, students in the three schools do express different logics behind the relationship between intelligence and effort. While definitions of intelligence do not vary from school to school in this study, students do indeed perceive the social consequences of intelligence quite differently in each local school context.

Historical Treatment of Intelligence as IQ

The concept of intelligence has never enjoyed a consensus on its definition. Instead, it has been an arena of great uncertainty and heated debate (Mackintosh 1998). In fact, one of the few uncontested aspects of intelligence is that it is relevant to

scholastic success (Deary, Strand, Smith, and Fernandes 2007; Gagné and St. Père 2001; Richardson and Bradley 2005). The first effort to measure intelligence was made by French psychologist Alfred Binet in 1904 to identify young students who might need extra help in school. Binet's initial tests, by 1912, were developed in the Intelligence Quotient, or IQ. Psychologists, as well as politicians and educators, were excited by the notion that intelligence is measurable, and intelligence tests were rapidly institutionalized into US education, military and other political agendas such as immigration (Gould 1981; Lemann 1999; Mackintosh 1998; Zenderland 1998). As IQ became the widely accepted marker of intelligence, the definition of intelligence was largely confined to the aspects of mental abilities which were measurable by the IQ test. In other words, intelligence came to be popularly defined as IQ.

Among scientists and scholars, there has been very little agreement about what intelligence is and what exactly intelligence tests actually measure (Brody 1992; Mackintosh 1998; Osgood 1984; Sternberg 1996). Richardson (2002) reminds us that leading theorists today are no closer to agreement on how to define intelligence than were the leading theorists 80 years ago. In a 1921 symposium, when the Journal of Educational Psychology asked 17 top theorists to state what they thought intelligence was, the results were so varied, that the only conclusion the Journal arrived at was that "intelligence is what intelligence tests test" (Boring 1923:35, quoted in Richardson 2002:284). In 1986, Detterman and Sternberg posed the same 1921 questions to a group of contemporary theorists, and come up with similarly varied results. 25 attributes of intelligence were mentioned in total, but with very little consistency across

theorists. Only three attributes were mentioned by 25 percent or more, none of which give a clear definition to intelligence: "higher level components;" "executive processes;" and "that which is valued by culture" (see Sternberg and Berg 1986 for statistical analyses of the responses). Despite the lack of scholarly agreement over intelligence, popular understandings of it can be characterized simply as IQ. The intelligence quotient is a rather narrow definition, based largely on logical and abstract reasoning skills.

Broadening in Psychological Understandings of Intelligence:

Multiple Intelligences, Social Intelligence, and Emotional Intelligence

The concept of intelligence has traditionally been a domain of psychology. Two debates in the psychology literature are particularly relevant to defining intelligence in order to engage the concept as a student identity pertinent to scholastic success. The first is work which debates the limitations of defining intelligence by IQ tests (Brody 1992; Jensen 1980; Johnson 1953; Osgood 1984; Richardson 2002; Sternberg 1996). IQ tests are built on the assumption that intelligence is a hereditary, biologically stable trait, commonly referred to as general ability, or g (Brody 1999; Carter 2005; McCall 1977). Psychologist Howard Gardner's (1983) theory of Multiple Intelligences is a well-known contribution to this debate, arguing against the notion that IQ adequately captures a person's intelligence. Gardner argues that IQ, as well as scholastic achievement tests (which are designed on the IQ test model) focus exclusively on logical, mathematical, and linguistic competencies to evaluate intelligence and learning.

Gardner advocates a view of intelligence which includes multiple competencies, such as musical competence and bodily-kinesthetic competence, which are neglected by traditional views of intelligence. Gardner's expanded set of eight intelligences caught on rather quickly in popular discourse. In addition to motivating a fair amount of educational reform, Multiple Intelligences has also evoked scholarly criticism in the last 25 years, much of which is still under debate (Kincheloe 2004; Schaler 2006).

Gardner's response to popular and academic notions of intelligence is just one of several broadenings to definitions of intelligence. The larger, long-running debate over whether or not intelligence is appropriately (narrowly) defined as *g*, and whether intelligence tests adequately capture *g*, has inspired scholars to develop additional categories of cognitive competence which warrant the title *intelligence*. Two such "new" intelligences have become stable features of psychology scholarship: social intelligence and emotional intelligence.

