

Birth of the cool: Peer Evaluations of Academic success and counter-

hegemonic construction of hip

The other students in the hallway are watching the conversation, but don't contribute. The hooded student interrupts the student in a black rock and roll band t-shirt's explanation and puts down its soup on the ground, "You can't do that!" The rock and roll t-shirt student is unfazed and in a patronizing tone describes the order of operations he used to complete the math problem and concludes his statements with a smirk at the hooded student and says "I bet you can't make a factor tree of 8 by 5." The other students laugh. The hooded student's volume increases to an almost shout. The student pulls off the hood to reveal her short blond hair that frames her face and contains a pink stripe and her double pierced ears, "You can't do $3X$ times X and get that answer. It's NOT possible." The debate continues with the other 4 students attentively watching, laughing and whispering to one another. After a few minutes the hooded student sighs loudly, stares at the ground and says matter-of-factly, "You just don't understand exponents."

An alternate social universe exists at the Lester School of southeastern Michigan. The school, unlike any in its area, provides a safe space for students who like to wear capes, can recite the first 125 digits of pi, hand sew and design Elizabethan period costumes and play jazz guitar for B. B. King's backup band. As the school's brochures suggest it is a place where, "Gifted students love to learn." In a nation with stark and distressing educational inequalities, academic excellence is more often than not a social stigma rather than an asset. In this context how does a safe space like the Lester School thrive? As parents, government officials, and researchers worry about adolescents peer pressuring one another into drug use, alcohol use, and risky sexual behavior researchers can witness an alternative example at the Lester school. What can the Lester school environment teach us about positive peer pressure? How is it possible that within this environment peer constructions of hip are so vastly different from surrounding schools

and the larger American culture? More specifically, how does a counter-hegemonic of cool, in which academic achievement is valued, form within the Lester school?

In my study of the Lester School I discovered three phenomena that contribute to these positive constructions of academic performance. A valued trait by both students and teachers, academic performance plays a significant role within the school. It is an esteemed cultural value by both teachers and students. I outline in my research how student interactions, teacher interactions and methods of negotiating ascribed identities at the Lester School collectively and individually work to define academic performance in this light. I began my research with a thorough analysis of preexisting dramaturgically focused literature, literature on the social self, self-evaluations, labeling theory, theories of social control, and social hierarchies. I continued my research with a three-month participant observation at the Lester School. Finally, I evaluated all my data according to the guiding principles of ethnography and grounded theory.

I concluded from my research that both institutionalized mechanisms and cultural norms construct academic performance as a profound source for peer evaluations at the school. In turn, these evaluations shape social life within the school and student's academic behaviors. The language and patterns of communication amongst students, students' close relationships with their teachers, the classroom settings of the Lester School, and the manner teachers and student's tackle social identities all encourage students to excel academically.

The Social Self

Constructions of cool rely upon social interactions in which individuals present themselves to one another. These interactions determine who rises to the top of peer status structures and why. Students evaluate each other's presentations of self and these evaluations affect their future social interactions, and individual behaviors. Social scientists mapped out several explanations for individuals self-evaluations and patterns of social behavior through two basic schools of thought. Labeling theory and theories of the social self dominate the literature on how adolescents feel about themselves in general and in relation to the evaluations received by others.

Starting in the early twentieth century scholars concerned themselves with the structure and construction of the self. Philosophers, psychologists and other social scientists argued that the self is composed of an objective component, "I" and a subjective component "me" (Mead, 1913; 374). The works of William James, Charles Horton Cooley's "Looking Glass Self" and George Herbert Mead's theory of the "Social Self" viewed this fragmented notion of self as socially constructed in daily life (Cooley, 1907 and Mead, 1913). The "I" component enacts all of the individual's self-conscious conduct and the "me" component is the imagined interpretation of one's behavior by other social actors (Cooley, 1902). Together these components function as the self in both private and public settings. Self conduct is then a presentation of "me" by "I." Mead suggests the self first develops when a child conceives of himself as good or bad in the remembered words of his parents (Mead, 1902; 378).

This dualistic notion of identity is of particular importance during the magnified period of identity formation in Middle School. For adolescent students at the Lester School, they must discover both who they are and how they want to present it to their peers. In this setting cultural values, like academic excellence, can take on more than one meaning to them. Students are able to present what they publicly believe in and value to their peers while potentially harboring conflicting opinions internally.

While the subjective and objective self are useful to any analysis of social interaction, this approach fails to explain how or why cultural values form. It is unable to connect identity to cultural values and relies completely on interpersonal work. It does not distinguish between types of social interactions or social actors. Nor does it address how the components of self interact or how one imagines the interpretations of one's own behavior by others.

The Dramaturgical Approach

The presentations of self in Middle School life are productive beyond identity construction. These presentations not only mediate interaction, but also grant and constrict social power and resources to middle schoolers. Individuals that are able to successfully interact with their peers earn a top spot in their social hierarchies and their peers tend to emulate and mimic their behaviors. Scholars Erving Goffman and Herbert Blumer presented a dramaturgical approach to explain how individuals present themselves to one another. Known as impression management, social life is a constant performance of the self to others. One achieves his or her social identity through social interactions while simultaneously presenting it to all social actors. All actors are trying to

control how other social actors interpret their presentations at all times. Actors depend on universalized norms of conduct and the use of non-verbal and verbal symbols in order to effectively present themselves (Goffman, 1959). Since norms and symbols are contextually specific an individual's performances can vary across different social environments. An individual is able to exhibit an array of behaviors throughout one day. In order to successfully perform, an individual must interpret the symbolic significance of his or her behavior, the setting, and the behaviors of all other social actors present (Blumer, 1962).

An individual's social identity, or self, is then a symbolic evaluation of all his or her previous social interactions. This social identity possesses symbolic significance in the actor's future internal conceptualizations of him or herself and in the impressions of others he or she interacts with. One's social identity can either be positive or negative and result in stigma. Stigma, as defined by Goffman, is the process by which the reaction of others spoils "normal" identity (Goffman, 1963). Individuals achieve normal identities collectively through social interaction and they prohibit social chaos. Normal identities provide social actors with feelings of safety and result from the orderliness of social interaction. The absence of normal behavior leaves social actors distressed and ready to stigmatize others in an attempt to restore social order (Goffman, 1963). All individuals are vulnerable to stigma, but certain social groups are more so than others. The branding of stigma, like social interaction in general, relies on the larger norms of society that exist outside of one on one interaction. However the symbolic interactionists' myopic view of norms as indistinguishable in symbolic significance from one another, makes it impossible to understand how an individual attaches symbolic value to his or her

interactions. A vision of the self as a “social identity” completely denies the actor agency in his or her development of self. When commenting on how certain styles of behavior or social characteristics become esteemed in a certain cultural space, one must analyze the processes of symbolic self evaluation and not just the plot of the interactions by which they are influenced.

Self Evaluations

Individual interactions build upon one another and can collectively determine both individuals’ values and their feelings about themselves. One way to determine what cultural values an individual believes in is to determine how he or she feels about him or herself. Value construction, identity construction, and the formation of social hierarchies all rely upon how individuals’ evaluate themselves. They are reflexive processes. The often internal affair of identity construction manifests itself through social interaction and allows observers to glean what individuals’ value about themselves and others. Social learning theory broadly defines self concept, one measurement of these evaluations, as “the concept the individual as of himself as a physical, social and spiritual or moral being” (Gecas, 1982: 3). These theorists tended to view self concept, or a view of oneself, as either a collection of self attitudes or a system of traits (Demo, 1992). Self-esteem is the individual’s total evaluation of his or her self concept. Definitions of self-esteem and self-concept do grant more agency to the individual than symbolic interactionism. For example, sociologist Viktor Gecas constructs self concept as both a structure and a reflexive activity an individual engages in throughout his or her life (Gecas, 1982: 30).

Looking at the multiple levels self concept makes it difficult to measure the correlation between appraisals by others and self appraisals. Other theorists offer the same old limited conceptualization of self-esteem merely as an internal account of other's interpretations (Demo and Savin Williams, 1983).

An extensive body of research focuses on how institutions and institutional processes determine self-esteem. For example, Susan Kools argues that the structural stigmatization and depersonalization of the foster care system results in its participants' low self esteem (Kools, 1997). Research additionally explores the impact of structures such as gender and race on self-esteem. A structural analysis of self-esteem presumes that individuals with strong bonds to society are more likely to engage in socially approved behavior and hold themselves in higher esteem (Erkut and Tracy, 2002). However, this claim does not hold up to empirical evidence.

