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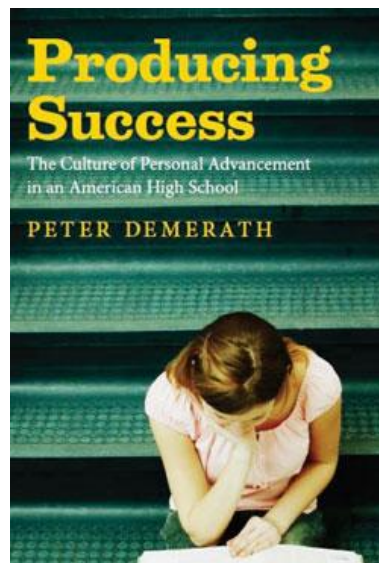
Demerath, Peter (2009). *Producing Success: The Culture of Personal Advancement in an American High School*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

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What should be the goal of an American high school education in a democratic, capitalist society at the opening of the 21st century? I kept pondering this question, reviewing my personal experiences as a high school student, a high school teacher and a parent, while I read Peter Demerath's anthropological study of Wilton Burnham High School in *Producing Success: The Culture of Personal Advancement in an American High School*. Demerath's well researched study, with data collection spanning four years, dissects and then synthesizes, not only the Wilton Burnham High School (WBHS) but also the community, Wilton, Ohio, in which it resides. The underlying theme of the book is that the "Wilton Way" as defined in the book leads to a perpetuation of social inequality. Demerath states: "this book argues that the tight—almost



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seamless—linkages between class ideology, parenting practices, ideal notions of personhood and accepted schools policies and practices make this a cultural system” (p. 2). The cultural system referred to is a set of beliefs and practices of middle and upper middle class suburban parents/communities that set the stage for the continuation of their prosperity as succeeding generations are born, graduate from school and take their place in the workforce.

My response to this book is “of course,” “this is nothing new,” and “what is wrong with this picture?” Demerath’s primary concerns are twofold: that the “Wilton Way” disadvantages non-middle class students/families unable to compete in this system and that the cost (physical and psychological), for students and society, of buying into these values and definitions of success are not worth the price paid. This creates a problem for me as an educator and as a member of society. In reviewing Demerath’s book, I shall try to explain the conundrum reading it has caused for me, and I believe, causes for many, if not most, educators.

This book, joining along with other texts in this genre (see for example: Humes, 2003; Klein, 2007; and Pope, 2001), sets its focus on a school with a mission to insure that its students will be well prepared to graduate from high school, enter and graduate from competitive (often ivy league) colleges and universities, and enter the work force as professionals who will achieve a high level of success in our society. This mission is accomplished by school and community working hand and hand. Chapter 1: “Class Cultural Ideology: The Wilton Way,” reinforces what Demerath often refers to as neoliberalism, a set of social, cultural, and political practices and policies that use the language of business--markets, efficiency, consumer choice, and individual autonomy and extends this kind of market logic into the realm of relationships. In other words, the traditional American values of individualism, work ethic, and competition put in a 21st century framework. To wit, Demerath several times quotes a Wilton teacher who tells him that the school is a business and business terminology often permeates administrative language.



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Chapter 2, “Parental Practices” details the type of middle class parenting, including significant interventions, which enable WBHS students to achieve success. These range from parenting skills that encourage autonomy, self-efficacy and hard work to securing special education services [even when unwarranted], tutoring, and other academic assistance to privilege their child. This parenting is combined with Chapter 3’s focus on “Institutional Advantaging & Hypercredentialing”, with long discussions of recognition, motivation, and freedom to make choices, which demonstrate how the school reinforces middle class parenting styles. These three chapters make up Part One of the text, which analyze Community, Home and School settings.

Part Two moves the examination to Student Identity and Practice. Chapter 4, “Student Acquisition of Psychological Capital” focuses on students and their assumption of these values. Even when parental pressure is removed, these students compete and strive, beyond exhaustion Demerath believes, to position themselves to achieve their goals. They become habituated to stress and exhaustion. Each individual assignment, project, quiz or test is perceived as a ‘do or die’ moment dramatically affecting the outcome of their entire education and, by default, their entire lives. A school with 40 valedictorians, all with a 4.0 average, becomes only part of the story. The consequences of this stance are discussed in Chapter 5, “Strategies for Achievement and Advancement.” Students who are skilled at fighting for every point available, be it over a faulty test question or extra credit. Students who are adept at jumping through teacher’s hurdles, but whose focus is always on grades rather than learning is one result. Cheating is not only rampant, but also viewed by most students as a necessary means to an end, not as an immoral act. The last third of the book, the “Costs of Personal Advancement” includes Chapter 6, ““Generation Stress” School Success” and Chapter 7, “Alienation, Marginalization and Incivility” continue to examine some of the negative consequences of the U. S. educational system both for the students who are successful as well as those who opt out.