Social intelligence is individuals' ability to "actively seek to engage in their social environment and pursue desired outcomes in the important domains of their lives" (Zirkel 2000). Social intelligence theory is concerned with cognition and behavior which individuals employ to actively interpret the meaning of their social world. Individuals make choices within given social frameworks that define appropriate behaviors, goals, and so on. The concept of social intelligence captures the way that individuals use their knowledge about their social environment to manage their emotions and direct their behavior strategically toward their goals. Social intelligence provides a practical counterpart to traditional views of intelligence, particularly in that it

recognizes effective behavior and morally valuable behavior as *intelligent* behavior. People who are successful in terms of how they navigate their social world; successful in their strategies to accomplish their personal goals are deemed intelligent, regardless of their mental acuity on academic tasks.

Similarly, emotional intelligence theory expands the traditional view of intelligence to include cognitive and behavioral competence in the arena of human emotion. Emotional intelligence includes a set of abilities including: "the ability to perceive accurately, appraise, and express emotion" and "the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth" (Mayer and Salovey 1997:10). The concept was brought into popular awareness with Daniel Goleman's (1995) book *Emotional Intelligence*, after which time, knowing one's "EQ" became fashionable. It became accepted as a marker of how socially successful and well-balanced one might expect to be.

Social intelligence and emotional intelligence represent a broadening of scholarly approaches to intelligence over recent decades. Traditional understandings of intelligence focus on they types of problem solving which appear on IQ tests. Real life, however, demands that individuals solve problems that are much more intuitive and multi-faceted than IQ test questions represent (Hedlund and Sternberg 2000). Theories of social and emotional intelligences offer categories of cognition and behavior which attempt to explain real life success within real social contexts. Social intelligence and emotional intelligence are thought of less as hereditary traits, and more as socially developed skills. However, one thing that social and emotional intelligence share with

traditional understandings of intelligence is that they are widely taken as measurable attributes, amenable to psychometric testing.

The "State versus Trait" Debate

The second relevant debate over the definition of intelligence is what is known as the "state versus trait" debate in social psychology, which distinguishes two competing perceptions of intelligence: state-like, meaning that one's intelligence is different at different points in time (and therefore can improve over one's lifetime), and trait-like, meaning that intelligence is a disposition one is born with, relatively stable and fixed over one's lifetime. Carol Dweck and her colleagues developed this theory of individual conceptions of intelligence in the 1980s, referring to state conceptions as "incremental theory" and trait perceptions as "entity theory" (Cain and Dweck 1989; Dweck 1986; Dweck and Bempechat 1983; Dweck and Leggett 1988). The debate includes disagreement over whether state or trait definitions have more explanatory power regarding student success, meaning that research seeks to determine whether students perform better in school if they have believe intelligence to be a state versus if they believe intelligence to be a trait (Silverthorne, DuBois, and Crombie 2005; Valentine, DuBois, and Cooper 2004). Such research is part of a larger vein of research in psychology and social psychology which looks for causal relationships between students' perceptions of their academic abilities, and their actual academic performance (Dweck 2000; Guay, Marsh, and Boivin 2003; Marsh, Byrne, and Yeung 1999; Marsh and Yeung 1997; Nicholls, Patashnick, and Mettetal 1986; Stipek and Garlinski 1996).

This literature investigates how students perceive their own intellectual abilities, taking student identity as a critical factor in academic performance. This social-psychological approach, however, is limited by its reliance on students' actual scholastic performance as the comparison point for student identity instead of allowing students to explain why and how their grades or standardized test scores may or may not be reliable measures of their intelligence.

Sociological Understanding of Intelligence

Sociological approaches to intelligence (including work by some psychologists and social-psychologists) have refuted the veracity of IQ, arguing that the tests are measures of a child's socialization in mainstream US culture (Richardson 2002) or measures of the testers' willingness to give hints to the child (Marlaire and Maynard 1990; Mehan 1978; Mehan 1998; Poole 1994), rather than representing what the child is capable of in daily life activities. This approach treats IQ as a social construction, rather than a biological fact, and emphasizes the ways in which IQ is used to justify organizational practices of the school rather than meet students' "needs" (Mehan, Hertweck, and Meihls 1985; Mercer 1974).