In a study of sports participation and self-esteem individuals of marginalized racial groups were found to have higher self-esteem than their Caucasian counterparts (Erkut and Tracy, 2002: 449). Similarly, Laurie Chassin and Susan Stager found extremely high levels of self-esteem among groups of incarcerated delinquents (Chassin and Stager, 1984). If stigmatized groups of society can possess higher levels of self esteem than their culturally acceptable contemporaries, the self evaluation process appears to be more complicated than a measure of self according to this institutional criterion. This research does not address how institutions can or do positively affect individuals' self-esteems. It ignores institutions' capabilities for successful self-development and constricts the understanding of self-esteem to determined entity. It does

not take into account the many institutional, interpersonal, and biographical events that collectively shape one's self-esteem.

Labeling theory seeks to describe that very interaction between self appraisals, appraisals from others, and behavior. In their search for the source of adolescent delinquency, labeling theorists turned to the self as “conceived by symbolic interactionists” (Bartusch and Matsueda, 1996: 145). All labeling theorists seek to explain how the process of labeling will affect the subsequent self conceptions, attitudes, values and behavior of those labeled (Bishop and Thomas, 1973: 1226). Since the self is determined by a process of labeling from significant others, deviant or conventional labels applied to the self can produce a deviant or conventional self identity. Similarly, positive labels applied to the self from significant others can produce positive self identity. Edwin Lemert suggests that social scientists can explain the labeling process through factors such social structure, role, status and symbolic interactions (Lemert, 1951: 168).

In analyzing how students' behaviors result from their feelings about themselves, it's essential to understand the role of public labeling. In classes and informal hallway settings students are continuously commenting on and evaluating one another. These evaluations affect how they feel about themselves, each other, and how they will behave in the future. In trying to understand how counter-hegemonic cultural values can develop within the Lester School, I needed to first understand how values, self-esteem, and social interaction function collectively.

Social Control in Schools

My research focuses not only on events that occur within a school, but how the school as an institution constrains and promotes certain behaviors and values. An analysis of how schools produce a unique cultural space with its own set of values, requires not only focus on the internal developments of students or the actions of authority figures, but a close conceptualization of school as mechanism of social control. As Prudence Carter articulates in her explanation of the achievement gap between black and white students, students encounter a “hierarchy of cultural meanings within schools” that are sources of “social control” (Carter, 2005; vi). Schools, aside from instructors of written academic knowledge, socialize students in a particular way. Teachers and administrators, through the application of negative reprimands, teach students to value certain behaviors, ways of thought, and cultural knowledge. Teachers value one type of cultural capital, often of the white middle class, at the expense of other kinds of cultural capital (Carter, 2005). This devaluing manifests itself in the behaviors of students. According to Carter, if students feel included within the school environment, they will be more likely to excel in academics and abide by the behavioral expectations of their teachers (Carter, 2005; 11). This rationale suggests that schools possess the power to impart their own cultural education on students. As an institution, a school is able to deeply influence what traits, characteristics, and behaviors students value and devalue.

Aspirations

Another way schools exert social control on their students is through the regulation of aspirations (MacLeod, 1987). Schools exacerbate differences in aspirations by judging their students. Students who do not perform well “can’t help but feel a judgment of academic inferiority cast upon them” (MacLeod, 1987; 117). Schools promote an achievement ideology which claims individual merit leads to the allocation of awards and academic success. Teachers and administrators claim all students are eligible to succeed if only they work hard enough and follow the rules. At the same time, schools legitimize inequality between students by sorting students according to “meritocratic criteria” such as grading (MacLeod, 1987; 113). Teachers often motivate students to achieve through negative evaluation and thus at the expense of students’ self-esteems. Teachers may pressure a failing student to pursue vocational school or to enroll in less rigorous classes thus lowering the aspirations of the student and marking him or her less valuable than his or her peers (MacLeod, 1987; 116). Students often internalize blame for their own shortcomings, and lower their aspirations for their later lives. As one low-status student said, “You’re kiddin’ yourself to have aspirations” (MacLeod, 1987; 257).

However, institutions possess the potential to increase students’ aspirations. Schools’ ability to motivate students and expand their dreams is an understudied area worthy of additional research.

Social Hierarchies

Every local news broadcast, public service announcement, and high school health class warns about the dangers of peer pressure. Research abounds the affects of adolescent social life, the power of peers, and existence of social structures. Many sociologists argue that for adolescents it is peers, not parents or teachers, that chiefly determine their investment in school and their drug use (Brown, Steinberg, Dornbusch, 1997). In an examination of United States' students declining academic performance, Laurence Steinberg, Benson Brown, Sanford Dornbusch concluded from their multi-disciplinary search in schools across the country that adolescent students as a whole do not take their school seriously and that American popular culture demeans academic success (Brown, Steinberg, Dornbusch, 1997; 19). Students are being pressured by their peers and by teen culture to not value academic achievement and in turn are underperforming.

However, the connection between how peer structures shape and develop their own sets of values is understudied. There is a deeply reflexive dynamic between cultural values and social hierarchies. Both elements interact with another, both elements coconstitute one another, and both elements are inextricably bound to one another. Social hierarchies simultaneously reflect cultural values, reinforce cultural values, and additionally construct them.

Research predominately focuses on the first part of this equation and largely ignores their part in value shaping. However, a proliferation of research tells the story of the importance of social hierarchies in adolescent life. In Murray Milner's recent study of

American teenagers and schools, status, or the accumulated approval and disapproval that people express toward an individual, is extremely important to adolescents because they have no real economic or political power (Milner, 2004, 4). Since students are forced to go to school, the only space they have to assert power is socially. For this reason they create their own systems of evaluation for one another. And their status acts as the most important part of their day-to-day lives because it is the only part they truly control (Milner, 2004; 4).

Within schools exist a shared set or criteria for social evaluation. Individuals gain status, or become cool, by three paths according to Milner. In adolescent status systems, individuals can gain status through conformity to norms, social associations, and social disassociations (Milner, 2004; 30-31). In other words, individuals can gain status by associating with other high status individuals, ignoring or harming low status individuals and demonstrating their knowledge of pre-existing cultural norms. The most powerful individuals with the most status are the individuals who dictate, alter, and control the content of the cultural norms. In order to achieve high status individuals must be acutely aware of the pre-existing norms and possess the ability to construct their own which others will follow (Milner, 2004; 39).

Across his study of several schools she discovered that a few universal status categories existed for adolescents. First, she found that the oppositional binary of non-deviant and deviant function within the schools as cool and not cool. Other social scientists found that these colloquial categories of popular students and alternative students exist in all middle and high schools (Milner, 2004; 41). In our larger pool of

popular culture, whether it is in teen movies or talk shows, these categories are reoccurring and prominent. The concepts of cool and uncool certainly occupy other cultural spaces, but are often synonymous with coming of age at school. More specifically, certain ideal types within cool and uncool exist to a certain degree in nearly all studied schools. The most universally studied and observed category of adolescent deviance in school is the “nerd.” Milner found that “nerds” are made fun of across all types of schools, and were the targeted recipients of negative overheard labels in her ethnographic research (Milner, 2004; 88).

School Structure

Social hierarchies do not form in a vacuum and are instead a product of the larger adolescent culture, American culture, and the school’s culture itself. Whether a school is public, private, mission driven, religious, boarding, expensive, urban or rural has a profound effect on the development of cultural values within its student populations. A group of researchers suggest it is institutional mechanisms within schools that influence the development of student’s ideologies the most. Murray Milner argues that school’s organizational mechanisms, like class size and specific in school programs, directly affect the formation of student friendships, cliques, and means to determine status (Milner, 2004; 150). Social values develop within a school as a result of a school’s mission, admissions qualifications, and countless other characteristics. These characteristics also provide a way for counter-hegemonic ideals and values to develop.

One heavily researched sub-culture is the American private school. Whether a boarding school or a local preparatory school, our collective psyche commonly construes

these institutions as otherworldly—the polar opposite of our public schools. In Caroline Persell and Peter Cookson’s analysis of over 55 private schools they describe the cut-throat academic dynamic frequently associated with these schools. They suggest that institutional mechanisms within these schools as a group help to construct a highly competitive academic atmosphere. The first mechanism they identify is the school’s admissions processes. These schools can require a combination of pre-tests, previous report cards, IQ tests, personal essays, letters of recommendation, interviews and even at home assessments before a student is admitted (Persell and Cookson Jr., 1985; 55). Persell and Cookson argue that these often cut throat admissions processes set the tone that academic performance and competition are esteemed values within the school. They additionally eliminate a potential component of diversity and result in a homogeneity of academic abilities (Persell and Cookson Jr. 1985, 55).

