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A Review of *Producing success: The culture of personal advancement in an American high school.*

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In *Producing Success: The Culture of Personal Advancement in an American High School*, author Peter Demerath attempts to address the deep, fundamental problem of inequality in American public education and explains that he "takes a different approach to understanding the role of education in the perpetuation of social inequality in the United States: [the book] focuses on the construction of advantage" and that, "above all" he "seeks to explain" the "the cultural basis" for how an anonymous, affluent mid-western suburban community can cultivate an "interconnected set of meanings and practices" that create this advantage (p. 3). He argues that the "tight—almost seamless—linkages [among] class ideology, parenting practices, ideal notions of personhood, and accepted school policies and practice" help formulate a "cultural system" that continually perpetuates this advantage.

In order to make this argument, Demerath operates out of an anthropological, social constructionist theoretical framework, which, as explicated by Burr (2003), says that "it is through the daily interactions between people in the course of social life that...knowledge becomes fabricated" (p. 4). I find Demerath's work to be interestingly aligned and in concert with Torres' (1992) ideas about participatory action research, which is "highly critical of mainstream education" and seeks to "empower the marginalized, the disenfranchised, the poor" whose "central objective...can be described by the term conscientization," which "rests on the development among students and teachers of critical consciousness of forms of class knowledge and class practice" (p. 53). For example, Demerath states that, "in addition to presenting an anthropological explanation of the local logic or culture of schooling in [the] community," the book seeks to "deepen our understanding of persisting educational inequalities in the U.S" (p. 4). He proudly proclaims that the "book builds on and seeks to contribute to a long sociological and anthropological tradition of research into the role of schooling in ongoing class stratification in the U.S" (pp. 4-5) and specifically mentions the previous work of scholars such as Margaret Mead—whom he says the book's viewpoint is "partly inspired by" (p. 9)—along with Pierre Boudrieu, Anette Lareau, Ellen Brantlinger, Alan Peshkin, and literally hundreds of others.

In the spring of 1997, Demerath identified and selected an Ohio Blue-Ribbon high school near the Midwestern university where he worked partly because the school had a principal who had a degree in anthropology. He presented a plan to conduct research at the school to the principal, and he was not only granted permission to do so, but also encouraged to expand his inquiry into a full longitudinal study. Demerath and his team knew the research strengths and advantages of being "insiders" in selecting a research role, and he became "something of an insider" (p. 8) when the investigation began in 1999 and the team spent four years conducting the research. The study had a longitudinal design where, over the course of the four years, he and his team spent "one to two days a week at the school during the first two years of the study," with the third and fourth years involving Demerath doing all the data collection on his own.

During this time they observed regular classes as well as enriched and AP; they "spent time in the cafeteria, hallways, and outside of school...attended concerts, games, staff meetings, in-services, award celebrations...and chatted informally with dozens of students and teachers" with observations recorded in "hundreds of pages of field notes." In December of 1999 they selected a diverse group of eight high- and under-achieving students to be focal participants in the study where they were interviewed for each of the next four years. The data included over sixty tape recorded interviews and a grounded survey that was administered to 605 students, all with the stated intent of achieving an "in-depth understanding of the class cultural processes in the community and school that seemed to confer advantages on students" (p. 14). This effort resulted in a ponderous corpus of qualitative data, which was then analyzed and coalesced together into a book segmented into three parts: 1) Community, Home, and School Settings; 2) Student Identity and Practice; and 3) Cost of Personal Advancement). These sections were further divided into seven chapters and a conclusion.

After presenting his constructed set of diverse patterns, Demerath proffers a set of recommendations to help address and remedy the problems identified at the school. In his conclusion Demerath surmises that there are "systematic practices of personal advancement in Wilton" (the pseudonym for the town studied)

that "have their basis in a long history of individual and community adaptations to the class stratification inherent in American society" (pp. 174-175). A central argument of the book is that these are "morally questionable practices" that are a "part of the overall culture of personal advancement that contributes to 'gaps' between students with different backgrounds" (p. 175). He claims that calling American public education "a system" would be "a misnomer," and that it more resembles "an open field of power with districts and schools competing against one another" with "relatively few rules regulating their practice and policies" (p. 175). Specifically, Demerath argues that students and the parents who are aware of this power structure benefit from it and promulgate it to "exercise their own sleight of hand" to "best position [themselves] to compete" and that parents have a "seeming awareness of the malevolent effect of their pushing," but have an "inability to restrain themselves" (p. 175).

Within this system he identifies themes of "a school emphasis on competitive success...keen awareness of competition, internalized attachments to personal success, highly specific aspirations, self-conscious attempts to habituate stress and fatigue," and students' "dizzying need to control their lives by 'colonizing their futures'" (p. 177). The study also found important educational differences in the experience of different kinds of students at Wilton. For example, Demerath presents the notion that female students seemed to be "more immersed in the competitive culture," that they "seemed to believe that they had to out-perform boys," and that they developed "warrior girl mentalities" and experienced "more stress because of it" (p. 178). The study also concludes that "African-American students were marginalized" because they "did not develop particular components of psychological capital" or "adopt the instrumental strategies for success" (pp. 178-179). Finally, the book also raised questions about "the extent to which the school was meeting the needs...of average and lower achieving students" with its focus on "hyper credentialing" and "emphasis on competitive academic achievement," which he says were stripping the school of its mission to educate all students, thereby causing these types of students to become defeated, alienated, and to largely exist in a state of passive non-compliance.

Demerath then briefly refers to a previous study that he conducted in Manus, New Guinea to juxtapose cultures. He provides seven recommendations for how to allay some of the aforementioned contemporary maladies of American public education. He recommends that Wilton and similar American high schools should do the following: 1) Teachers and administrators should engage in thoughtful conversation about how to control the extent to which competition is foregrounded in school; 2) Eliminate all forms of extra credit; 3) Explore ways to increase opportunities to engage in hands-on learning activities and decrease student spectatorship; 4) Decrease homework; 5) Offer students more assistance in how to navigate the high school and college admissions process; 6) Curtail the amount of freedom and choice offered to students; and 7) Explore ideas to move the day back to give students more time to sleep.

The strengths of the book include both the amount of time spent and the depth to which the site and the case studies were used in developing this longitudinal study to generate data. I also find the specificity of the of the culminating and synthesized findings, interpretations, and recommendations to be particularly strong and shrewd; Demerath's seven specific recommendations could have only been gleaned through such a thorough qualitative inquiry and offer very specific, focused, potentially productive and fruitful practices to help assuage the problem of inequality he initially sought to investigate. Conversely, I feel that the book's limitations include those of applicability, generalizability, and extrapolation. One might fundamentally question how validly the findings from one affluent mid-western town with a primary focus on eight kids can be generalized, extrapolated, and applied to any other school, culture, community, or set of individuals anywhere else. It is quite possible that these findings might only be suitable and pertinent to that one school and community. Additionally, I found the juxtaposition of his previous study on the Manus' culture to be insufficient and inadequate. He does introduce, refer to, and indicate that the study will be insightful and important for the comparison and contrasting of the two respective cultures' differing values and appropriations of the concept of "success", but, in my opinion, this contrast is offered in a cursory and far less substantial and insightful manner than it could have and should have been.

References

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