As a product of a middle/upper middle class highly competitive high school, a former Advanced Placement teacher in a Blue Ribbon School of Excellence, and the parent of a child with an International Baccalaureate diploma, I related personally to many aspects of Demerath's discussion. On one side, I am well aware that the playing field is not level and that students with parents and a school system that not only nurtures, but also demands the achievements, academic and extracurricular, that this school and community demand, has its costs. It undoubtedly does perpetuate a cultural system that advantages middle and upper middle class students by setting them up for success *if* they chose to perform; perhaps, even if they don't make that choice. I personally shrank from the intensely competitive nature of my high school and while my lack of stellar performance did not rise to the level of Demerath's description of "passive noncompliance" by some students, I certainly, as a high school student, made the decision to not participate to the extent of my ability, and to leave the playing field to those more competitive and self-directed.

However, the values that were driven in by family and school still left their mark, I have achieved all, perhaps much more, than might have been expected from my high school career. I frequently wonder what would have happened if I had attended a less competitive high school—I surely would have been happier short term, but would my life have been as productive and as fulfilling as it has turned out if I had not received the preparation that was forced on me. I regularly assign my curriculum classes books in this genre: Pope's *Doing School* (2001) or Klein's *A Class Apart* (2007) are two that I have recently used. In the case of Klein's book, the site is Stuyvesant High School in New York City with a more diverse and somewhat less advantaged population. However, the message is the same as Demerath's—if you want to succeed in 21st century America, a high level of performance is what is expected of students. The conundrum I referred to earlier rises again. The physical, psychological and social costs to the students who opt in to the system is very high. I remember visiting an Ivy League campus with my son when he was a junior in high

school. The student leading the campus tour mentioned that if you fell ill and had to miss a class, either nobody would lend you their class notes or they would falsify the notes due to competition and jockeying for graduate school admittance. I told my son that he could not apply to a place that held those values. At the same time, I am keenly aware that the students graduating from institutions such as that one are the future leaders, innovators, etc. of our nation (Enron and Wall Street scandals notwithstanding).

What about the students left behind? The ones Demerath believes don't have a chance--either because they and their families do not understand the system or because they reject it. Now this becomes a complex problem. We live in a country where the Horatio Alger story still flourishes and where people believe in education as a path to social mobility. There are excellent magnet programs in many urban venues where that opportunity still may arise *if* certain conditions are in place. However, the gist of Demerath's argument is undoubtedly true: there is a set of values that belong to the middle class, the upper middle class and the upper class that privileges their children for success. The school, working hand and hand with those parents and the community organizations they form, clearly does create and perpetuate that social inequality. One question that might occur is can (and should) these values and practices be transferred to lower and lower middle class schools as a way of leveling the playing field?

What is the solution to "morally questionable practices that are a part of the overall culture of personal advancement that contributes to achievement 'gaps' between students from different backgrounds" (Demerath, 2009, p. 175)? Chapter 8, Conclusions, does not provide answers, but it does make some recommendations which should be considered by educators. First, and foremost, is the call to engage in a conversation about the role of competition in the classroom. This includes a de-emphasis on grades and a renewed emphasis on learning as part of that discussion. And, it would include, according to Demerath, the elimination of extra-credit which he believes leads to grade inflation. A second recommendation deals with active

learning and rebalancing school days with an eye to eliminating homework, which the author believes has “dubious value” and not only advantages students with the time and the place at home to complete it, but also diminishes time for students to participate in other activities (p. 183). A third, and last recommendation, is to focus on how schools can assist students with their post high school goals, particularly their focus on process of selecting and applying for colleges and universities. Here the author is concerned that students will be so exhausted from high school that they will ‘burn out’ once they reach the university they have worked so hard attend or be disappointed that they were not admitted to their first choice despite the effort expended and sacrifices made. In particular, Demerath is concerned about the stress and burn out rate for girls who, he says, are much more competitive when it comes to high achievement—a warrior woman complex.

I began this review by asking: What should be the goal of an American high school education in a democratic, capitalist society at the opening of the 21st century? I close by stating I am still unsure. On the one hand, there is no doubt that the playing field needs to be more equitable and that the nature of competition in high achieving schools is leading to some questionable moral and ethical behaviors. On the other hand, as the newscasters, economists and others, constantly remind me, there are many countries, China, India and South Korea to name a few, who are “hungry” and seeking to dominate the world’s economy and that the need for our schools to reinforce the values that led to America’s pre-eminence in the world is crucial unless we, as a society, are willing to settle for a significantly lower standard of living. There are many people who believe that an American economic decline could be a 21st century outcome for the world economy and that only a highly competitive, achievement centered system of education may be able to keep this outcome at bay.

In closing I might point out that Demerath may need to focus his next study at a much lower educational level. In July, 26, 2010 the New York *Times* featured an article titled

“Equity of Test is Debated as Children Compete for Gifted Kindergarten.” This article discussed the test preparation for “gifted” kindergarten placement including a two-month long “boot camp” for 4 year-olds which includes “eight one-on-one 45 minute sessions and two test-prep books” with a price tag of \$1,075! Some parents quoted in the article were unaware that test prep books beyond what the city provided were available, others stated they couldn’t afford the more than \$50 price tag for materials they located online. The article concludes that “A lot of middle-and upper-middle class families rely on this.” The article states kindergarten “test prep is a new form of discrimination, “not by race, by social class.”” Dr. Demearth, high school is the tip of the iceberg.

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