Persell and Cookson identify another culturally significant mechanism, the traditional elite private school curriculum. This curriculum includes classical Greek and Roman texts, European history, philosophy and the works of Shakespeare. It’s uniformity, historical presence, and lack of input or personal relevance to many students works to create a dynamic of academic uniformity (Persell and Cookson Jr, 1985; 105). Students are not choosing their curriculums and instead are submissive recipients of an education chosen for them by adults. This example of banking education produces a “common consciousness” that pressures students to succeed, but not think independently (Persell and Cookson Jr., 1985, 107). These institutions also employ stringent grading policies and demanding workloads (Persell and Cookson Jr, 1985; 103). Together, Persell and Cookson argue that these mechanisms produce a cultural environment in which

individuals achieve high status through regimented performance, “The intense pressure to get into the right college coupled with the collective demand for conformity creates academic atmospheres where excellence is most highly valued for its practical rather than its intrinsic worth” (Persell and Cookson Jr., 1985; 106).

However, status in these institutions is not merely directly correlated with the best academic performer. Since there is no cultural value on the love of learning or intrinsic motivation to learn, students with high status cannot appear to be “trying to hard” with their studies (Persell and Cookson Jr., 1985; 105). Student at the top of the social ladder typically succeed academically, but do not publicly appear to study too much or try too hard. These students must succeed, but must also construct their academic success as effortless. I believe, however, that mechanisms exist outside the school that also contribute to the development and enforcement of these cultural values. Unaddressed in this study is the role of parents who would select, and make the financial commitment to sending their child to a private school.

A statistical analysis of the millennial generation finds that greater than half of all students in private school possess at least an undergraduate degree (New Strategist Editors, 2004; 16). Typical students enrolled at elite private schools would then receive pressure to succeed academically from their parents at home. If both of your parents have advanced degrees, students are more likely to believe that higher education and a certain level of academic success is a given. As anthropologists Barbara Schenider and Yongsook Lee found in their analysis of the high rates of academic success in East Asian students in the United States, “East Asians do well in school because their parents expect

it...parent expectations are extremely powerful and are transmitted through a cultural context in which education is highly valued because it leads to self-improvement and self-esteem” (Schneider and Lee, 1990; 374). Additionally, parents investing time and money into private school often demand higher performances from their children because of that investment. In my 10 years at private school, my parents motivated me to succeed academically by communicating their sacrifice for my education. They often said, “If you don’t want to work hard, then you can do that for free at public school.”

The Lester School is not just any private college preparatory private school. It fits within a named class of mission driven private schools—progressive schools. Differing from the majority of private schools, progressive schools are driven to teach students to think for themselves. As Persell and Cookson explain, “Progressive schools have not traditionally sought to prepare students for exercising power, but rather encourages them to develop their individual, intellectual and creative potentials” (Persell and Cookson, 1985: 41). The institutional mechanisms that help achieve this cultural ideal are the small classroom sizes, the emphasis on shared academic projects, and personalizing the curriculum to each individual student (Persell and Cookson, 1985: 41).

The personal attention teachers give each individual student reduces a student’s potential feelings of isolation at school and helps motivate students to invest in schoolwork. Arthur Powell found in his research on the American Prep School tradition that students are more likely to do their schoolwork and do it well in progressive prep schools because they care so much about their teacher’s opinion of them (Powell, 1996; 198). While documented in Powell’s research, the usual level of personalization included

in identified progressive private schools should not be conflated with the Lester School's programs and school philosophy. The uniqueness of the Lester School's personalization mechanisms deserves to be studied and analyzed.

Racial and Ethnic Difference in Academic Performance

Several of the most academically successful and socially powerful middle school students at the Lester School belong to racial and ethnic minorities. Counter to colloquial beliefs and the empirical truths of academic performance in the United States according to race, the Lester School provides a space where diverse students succeed. Looking to understand how the Lester School is able to overcome the national racial and ethnic academic trends requires an understanding of those overarching trends. The dominant narrative to explain the underachievement of racial and ethnic groups in schools combines economic disenfranchisement and cultural deprivation (Epps, 1995; 595). A frequently researched phenomenon, many scholars continue to weigh in on the gap between educational performances of white and black students. The landmark text on the subject, "Black Students' School Success: The Burden of Acting White" presents a cultural deprivation paradigm. First off, the socialization practices of low income African Americans lead to black youths sabotaging their own high school careers (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986). Specifically, Ogbu and Fordham argue that racialized peer pressure serves as a major source of academic under achievement for blacks. Black adolescent students face a racialized stigma of academic success. This success is racialized as white and achieving academically lessens their cultural authenticity in their communities. Fordham

and Ogbu explicitly state that black students learn ambivalence toward academic achievement in their communities (Fordham and Ogbu in Tyson, Darity and Castellino, 2005; 595).

In a more recent study of understanding the burden of acting white and dilemmas of high achievement in black communities, Karolyn Tyson, William Darity and Domini Castellino found in support of Fordham and Ogbu that black students were often teased for achievement or “being smart”, a heavily racialized pattern of deep seeded animosity between higher and lower achieving students (Tyson, Darity and Castellino, 2005; 594-596). Tyson, Darity and Domini conducted a study of North Carolina public schools and analyzed their enrollment in advance placement and honors courses. They found students of color, specifically black students, to be highly under represented in these courses and sought to find out why (Tyson, Darity and Castellino, 2005; 582). They concluded in support of Fordham and Ogbu that the public displays of animosity toward high achieving students of any race and specifically students of color decreased these students’ likelihood from enrolling in any advanced courses. According to this logic, it is a social and cultural risk for black students in these communities to succeed academically.

This phenomenon of achievement varying according to social identity groups is not merely limited to race or ethnicity alone. Researcher Signithia Fordham identified how black female identity impacts academic performance in a Washington D.C. high school. Fordham discovered that while most students in the school were black that most of the faculty were white and described black students as “hard” (Fordham, 1993; 5). She found that black female identity specifically negatively impacted students’ academic

performance. Fordham further identifies ways in which black female students overcame these cultural barriers to success, “Black girls achieved academic success by becoming and remaining voiceless or silent...or impersonating a male image” (Fordham, 1993; 10). Fordham argues that the intersectionality of cultural values localized in the individual school and the larger American culture discourage both female and black academic success. Fordham cites academic and activist bell hooks who explains the story of her schooling as a black female, hooks describes how her parents ambivalence about her preoccupation with school related learning robbed her of her confidence and threatened per pursuit of academic excellence (Fordham, 1993; 23). While the phenomenon runs counter within the Lester School, the analysis of cultural values’ impacts on academic performance sheds significant light on academic performance and social hierarchies.

Cultural values like associating certain social groups with academic success and certain social groups with academic failure affect individuals directly as stated above and indirectly through affecting individuals’ attitudes. In a study of gender equity and information technology in education Monique Volman and Edith van Eck (2001) found attitude to be a dependent variable that determines computer attitudes and computer performance (Volman and van Eck, 2001; 613). They found girls and women’s negative attitudes about their own computer skills and computers in general as reasons for the limited participation of girls in informational technology (Volman and van Eck, 2001; 625). They argue that these negative attitudes form from larger cultural values that are transmitted through social images, socialization at home and at aschool, the pedagogical and didactical characteristics of curriculum (Volman and van Eck, 2001; 630). Volman and van Eck’s identification of attitudes as a dependent rather than independent variable

is an important step toward understanding differences in academic performance according to social identity groups, but it does not explain the origins of the cultural values that affect attitude. In other words, we still do not know how these values that favor one social group's academic performance over another's develop.

The gendered academic performance gap has been a prominent area of study for social scientists for the past thirty years. Discourses on the subject have changed over time from one that focused on the underachievement of girls, and later the more recent under achievement of boys since the 1990s (Jones and Myhill, 2004; 550). These two discourses highlight different components of this gendered phenomenon. In the studies of underachievement of girls, social scientists often suggest sex-typed beliefs about subjects like science, math, or english, female structure female's performance in them (Jovanovic and King, 1998; 490). Countless studies seek to explain why girls and women are underrepresented in math and the "hard" sciences and continually conclude that students and teachers' behaviors are affected by gendered beliefs in the essential qualities of boys and girls. These studies explain how math or science being a "male domain" discourages girls and women from participating and invites boys and men to participate instead (Jovanovic and King, 1998; 491). Social scientists utilize these arguments to explain why, "More boys than girls perform well in mathematics...and [why] girls, far more frequently than boys choose not to take intensive mathematics courses" (Leder, 1980; 411). Whereas studies of underachieving boys hypothesize that boys and young men are not fully integrated into the school community and this isolation discourages their desire to want to perform well in school (Jones ad Myhill, 2004; 553). Both of these theories

address how academic performance can be gendered, but also fail to explain how those cultural values develop, expand, and are reinforced specifically within the schools.

Methodology

The Site: The Lester School

In order to shed light on both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic constructions of academic performance, I wanted to conduct research at a site where academic achievement was highly valued and an indicator of high status. I began collecting my data in the fall of 2008 at a private school in a wealthy suburb of Detroit, Michigan. In setting out to study adolescent peer evaluations of academic performance and constructions of cool, I knew I wanted to select an atypical site. Doves of research suggests that academic success is “not cool” in many racial groups, classes, regional areas of the country and at many points in time exist. The wealth of this research while certainly proven generalizable contradicted my own adolescent schooling experience. After gaining a deep understanding of this literature, I wanted to examine a definition or set of definitions of cool located within a particular institution that challenged this proven core component. Based upon my own memories, I knew that counter-hegemonic definitions existed and thus affected the way that some students interpreted one another's academic success.