Much of the sociological work on intelligence stands in opposition to claims such as Herrenstein's and Murray's (1994), that racial differences in IQ and standardized academic tests are due to differences in intelligence rooted in the biological make-up of the races. Brooks-Gunn, Klebanov, and Duncan (1996) demonstrate that differences in intelligence test scores between white versus black five

year olds all but disappear when poverty and home environment are taken into account. The authors show that social and economic factors explain 80% of differences in test performance between the groups in their study. A wealth of literature supports the claim that social and economic disadvantage explains much of the IQ differences among races in the US (Flynn 1980; Flynn 1984; Gould 1986; Lewontin 1975; Mackintosh 1998; Moore 1986; Turkheimer, Haley, Waldron, D'Onofrio, and Gottesman 2003).

In addition to life circumstances such as poverty, one's immediate environment can also affect test performance, particularly if the test taker feels intimidated by the test or the test administrator, or perceives a stereotype threat (Katz 1964; Katz, Roberts, and Robinson 1965; Perry, Steele, and Hilliard 2004; Steele 1997; Steele and Aronson 1995). Croizet and Claire (1998) illustrate the phenomenon of stereotype threat on performance on intellectual-ability tests. In their study when the test was presented as a diagnostic test measuring intellectual ability, meaning that students were told it was a measure of verbal intelligence, low SES children did much worse than their high SES counterparts. To trigger the stereotype threat, half the students were asked to report their parents' occupations and education levels before starting the test. Low SES students scored lower in terms of number of correct answers, number of items attempted, and accuracy. When the test was not presented as a verbal skills diagnostic, but rather as an "investigative tool for studying hypotheses about lexical processes," the low SES children's scores were not significantly different from high SES children's.

The scores of the two groups matched in terms of number of items correct, number of items attempted, and accuracy.

Related to stereotype threat, another environmental factor which is often claimed to affect student performance is teachers' expectations for that student. For over half a century, sociologists, psychologists, education scholars, cognitive scientists and the like have been debating over whether teachers' expectations for particular students influence those students' performance in school and performance on intelligence tests. Many experiments such as Rosenthal's and Jacobsons' (1968) famous Pygmalion in the Classroom study find that when teachers are falsely informed of students' high intellectual potential, those students make significant gains in intelligence test scores after a period of time with that teacher. However, subsequent experiment research has failed to produce consistent results, so the Pygmalion effect remains controversial (see Spitz 1999 for a review) regarding the growth of students' intelligence based on teachers' expectations alone. While this debate remains unresolved, it serves as a testament to the enduring problem of determining just what intelligence is, and what intelligence tests actually measure. Nonetheless, research does consistently show that school performance is affected by teacher expectations (Diamond, Randolph, and Spillane 2004; Hughes, Gleason, and Zhang 2005; Jussim and Eccles 1992; Jussim and Harber 2005; Muller, Katz, and Dance 1999).

Richardson (2002) catalogues the history of the uncertainty around intelligence, reminding us that IQ consistently becomes a "surrogate for social class" (2002:297). He argues that the variance in IQ scores "is not entirely (or even mainly) cognitive, and

what is cognitive is not general or unitary. It arises from a nexus of sociocognitive-affective factors determining individuals relative preparedness for the demands of the IQ test" (2002:287). Richardson argues that there are three main categories of preparedness which affect IQ performance. The first is the extent to which people of different cultures or social classes have developed particular types of reasoning and specific forms of knowledge. Richardson takes Vygotsky's (1988) understanding of cultural tools to emphasize that different social classes use the cultural tools of a society to different extents, and that IQ tests are designed by members of a relatively elite social class. Therefore, the IQ test items "tend to test for the acquisition of a rather particular set of cultural tools" (2002:289). Forms of knowledge and reasoning are inseparable from cultural patterns, hence the way that different classes in one society use the cultural-cognitive tools available to them will vary because their social-cultural position and life patterns vary. Richardson asserts that "the IQ test collapses this rich and complex variegation in human cognition into a single scale" (2002:289) and that scale is only designed to measure proximity to one particular (elite) class' use of cultural-cognitive tools. Thus, the kinds of language forms and rote knowledge one practices in daily (often family) life, affects one's ability to perform well on IQ tests.

A second category of preparedness for the demands of the IQ test, according to Richardson, is "academic orientation" and "self-efficacy beliefs." Individuals' levels of engagement with the tasks on IQ tests vary, and this affects their performance. Similarly, individuals' faith in their abilities to perform well on such tests also affects performance. Richardson emphasizes that self-efficacy beliefs can be socially inherited

from one's parents, as can attitudes about academic orientation, which means that parents of a particular social class can help reproduce in their children IQ results which are typical for that social class—not based on cognitive talents, but on attitudes and beliefs.