I thought my ethnographic research would be most fruitful at the very school I attended for ten years. I selected the Lester¹ School knowing that my insider role as an alumnus provided me with all sorts of knowledge on the school itself, its academic philosophy, its history, and its pedagogical techniques. Furthermore, I knew that I could rely on my close personal friendships with teachers, administrators and current students at the school in order to gain access and permission to conduct my research.

The culture of the Lester School makes it perfectly suited to studying definitions of cool that include academic success and greatly impacted my desire to utilize as my main research site. It is a heavily and openly mission driven organization. It markets itself as the place where, "Gifted children love to learn" (Lester School Homepage 2009). Enrolled students must be identified and evaluated by a professional psychologist as gifted prior to their admission. All Lester students possess cognitive abilities within the top 15% of the general population and exhibit combinations of leadership, emotional, creative and psychomotor skills. Additionally, these students have parents or guardians who deeply value their education. Their guardians are willing to pay or find scholarships for their child to attend and often drive them to school from very long distances. Their guardians go to great lengths to gain their child admission to the school and keep him or her there.

Moreover the school's commitments to ethnic, economic, religious, and regional diversity through its scholarship allocations and recruitment techniques ensure that its population of students includes many different social identities and types of community members. I felt that a diverse population would allow me to study a definition of cool that

transcended specific racial or economic groups and instead resulted from institutional culture.

The school's philosophy of liberationist education also encourages students to learn what they love and to love to learn. The student to faculty ratio is 13:1 and exclusively employs teachers who provide students with “future-oriented...meaningful learning experiences” (Lester School Homepage 2009). The school offers instruction in pre-kindergarten through senior year of high school. Students often design their own independent studies, influence curriculum development, participate in staff hiring decisions, refer to their teachers by their first names, and are not required to take any particular classes in order to graduate. I believed at the onset of my research that these institutional characteristics and traditions would allow for rich and unparalleled definitions of cool to emerge. Setting my work apart from the pre-existing literature, conducting research at the Lester School adds rich information on a largely unexplored type of site and type of subject. It truly is a school like no other and I was confident that my understanding of it would facilitate the goal of my research, which is getting at the symbolic meanings of cool and disrupting the widely held belief that no matter where one goes school is not cool.

Ethnographic Observation

I engaged in ethnographic observation attempting to gain insight into how other students value academic success and its relationship to their notions of cool. Two days a week, I observed in 2 classrooms Lester School from October through December 2008. As the term ethnography implies, the goal of my research was to understand the subjective meanings that people hold dear, internalize or reject. My research was inspired by the tradition of ethnographers such as Barrie Thorne. As she explains in the introduction to her ethnographic research on gender in elementary schools, fieldwork consists of “involves extensive witnessing and sense making” (Thorne, 1993: 8). I gained permission from the director of the middle school to “do whatever you want.” The director announced my research plan to the faculty at a meeting prior to my first site visit and these faculty members agreed to permit me in any of their courses.

The participant observation process involved teachers introducing me to their students as a researcher and I sat in the backs of their classrooms silently taking notes. I tried to balance the two poles of participant observation—the distant observer versus the immersed participant (Emerson et al, 1995: 18). I interacted with students greeting them, asking questions about their coursework and offering to answer questions about my research or myself. During the actual class periods I made a point to look as if I was paying attention to the information relayed by the teachers. Mirroring the behaviors of other students in the classrooms, I purposely focused my gaze on the teacher, the words written on the board or in the required texts. I borrowed class specific books from the teachers in order appear more student-like and put students at ease with my presence in the classroom. Additionally, I also openly acted as a researcher by diverting my gaze to

students, taking notes in the classroom when no one else was and each student knew my official role.

My role as a well-liked former student granted me many privileges at the school. All of the middle school teachers and administrators greeted my presence very warmly and expressed great enthusiasm for my project. They all approached me to ask how they could help and inquired about the success of my research as it progressed. My freedom to explore wherever I wanted within the school allowed me to observe and at times interact with students in both informal and formal contexts. I elected to observe in a host of school environments. I anticipated that students may behave differently depending on their location and that their evaluations of academic success may change according to the context. I wanted to control for these different academic contexts in my research and thus made sure that I observed students in different types of classrooms, in the hallways, in the library, and during their lunch hour. I also utilized my relationships with teachers to conduct informal interviews with the teachers themselves in the teacher's lounge and in their classrooms.

Inspired by ethnographic guides that suggest that researchers observe sites that the subjects themselves value (Emerson et al, 1995), I made sure to observe areas of the building that students elected to spend time in such as the hallways and in the library. I wanted to see if positive comments on academic performance were localized only within the formal classroom setting or if they transcended into peer dominated spaces as well. I positioned myself on benches or waiting in front of teachers' doorways in order to minimize the obtrusiveness of my presence in informal settings and happily answered

students' inquiries about it. Only one student actually asked me what I was doing and I readily explained the purpose of my project and my Lester alumni status. Most students didn't even direct their gaze toward me.

We often colloquially conceptualize Middle School as a painful and embarrassing period of self discovery and social meanness. Whether it be the popularity of television shows like *Degrassi* that chronicle Middle School gossip and drama or the number of parental advocacy programs targeted at protecting kids between the ages of eleven and fourteen, Americans are largely aware that Middle School is an important time for self definition. It is a period of rapid emotional and physical development that forces individuals to question who they are and what they want to become. I chose to study Middle School students because I believed that this period of identity construction would allow me to witness norm construction and the promotion of cultural values more intensely than any other age group. From my own personal experience, I remembered that the worshiping of “cool” kids in Middle School was more public than at any other point during my secondary education. This was the time when the teasing, the bragging and the praising of students occurred most frequently and most flagrantly. Even as a student, I knew that Middle School was going to be a tumultuous time. I believed when designing my research that this moment of social anomie would provide me with the best information on how and what gets constructed as popular.

In selecting classes to observe, I attempted to encompass two teaching-styles and subjects of study extremes. I selected a 7th grade social-studies teacher and a 6th and 7th grade math teacher. Based upon my previous experience as one of their students, I knew

that these two teachers specifically exhibited two distinct teaching styles, covered different subject areas, and maintained classrooms with a very different feel from one another. The math teacher maintains a strict classroom with outlined behavioral requirements, assigned seats, and a heavy daily workload. She holds a position of great respect within the school and students know that she will not allow certain behaviors in her classroom. On the other end of the spectrum, the 7th grade social studies teacher is much more tolerant of deviant behaviors in her classroom. She is extremely warm to students, vocally supportive, and does not often enforce rules or reprimand students publicly in class. Students' behaviors in these two classrooms vary significantly and I sought to observe them in my research design. I felt that these different classroom environments would provide more information to my study of students' academic behaviors and specifically help to answer how different environments construct and influence academic behaviors.

Data Analysis

Similar to traditional qualitative data analysis techniques, I employed grounded theory in the analysis of my data. I produced a record of my field observations and informal interviews. This record contains all of the rich subjective data I gained in the field. These fieldnotes include descriptions of key incidents as reconstructed from my jottings that I took while in the field. These data sought to capture the totality of what I observed. In them I recorded behaviors, phrases, movements, body language, race, age, and gender of actors. My fieldnotes focused on phenomena in order to evaluate whether

or not they function as independent variables, correlated factors, or merely coincidental factors. In addition to the chronological description of salient events, I included the symbolic meanings of these incidents according to both the subjects and myself. These at times rivaling interpretations add a complexity to my analysis and offer the reader to take both into account. My ability to successfully analyze my research requires this kind of detail-oriented record in order to draw larger theoretical conclusions and “expose the meanings” within my data (Corbin and Strauss 102).

I acknowledge that I could not escape my internal biases in my construction of these notes and instead am as open as possible about my position and method of interpretation (Corbin and Strauss 99). Beyond my honesty, I attempted to ensure the validity of my claims by employing several analytic tools of open-coding. After my fieldnotes were complete, I began the process of taking the specifics contained within them and making general conclusions (Corbin and Strauss 88). This process started with completing a line-by-line analysis of all incidents within my fieldnotes. In this micro-analysis I identified the phenomena occurring within my incidents and then organized these phenomena into larger concepts. I then evaluated the patterns and connections between these concepts (Corbin and Strauss 94). This process required cataloging the themes, topics, and possible meanings of the incidents and taking a step back to question how and if they fit together. As qualitative researcher Michael Agar argues, my analysis required the “critical micro-level work looking at a few detailed passages...doing the dialectic dance between an idea” and one's observations (Seidel 7).

Before constructing these phenomena, concepts, and categories I first engaged in intense questioning with my data. I asked and then answered what is going on in each incident, who are the actors involved, how do the actors interpret each incident, and are their interpretations different or the same and why (Corbin and Strauss 77). I pose these questions within each classroom site individually and comparatively between the two of them. These sensitizing questions acted as the more definitive component of my research and allowed me to make more abstract conceptual conclusions. The next step of inquiry involved focusing on how the concepts interact with one another, how actors' behaviors change over time, and identifying the larger structural factors impacting the incidents. Another line of questioning in my conceptual construction process required looking at the concepts reflexively. Do these concepts, generated from an analysis of the incidents, actually work in the incidents? In what incidents do these concepts not work and why? And ultimately, how can I strengthen the development of these concepts with my next analytical steps (Corbin and Strauss 78)?

Finally, my open-coding process included the systematic comparison analytic tool. I referred back to my literature review pertaining to my research question and review their themes and empirical claims. I evaluated how the incidents in my research compare with those previously documented by researchers and in my own personal experience (Corbin and Strauss 101). I further assessed reasons for these potential differences and or similarities. The answers to all of these questions allowed me to form my overarching theory. This theory incorporated the results from the analytical tools described above and shed light on my theoretical and empirical questions.

Findings

Math teacher Cindy writes an Algebra problem on the board. After a few moments 7th grader Julie announces from the back of the class, “OMG [Oh My God}, I got it.” ...Her peer Chloe responds, “Me too.” Their eyes lock and in unison they smile and proclaim, “It’s soooooo easy.” They high-five.

Through analysis of the data, I first and foremost discovered a consistent and prominent counter-hegemonic construction of cool within the Lester Middle School. Every single observation I conducted, consistent with reflection of my own ten years at the Lester School, points to an elevation of academic performance in there adolescent social structures. Students constantly sought to answer questions posed by their teachers, would receive praise from fellow students for correct answers, and without fail all high-status students succeeded academically at the school. Beyond constructing academic excellence as an enviable and valuable trait, the Lester School provides a different example of esteemed students. The top students at the Lester School in terms of both academic performance and social status include boys, girls, white students, students of

color, out LGBT students, Jewish students, Christian students and Muslim students. In contrast to the existing literature and the dominant narrative on academic performance, a diverse group of students succeeds on a daily basis at the Lester School.

Table 1 Frequently Observed Public Displays of Academic Excellence

Demonstrations of Valuing Academic Excellence	Negative Encouragements to Succeed Academically
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High-Fiving after correctly answered questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eye rolling after incorrect answers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Verbal congratulations for correct answers from teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smirks at incorrect answers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Verbal congratulations for correct answers from students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Laughing and whispering at incorrect answers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frantic hand-raising to answer questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interrupting students who were incorrectly answering a question
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Displays of exemplary student work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ignoring students that previously answered questions incorrectly

I have identified several institutional mechanisms of the Lester Middle School that collectively contribute to the development of a counter-hegemonic construction of hip in which academic success is high status quality among peer social hierarchies. My

findings focus on the role the Lester School plays in developing and encouraging the acceptance of this cultural value. Academic success is a stated goal of the school and it consciously tries to construct academic success as valuable. My research details the processes and factors that help to construct academic performance as a positive cultural value. I outline in my research how student interactions, teacher interactions and methods of negotiating ascribed identities at the Lester School collectively and individually work to define academic performance in this light.

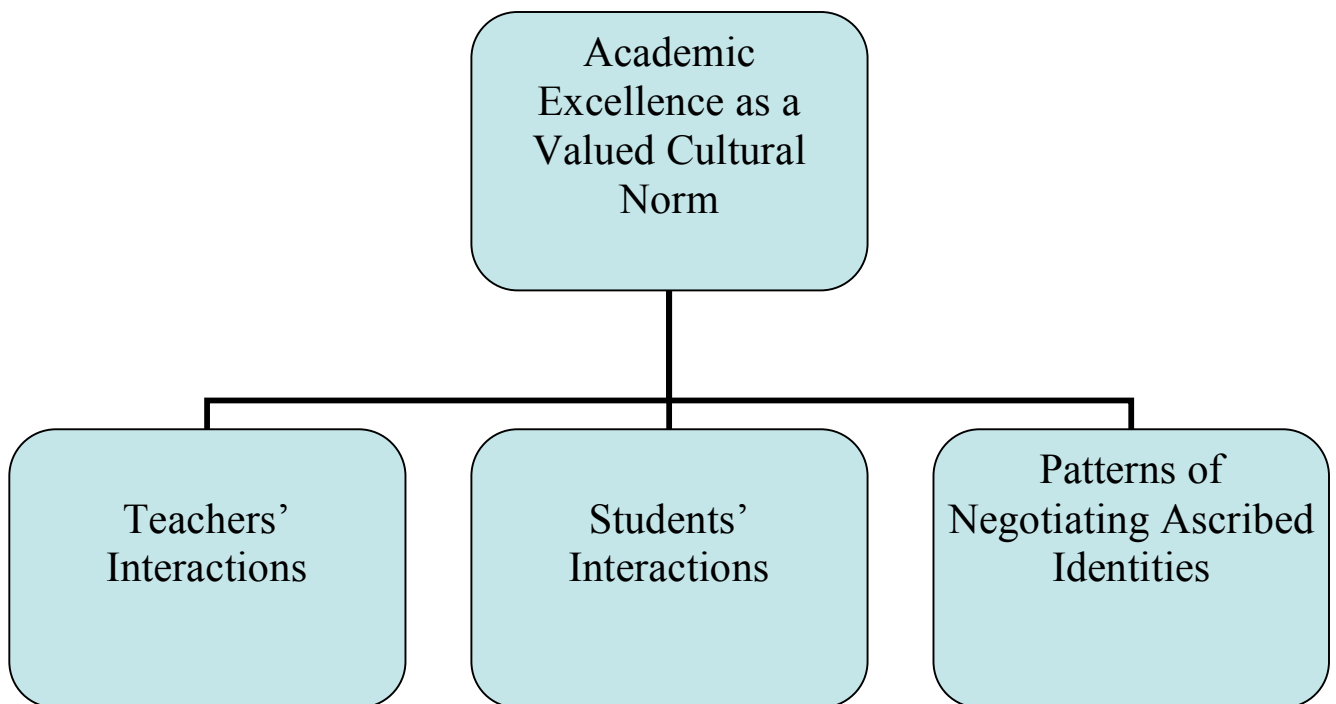


Figure 1 Contributors to Counter-Hegemonic Constructions of Cool

Institutional mechanisms intended to encourage academic success include: small class size, the use of the Socratic method, the mission of the school, the development of a

love of learning, personalization of education choices and curriculum. Unintended institutional mechanisms that nonetheless encourage the peer elevation of academic success include: the diverse faculty, the fostering of intrinsic motivation in academic pursuits, and faculty's close relationships with students.

Table 2 Mechanisms Encouraging Academic Success

Intended Institutional Mechanisms	Unintended Institutional Mechanisms
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small Class Size 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diverse Faculty
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Socratic Method 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of Intrinsic Motivation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mission of the School 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faculty's Close Relationships with Students
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personalization of educational and curriculum choices 	---
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of a Love of Learning 	---

Teachers' Interactions

At the Lester School several school policies work with the unique characteristics and personalities of the diverse staff to produce distinct patterns of teacher student

interaction. Teachers use unconventional methods to assert their authority, set the tones for their classrooms, and engage with students on a personal level. The mission of the school, small class sizes, the reliance on the Socratic Method, and the close relationships between students and faculty collectively help to construct and promote academic excellence as a desirable trait.

The importance of realizing the positive potential of each individual is central to the school philosophy. Through a process of life-long learning, each individual strives to become self-actualized as a moral, creative, productive, and fulfilled person, partner and global citizen...All individuals strive to fulfill their distinct destiny, to express themselves sincerely, and to learn from the example of others. This optimistic, humanistic view of life affirms every person's potential for growth, happiness, and compassion.

-The Lester School Philosophy, Board of Trustees 1999

The mission of the Lester School is focused, explicit, and on the tips of teachers and administrators' tongues. From Philosophy Day to Founder's Day to countless all school assemblies focused on "Living the Lester Philosophy," the school promotes the discussion and implementation of the Lester Philosophy on a regular basis. Teachers in the Middle School assign students to research this philosophy and reference it in their discussions of other topics. The philosophy is attached to every school phone directory,

publication, press release, and internal document. Students that attended Lester elementary school prior to enrolling in its Middle School have made at least one patchwork quilt expressing their understanding of the Lester philosophy. The Lester School operates under the principle of theory and praxis. Faculty and administrators interpret the Lester philosophy as a living philosophy that can and should be achieved in the lives and works of Lester community members every day.