The third category of preparedness is the test-taker's self-confidence, test anxiety and related emotional states which affect performance in testing situations irrespective of intellectual abilities. As Bandura, Barbaranelli, and Caprara (1996) argue, parents with low expectations of themselves often transmit low expectations of their children which influences a child's level of anxiety and general reactivity to test situations, in addition to affecting the child's self-efficacy beliefs as discussed above. Thus, low IQ scores can be reproduced across generations, not through biological transfer of genetic intelligence, but through social means.

These sociological approaches that interrogate the environmental factors which influence academic and IQ test performance all cast doubt on the reliability of IQ measurement of intelligence to do much more than identify an individual's socio-economic status. IQ, and intelligence more generally, can be seen as a social construct rather than an objective fact of one's biology. Such research provides critical insights to the open question of how to best define intelligence, insights which are especially necessary given that that popular definition of intelligence is simply IQ, and that popular conceptions of intelligence do take it largely as a biologically determined trait.

Comparing Scholarly Definitions to Students' Folk Definitions of Intelligence

An important dimension of students' success identities is their understanding of what intelligence is. Listening closely to students' descriptions of intelligence provides insight into their own definitions of the concept, what we can call "folk" definitions. I use the term "folk" as a designation that students' definitions are on-the-ground meanings that individuals use in their daily lives; meanings which guide both their own behavior as well as their interpretations of others' behavior (Bruner 1990; Cahill 2004). Understanding the way that scholars and experts explain intelligence provides an incomplete picture of how intelligence is understood in students' daily lives.

Here I identify four categories of intelligence that emerge in students' interviews in my study. I then compare these folk definitions of intelligence to scholarly theories. I find that students' folk definitions do not cleanly reflect experts' definitions, and some theories of intelligence are entirely absent from students' discussions.

Throughout the in-depth interviews I conducted with the 57 high school students in my sample, implicit and explicit definitions of intelligence emerge in students' responses. In an effort to elicit students' understandings of how intelligence is identified in other people, I asked respondents: "how can you recognize someone who is intelligent?" Their responses varied regarding which aspects count as intelligence, but students' answers converged around two main areas where intelligence can be observed: 1. Talk demonstrates intelligence, and 2. Behavior demonstrates intelligence. Specific definitions of intelligence also emerged in students responses in other parts of the interview: in students' reactions to anonymous report cards; in students'

descriptions of their own grades as partly based on effort and partly based on intelligence; in responses to interview questions of whether grades and GPA generally indicate intelligence; and in students' explanations of their own level of intelligence.

From all of these discussions, four general categories emerge of students' understandings of intelligence. One category is Details of Speech. Students assert that using "big words" and "saying things correctly" give an impression of high intelligence. In addition, students in my sample also cue in to a person's topics of conversation to assess whether or not that person strikes them as intelligent. These students hold a perception that intelligent people discuss specialized topics, such as politics, history, and other academic subjects.

A second category is Acquired Knowledge. Students in the sample express: that "knowing what they are talking about" is a key indicator of whether or not someone is intelligent. The source of knowing what one is talking about is often described as "knowledge" by the students I interviewed. Some students' descriptions of knowledge stress the ability to produce answers to "random questions," something akin to the knowledge found on trivia cards. Other students describe knowledge as in-depth information on particular subjects. Rather than a stockpile of factoids, some students look for expansive information on whatever topic an individual is interested in. Thus, both breadth of knowledge and depth of knowledge are signals of intelligence.

A third category of intelligence is Adroit Mental Processing. Some students describe this in terms of how quickly a person can come up with a solution to a problem, while others focus on the quality of the solution, no matter how long it takes a

person to come to it. Adroit mental processing is also articulated as the ability to apply concepts to new situations as well as hold a conversation on a topic that is outside one's realm of expertise.

A fourth category is Laudable Behavior. Following everyday rational logic, such as "not jumping off a bridge" comprises the most practical dimension of laudable behavior. More commonly, however, students' responses center on behaviors which can best be described as moral because they are behaviors which students value as *good* and *right*, such as trying harder than ever when faced with a challenge, or helping people who are in need.