This philosophy encourages students to pursue what they care about and encourages other community members to support them every step of the way. Even the rhetoric within the philosophy pushes students to be who they are and honors each individual. It also specifically states that through the process of education and self-actualization students will become better people, better members of the global community. Faculty and administrators drive home the point that students are responsible for one another and to do what they can to make the world a better place. From issuing class t-shirts that read, “With this freedom comes great responsibility,” to bringing up “global stewardship” for discussion in almost every class, the Lester faculty articulates that through education we can make the world a better place and it is our call to do so.

Another powerful component of the school’s philosophy in elevating the cultural value of education at the Lester school is the story of the school’s founding. The school’s founders were

“refugees who witnessed the moral cataclysm of Hitler’s Third Reich, responded by founding The Lester School on a philosophy for life. The Lester School exists because of this philosophy in order to provide a safe

place for children to grow into intelligent and sensitive contributors to their world.” –The Lester School Philosophy, Board of Trustees 1999

Faculty and administrators constantly reference this story in their classes, assemblies, and in the hallways. The emotional intensity of this story and constant questioning of, “What would our founders do,” collectively influence students to value education. The school, through its philosophy and the discussion of it, constructs the pursuit of education as the duty of every caring individual. If one wants to better the world, they must value and commit to education. More than a career path, an abstract obligation or chore, education acts as a core component of being human. Constructing education in such moral terms encourages students to pursue and value academic excellence. Their choices to study, participate in class, and do both of those things well are interpreted not as a plot for success, but a service to the world. Education acts as such an esteemed cultural value within this environment that not to value it results in students’ scorn of one another. From sighs to eye rolls to haughty corrections of their peers’ mistakes in the classroom, students attach stigma to academic failings and often morally judge the culprits. As one student in Jill’s social studies class articulated to his peer, “Come on, man. Why don’t you get this? Geeze” (Fieldnote December 2nd, 2008).

Teachers are able to realize the mission of the school through the small class sizes throughout all grades and subjects at the Lester School.

“Small student-teacher ratios make it possible for teachers to be close to each student's learning experience. Individual learning styles can be understood so

that strengths are nurtured and strategies developed between teacher and student to most effectively meet that student's needs.” –Lester School Homepage 2009

An unspoken rule when I attended the Lester School and when I served as the student representative for its governing Board of Trustees was “under 25.” The Board continually strategized how they, as a governing body, could ensure this ratio in Lester classrooms. In addition, faculty and administrators strive to ensure every class contains less than 25 students. The founders of the Lester School also wrote extensively on the necessity for small class size in developing life long learners. While each graduating class contains between 40 and 60 students, the Lester School believes their classes will be most successful with extremely small faculty to student ratios. The administration controls for small class size when determining the number of available spots for admission to the school. The Lester School’s Elementary, Middle, and Upper School all value small class size. From the pre-kindergarten to the Pre-Algebra and Social Studies classes I observed, there are never be more than 30 students in classroom with only one teacher.

As stated above, this small class size is intended to facilitate strong and personalized teacher student interactions. Small class size is intended to help teachers personalize their techniques and lessons to the individual needs and strengths of students in their classes. These individualized techniques are specifically meant to help all students set and achieve salient academic goals. In my observations, class size most certainly encouraged the closeness between students and teachers. All teachers know significant amounts of their students’ personal and academic lives. Teachers tailored their questions about the material to individual students in order to highlight their strengths

and weaknesses, and to challenge and develop individuals. This small class size allows each student the space to participate in class, ask questions, and ask for help. In Jill's 7th grade social studies class, I observed that in every single class at least 15 out of the 18 students substantively participated by either answering or posing a question.

I regularly observed a 6th grade Math 2 class of six students taught by Cindy. The first time I observed this class Cindy approached me to explain how it was designed part way through the school year for students with learning differences. Cindy explained how several of these students were not succeeding in a larger Math 2 class and she wanted to create a "different environment" for them to succeed in (Fieldnote November 14, 2008). In this class Cindy asks every individual student to participate in the class several times. She offers individualized comments of encouragement and inquiry into their lives outside of math class. She is able to hold eye contact with all students and the students participate in front of one another all class long. Students cannot hide their academic abilities in this class because Cindy demands that they perform in front of each other regularly by either answering problems on the board or from their desks. Students, as a result, are acutely aware of their contemporaries' level of knowledge and current academic performances. Cindy even verbally comments on students' performances and encourages other students to take note of one another's successes and failures. During her Math 2 class of six students, Rosalee, a white girl with curly brown hair and green knit hat, successfully answered a problem in front of the class. As she finishes it Cindy noted, "You see. Rosalee got it. I'm very happy" (Fieldnote November 14, 2008). One cannot hide their abilities in a class of six. The small class size facilitates the public display of one's academic abilities and encourages students to perform well.

Beyond small class size, teachers demand Lester students perform in front of one another on a daily basis. Lester teachers rely on the Socratic Method of instruction.

Socratic Method: A method of teaching or discussion, like that used by Socrates, in which by means of a series of questions and answers the logical soundness of a definition is tested, the meaning of a concept examined. – Webster's New World Dictionary

Instead of the majority of classes being lecture based, Lester School teachers continually pose questions to individual students by name or to their classes at large. In Cindy's Math 2 and Pre-Algebra classes she lectures less than 15 minutes during every 45-minute class period. She dedicates two-thirds of every class to posing homework questions or new problems to her classes. At the beginning of every class Cindy alternates asking specific students to answer questions from the homework on the whiteboard at the front of the class. She dedicates 1/3 of every class to this in all of her classes. When students didn't know the answer to questions she posed then she would merely ask another student or continue to probe the same student. Instead of correct a student that floundered in front of the class, Cindy often asked the entire class if they agreed or disagreed with the publicly presented incorrect answer. The Socratic Method, like small class size, puts academic performance into the shared sphere of school life. Everyone knows how their peers are doing in classes because they are forced to perform in front of one another every day all day. On one occasion when one male student got the answer wrong in front of Cindy's class his peers quickly caught his computation error.

Students began erratically raising their hands and said “No!” Cindy stopped and asked the class if they agreed with his answer. She instructed them to vote, by a show of hands, yes or no. There was no consensus and Cindy said, “Well then I guess we don’t have an answer. She pressures her students to figure out the question, “Was Max correct?” More students than not say “Yes.” Some students are jumping out of their chairs and half standing up while doing so. Cindy makes eye contact with Max and says, “Correct. You go Max” (Fieldnote November 13th, 2008).

Jill, like Cindy, forced students to present their in class work and homework to each other. Jill completed “homework check-in” with all of her classes at the beginning of each class. Jill would walk around the room with her grade book assessing whether or not each student completed their assignments. Jill would announce each student’s name and the student would then verbally respond and physically show Jill their work. Jill would then comment about the level of completion and or quality of the work. While small side conversations between students often occurred during this time, the official focus of the class was on each individual student and Jill made her way around the room. Other students regularly commented on their peers’ performances during this time.

While Jill is describing the importance of a map projected via PowerPoint one white girl in a t-shirt and jeans asks a question about its contents. Jill clarifies that the big blue portion of the map is the ocean. Several other students laugh at their peer’s misunderstanding and she offers a brief chuckle too noting, “Oh duh.” The lecture continues. –Fieldnote November 18th, 2008

The nature of teachers' questions also affects the development of cultural values within the school. Teachers chronically asked students, "How do you feel about that?" No matter what information teachers present students, whether politically charged or morally spurious, they pressure students to engage with the material on their own terms. Once students answer questions teachers often respond with follow up questions to include the rest of the class in the discussion. Teachers pose questions to the entire group and to individual students.

While Jill is lecturing on the 100 year war she polls her students as a group to identify out-loud members of the English Royal family. Jill prompts the students with questions like, "Who is his brother?" and "His heir was...?" Out of the 18 students in class, 13 of them are answering Jill's questions out-loud. Many students, both boys and girls, are very excited by this interaction and frantically wave their hands and raise their shoulders up while answering.

–Fieldnote December 2nd, 2008

If students ask questions, teachers are more likely to answer by asking the entire class a modified version of the question. For example one student asked Jill if a specific historical figure was gay. Jill responded by asking her students what they had heard and what they believed the significance of the trait to be in terms of their current discussion (Fieldnote November 18th, 2008). The Socratic Method urges students to develop a relationship with the material they're studying and also forces them to present their abilities and opinions to their peers. This public display makes students vulnerable to teasing if they underperform academically and subject to praise if they succeed.

Teachers and students form and maintain deeply personal relationships that transcend and influence dynamics within the classroom.

“Our faculty has found that grounding ourselves in strong personal relationships based on mutual respect allows us to guide students as they strive to understand, appreciate, and embrace the challenges that face us everyday.”

–Lester Upper School Director in an all school mailing 2008

Students starting in nursery school classes at Lester throughout high school address their teachers by their first names. New students and parents are often disturbed by this practice finding it disrespectful, inappropriate, or authority weakening. The common justification for it from teachers and administrators is that all members of the Lester community are always simultaneously teachers and students. All members of the community should respect one another, learn from one another, challenge one another, and seek to understand one another. As Jill explained to one of her students, “We’re all friends here.” These close relationships with students and teachers evolve not only because of the name policy, but also from teachers’ level of self-disclosure in the classroom. As discussed previously, teachers share personal anecdotes about their lives, their experiences and their challenges in the classroom on a daily basis. Teachers talk about their partners, their children, their parents, their middle school experiences, their views on a subject if questioned, and provide a place within their classroom for students to share their own personal information.

I'm still in regular phone contact with my AP Biology teacher from Lester and consider her to be an important part of my life. She was a tremendous source of inspiration and emotional support for me throughout my school experience and my fellow alumni and current students have hundreds of similar stories. Lester teachers make themselves so available to students and visibly express that they care about students' well being first. Lester teachers offer frequent and public praise and encouragement of their students. Every class period after every correct answer or incorrect answer to a question posed both Jill and Cindy affirmed the participating student. Comments like, "I'm so proud of you," "Excellent work," "You should feel great that you did that," are almost too numerous to document. Additionally, teachers like Jill and Cindy hold eye contact with their students at all time. They address questions to individual students and make it a priority to get to know each individual student. Teachers also write single spaced multiple page reports for students as part of their trimester grades. These reports, instead of the more traditional letter grade, present a holistic view of the student and tries to account for the student's progress and success on his or her own terms.

Students have relationships with their teacher that transcend their traditional roles as students and teachers. This blending of students' personal and professional lives adds another personal component to their conceptions of academic performances. These close relationships between students and teachers encourage students to perform in order to please their teachers because they care about them. Students often directed questions and jokes in class directly too their teachers because they care about them. Even students that didn't regularly complete homework or were not the highest achievers in their classes often joked or interacted with their teachers leisurely while in front of their peers. For

example, Dylan a highly active and often disruptive student in Jill's seventh grade Social Studies class regularly joked with Jill exclusively.

Jill begins class by taking attendance and calling out each enrolled student's name and marking down their presence or absence in her book. She discovers that two boys are absent today and she smiles, raises her eyebrows and jokes that it will be a lot quieter today without these students presence. Dylan, a skinny white boy with long blond curly hair, proudly says, "I'm still here." He smiles, the class laughs and their teacher Jill chuckles too. Jill, still smiling, looks at Dylan and says, "We're counting on you to be as disruptive as possible since your comrades aren't here." The class laughs and a few tables of kids whisper to one another after this comment while continuing to laugh. Dylan also laughed and told Jill he accepted her challenge. –Fieldnote November 18th, 2008.

Similarly, students' frantic hand waving, aggressive volunteering to answer questions, and probing questions on the material presented in class were almost always addressed to the teacher by name. Comments like, "Hey Jill! I totally know this," "Cindy!! Please call on me," to "That problem is obvious Cindy, let me do it please," all indicate a level of performance students wish to present to their teachers. The observed students largely tried to present a desirable image of themselves to their teachers and one component of that is academic excellence.

"Lester is a place where the ideas and feelings of students are important to the adults in their lives. The result is an environment in which students are free to take educational risks and participate in decision making, an environment in

which it is okay to be smart and okay to be committed to learning. Students are encouraged to become increasingly self-directed and independent. They are helped to develop an understanding of and control over their learning process as they develop skills, form concepts, and define ethical and moral issues.”

–Lester Homepage 2009

The caring and trust that evolves between Lester faculty and students aides in the school’s promotion of student self-actualization. An offshoot of the Lester School philosophy, a core value of the school is encouraging intrinsic motivation and fostering a love of learning in all students. The value manifests itself in the curriculum choices students are able to make, but additionally is an important point of discussion within the school. As the poster of Einstein proudly proclaims in Cindy’s middle school math classroom, “Imagination is more important than knowledge.” If students do not find their current studies engaging they are encouraged by administrators and teachers to speak up and communicate what they would like to learn and why. Students take advantage of this commenting in the middle of a social studies class that a particular lecture is “lame” or “putting [them] to sleep.” One student regularly read printed news articles from the Internet in Social Studies class. While Jill asked this student to please focus on her class while he was present in it, she also made time after class to ask him questions about what he was reading and visibly displayed interest in what this individual student was interested in.

Similarly, Cindy had several students ask to speak with her after class about their own theories and issues pertaining to math that were outside the field of study of their

class. Cindy would volunteer her free blocks, her lunch period, and offer to schedule time with any student curious about math issues. She regularly stayed late with students to go over “cool fractals” and things students noticed about “exponents.” Jill opened up her classroom to students during the after school time. While Jill would be grading papers and planning her lessons students would be researching things for fun on her computers, chatting with Jill, and playing advanced international political simulation games. Both of these teachers made themselves extremely available for extra-academic teaching and learning. They constructed learning, reading, teaching, and debating as leisure activities in addition to part of school life. Further assisting the development of academic performance as a positive quality, they treat education as a fun choice.

Teachers and administrators at the Lester School work hard to weave education and educational activities into their lives and their lives into education and educational activities. As stated earlier, Lester staff present their personal opinions and experiences within the context of the classroom. They talk about education’s impact on their lives, and how specific subjects and information affected them. Additionally, the Lester staff teaches students outside on sunny days, takes them to get ice cream occasionally, offers lots of experiential and service learning opportunities, and extensive field trip programming domestically and internationally. All of these opportunities are central to constructing the process of schooling and education as a whole as part of one’s life. These elements of the Lester education work to deconstruct academics as outside one’s real life, and instead attempts it to integrate into a student’s larger life. Through these opportunities Lester tries to educate the whole person and as a result one’s educational choices again becomes a reflection of one’s identity.

Students' Interactions

Julie was asking the class a question about Pascal's triangle and 6 hands wave frantically. Two students were shouting "Ooo! Ooo!" and Julie calls on Darryl. Darryl is a tall African American boy with baggy black jeans and a Baltimore ravens super-bowl t-shirt on. He is seated in the front the front row of desks and when he explains his answer and how he got it the white boy with dark hair sitting next to him insists that, "No--you can't do that." Darryl is confident in his method and asserts, "No. Listen..." And then he explains his method once more. The African American boy sitting behind Darryl chimes in agreement with Darryl and says, "Yeah man. You got it." After Darryl explains his method once more the boy sitting next to him appears to accept its validity. He nods and Julie asks another question of the class. –Fieldnote December 12, 2008

Students comment on one another's academic performances frequently. They tease, brag, joke, congratulate, admire and even gossip about quiz grades, test answers, essays and general coursework. They voluntarily involve themselves in each other's academic lives. The ease and regularity at which they communicate about academic performance suggests the high role it plays within their own Middle School student culture. Even in informal settings in the hallway, at sports practices, and during lunch students were still talking about their own performances.

An indicator of the importance of academic performance to student life and its part in organizing social structures is the manner students talk about it. Students use their own slang when commenting on school affairs. They do not change their method of communication from when they talk about the latest *Killers* cd to when they talk about their Pre-Algebra homework. They employ terms like “dude,” and online computing slang like OMG, LOL etc. This use of language constructs academic performance as one of a host of values that shape and enhance student life and culture at Lester. Academic performance like physical appearance or musical tastes acts like a characteristic students assess when evaluating one another’s social worth.

Students do utilize academic performance to socially ostracize and glamorize their peers. Individuals like Darryl that effortlessly answer questions in class reign at the top of social structures. Other students look up to him both in-class and out. Students congratulate him on his academic prowess and this congratulating extends to other spheres of their lives at school. Students always wanted to sit near him at lunch, offered to shoot baskets with him in the gym during their free blocks, and generally sought to spend time with him. They laughed at his jokes, talked highly of him when he wasn’t present, and described him upon my inquiry as “popular.” Darryl and other students like him at the Lester School were not popular in spite of their academic performance, nor was their scholastic aptitude a tangential and unexplored part of their public personas. Students knew of Darryl’s academic successes and praised him for it. They

offered him, “Good call, dude,” and “Yeah man, you got it,” whenever he answered questions.

Students like Darryl and his peers possess an ownership over their academic careers that allow them to view them as an essential part of their identities. These students are their own academic gatekeepers. They choose as eleven year olds the majority of their classes from a wide array of core and elective classes.