I asked students "how can you recognize someone who is intelligent?" If the student had trouble thinking about an answer to this open, and fairly abstract question, I followed with: "say for example you are a friend's family picnic, meeting new people. What would make you think to yourself, 'wow, she is smart'?" Two students replied that they do not know. The other 55 students responded with a wide range of answers, but those answers largely converged around the four categories listed above. Most respondents volunteered multiple aspects of individuals which, in their minds, indicate intelligence. I coded each aspect separately, so that in the end, I have many more total responses than I have students. This method allows students' complex, multi-faceted understandings of intelligence to come through in the data analysis. For students in my sample, being intelligent is not simply the possession of a capacity or facility for acquiring knowledge; rather "intelligent" is a description of a whole person, someone whose behaviors and/or speech betray a range of venerable qualities.

Definitions of intelligence cross the three school sites rather seamlessly. The question of what intelligence is seems not to be a point on which local school contexts differ. However, Part II of the dissertation demonstrates that at each of the three schools, intelligence's relationship with school success is understood differently. Nonetheless, students' own discussions of intelligence indicate a much "messier" definition of intelligence than current scholarship on the topic acknowledges.

Although seven of the fifty-seven respondents assert that they need to get to know another person before being able to really know whether or not he or she is intelligent, and two students feel that they are not ever able to tell whether another person is intelligent, the vast majority of the students in my sample were able to articulate concrete aspects of others' behavior and speech which signal intelligence. Additionally, a handful of students at each school (total of twelve) suggest that the way one carries oneself, i.e. with confidence, can also signal intelligence when it is observed in combination with other indicators of high intellect.

From interviews with students I find that they define intelligence in complex ways. A single student rarely gave a single definition of intelligence as *only* knowledge or exclusively quick thinking. Instead, students paint composite pictures of intelligence with varying textures. This is somewhat akin to Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences in that students see multiple abilities as signals of intelligence. However, students I interviewed did not articulate Gardner's eight categories, or even any subset of Gardner's eight categories. Rather, the data indicate that students have a much more general impression that intelligence has multiple facets; therefore a variety of things can

signal that someone is intelligent. An important finding is that many of students'
definitions depict intelligence as behaviors and abilities which would be impossible to
capture on IQ tests or any academic measure: abilities such as holding one's own in a
conversation outside one's area of knowledge.

Some theories of intelligence do not appear in the data, for example Emotional
Intelligence. The students I interviewed did not express features of emotional
competence as indicators of intelligence. However, several aspects of students'
descriptions of intelligence do coincide with other existing theories. For example
students refer to vocabulary and grammatical correctness as indicators of intelligence,
and these are common measures of intellectual ability both in school and on IQ tests.
However, students' descriptions of details of speech do not limit intelligence to
vocabulary and grammar alone. Students combine "smart" speech with "smart" topics
of conversation, a feature of social interaction which cannot be measured on tests.

Students also depict intelligence as knowledge, and sometimes this is
characterized as the same type of relatively obscure bits of information found on
intelligence test items. However, more often, knowledge is characterized as an in-depth
understanding of a particular subject area. Exhibiting expertise in a topic of interest
signals intelligence to many students, regardless of whether one's pet topic would
appear on an intelligence test. Thus, intelligence is evident in anyone who is
intellectually stimulated by learning enough to gain expertise in a subject.

Furthermore, while IQ tests and standardized academic tests attempt to measure
how adroitly the test-taker processes information, students identify a much wider scope

of adroit mental processes in their definitions of intelligence than could possibly be measured by a test. Coming to a meaningful conclusion to a puzzle which has been on one's mind for a long period is an example of intelligence which is outside the scope of IQ. Intelligence is obviously much more, according to students, than "that which intelligence tests measure."

Even social intelligence, a concept that emerged specifically to identify a category of competence which falls outside of traditional definitions, does not cleanly capture on-the-ground understandings of "smart" behavior in these students' lives. Social intelligence theory does not accommodate selflessness, and many students I interviewed describe behaving intelligently and behaving selflessly in a seamless combination.

Although students do not express discomfort with intelligence's many facets, scholars do. There is overwhelming uncertainty over how to define intelligence in scholarly literature. Furthermore, intelligence also has a "moral career" according to Richardson and Bradley (2005). The authors argue that because learning is understood to rest on intelligence, intelligence is bound up in moral imperatives of learning. They demonstrate that intelligence, as a moral construct, is a resilient feature of schooling in the US. Like other sociological approaches to intelligence, Richardson and Bradley emphasize that it is inseparable from its social meaning. This dissertation focuses entirely on that social meaning, and the complicated ways it is caught up in understandings of school success.

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