“The structure of Lester's curriculum emphasizes conceptual and experiential learning opportunities that facilitate specific goals for individuals in response to their intellectual and personal/social characteristics, needs and interests.” –The Lester School Homepage
2009

Lester Middle Schoolers are free to determine over half of their schedule. Students are only required to take core classes in math, social studies, science and English. Their schedules are made up of eight forty-five minute blocks and these requirements only occupy four blocks. Students can choose how they wish to spend their remaining four blocks whether that be in registered electives like Edible Art or Shakespeare or they can take physical fitness courses, design their own independent studies, or fill up their schedule with free blocks. Students are able to register for free blocks in which they are able to conduct whatever activities they deem appropriate on campus. Students often use this time to study in the hallways, socialize, play on the computers in the library, or shoot baskets in the gym. Students spend this time without

adult supervision and are not required to do anything specifically with this time. While administrators warn students who have more than two free blocks a day, if the student makes a compelling case for why they need or desire multiple free blocks then they will almost always be receptive.

Students who express interest in a specific topic or area of study are encouraged to pursue independent studies under the direction of the teacher of their choice. Current independent studies occurring at the time of my research included printmaking, human evolution, and the works of William Blake. While everyone may not design or take an independent study while attending the Lester Middle School, teachers often present them as an option. Students know that they are able to focus their studies on whatever topic they choose if they so choose.

Beyond independent studies students are encouraged to assist their teachers in curriculum development and involved in all hiring decisions. All teachers submit curricular evolutions to understand students' feelings on their in class material. If students express interest in a topic in class teachers are extremely likely to provide more information on that topic in the next class period. For example, Jill's students asked a lot of questions on the Children's Crusade during her presentation. The next class Jill set aside additional time to provide new information on the Children's Crusade and discussion continued. Similarly, Cindy questioned her students every single class, "Did you like doing that activity?" "How did you feel about that?" "You all understand that?" "Was this helpful?" If these questions were ever met with criticism from students, Cindy

would immediately attempt to adapt her teaching methods and the information presented to suit students' expressed needs.

At the Lester School teachers, administrators and students work together to determine curriculum. Students possess a tremendous amount of freedom in choosing what courses they take and to a certain extent the information presented in those courses. This freedom helps to further construct educational excellence in a positive light. Schoolwork is not a chore or an obligation thrust upon them from some aloof authority figure. Instead, school and the work one conducts in it is a choice. The tremendous amount of agency these adolescents command allows them to define their self-esteem through their academic performance. Their education is even more a reflection of who they are because they are so involved in choosing what their education consists of. Their educational performance also helps to define how their peers see them because it functions as another expression of self-identity. Since each individual can, again to a certain extent, choose what and how he or she studies, school performance functions as an area where individuals can exert their own control and publicly define themselves.

Negotiating Ascribed Identities

“Lester was established to insure education that considered the human condition and respected human rights. Dr. King’s messages and his work as a champion for human rights make him one of our most significant models for the school’s

fundamental virtues.” -Head of Lester School at annual Lester Martin Luther King Jr. Candlelight vigil January, 2009.

In terms of gender, racial and ethnic, religious, and sexual identity the Lester School faculty achieves an astounding level of diversity. At all school functions such as the annual fall all school picnic or in Middle School health and life sciences, diversity is an area of discussion and promotion. The head of the Lester school, who acts as the principle figure, is an African American immigrant from Jamaica. The other administrators include an out lesbian whose partner also works at the school’s Lower Campus and a male Caucasian self-proclaimed flower child who has a long grey ponytail and regularly sports tie-dye to school events and meetings. These are not caricatures or simply symbolic or tokenistic embodiments of diversity at the school, but are rather signposts of diversity in student’s everyday lives. The Middle School teachers are nearly 50% women and 50% men with ten on staff faculty six are women and four are men. There are two teachers who immigrated to the United States at varying ages from across the globe and individuals who identify with the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faiths.

These examples do not just exist as an unspoken component of the school environment. In classes, school functions and informal conversations with students, staff frequently speaks about their own identities and experiences. Both Jill and Cindy spoke numerous times on their experiences in school as an adolescent, made reference to their countries of origin, and spoke about how their religious faiths impacted their opinions on a subject. Teachers also confront issues of diversity and identity in the design and

implementation of their curriculums. Jill directly and unabashedly addressed issues of race, gender and sexuality in her class on a regularly.

During the lecture Jill starts a PowerPoint slideshow with informational slides, lecturing on each slide while students take notes. When Jill introduces Richard the third, a slim girl in a green t-shirt, jeans and tan Ugg boots raises her hand. After Jill calls on her by name she asks, "Wasn't Richard gay?" Jill responds that some historians believe it to be the case. Students appear to accept this answer and no one asks further questions. No new facial expressions were provoked by this question and Jill immediately continued lecturing where she left off.

-Fieldnote November 18th, 2008

Students conduct ascribed identity focused conversations informally on their own as well. Race especially is a topic students feel comfortable and concerned with talking about. On many occasions in the hallways and in side conversations during class students made reference to race, inquired about racial politics or lamented racial injustice. In one particular example, several students were conducting research for a project in the school library. Students selected their own groups to work in and were casually going at their own pace to answer several questions for their Middle School science lab. A group of four boys including two African American boys and two white boys sit facing the same computer,

The African American hooded student jokes, "It's always gotta be the black man." His three peers laugh and the blonde boy controlling the computer says

that this joke isn't fair. While smiling and turning up his palms he explains, "It's not like since I'm white I'm like every Russian." The group of boys laugh again.

-Fieldnote November 18th, 2008

These students are willing and able to conduct an informal conversation about race, but in such a way where they link themselves as individuals to larger societal structures. They felt safe enough with each other at school to joke about race in a public setting. Beyond just commenting on racial dynamics, these students were able to use their own identities to add to a conversation about the greater society.

Teachers and administrators' various identities are units of analysis that students engage with, ask questions about, and evaluate on their own terms. The school also employs a full-time diversity coordinator who provides counseling, programming, and curricular opportunities focused on the understanding and respect of various forms of diversity. Middle and Upper School students participate in an annual Diversity Day with a full day of diversity workshops and dialogues. The admissions office also makes creating a diverse student body a stated objective and in its promotional materials claims they look for students from various social and regional backgrounds that will "enhance our community" (Lester School Homepage 2009).

The diverse team of professional leaders at the Lester School offers support to its diverse student body. Similar to the literature on role modeling and shattering the glass ceiling in professional situations for women and people of color, students at the Lester School see a diverse group of role models. Students that may not see individuals in

leadership positions in other parts of their lives or potentially at other schools are able to see people that look, act, and have experienced life similarly in some significant way. Underrepresented groups in the larger society, who are often constructed as academically insufficient or inferior like African American women or LGBT identified adults, are present, connecting with students, and showing them how they succeeded. In accordance with the symbolic interactionist theory and other theories of the social self and research on status, individuals define themselves in terms of how they see other people and themselves. The diverse faculty at the Lester School helps students define themselves as capable of academic success.

Discussion

My research suggests there are several important relationships between institutional mechanisms and cultural forces within the Lester School that influence social interaction and the prominence of certain cultural values. Institutional characteristics of the school like small class size and the use of the Socratic Method work in conjunction with one another to produce the space for certain types of social interactions to occur. These social interactions are ultimately where the cultural battle to define values and structure student social hierarchies occur. These overlapping and reflexive processes depend on one another. The success of the Socratic Method in motivating students to succeed relies upon close relationships between students and

teachers and close relationships between students and teachers are enhanced by the use of the Socratic Method. The institutional mechanisms and patterns of social interaction coconstitute one another and together construct and reflect cultural values within the school. The counter-hegemonic value construction at the Lester School requires alternative school policies and alternative social norms for students and teachers.

These heavily connected processes require more research. A deeper understanding of value construction at the Lester School should focus on the kinds of individuals' who are attracted to the school and seek to evaluate any changes with their values prior to attending the school, during their attendance and after. A longitudinal study interviewing alumni of the school and asking them to reflect back on their years at Lester would provide substantive information on the strength of these counter-hegemonic values in students' lives and the degree to which they are bound to individuals' identities.

Conclusion

The Lester school provides a fascinating example of a school unlike any other. I identified several institutional mechanisms within the school that I believe to contribute to the development of a counter-hegemonic valuing of academic performance that encourages students to succeed academically. I observed how institutional mechanisms like small class size, a progressive mission, and diverse faculty can affect close teacher student interactions, student interactions and patterns of negotiating ascribed identities. The interplay between institutional mechanisms and patterns of interaction collectively work to construct academic performance as a valued trait.

As policymakers and researchers bemoan the cultural degradation of modern day American adolescents I offer them this documentation of an alternative reality. As we struggle as a nation to guarantee educational equality to all students, let the Lester school serve as an example of one way to motivate students to do good work. I believe further research on small class size, mutual respect in the classroom, and self-guided curricular opportunities would greatly benefit both our public and private school systems. While the Lester school is an elite private school that is not accessible to all students, despite its scholarship opportunities, it does provide a map of interpersonal interactions between school staff and students that I believe could be helpful in any school. Mutual respect between students and teacher, more than anything else I observed, is the best indicator of student success and positive feelings on academic excellence.

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