Misfits in School Literacy

Whom Are U. S. Schools Designed to Serve?

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For much of the history of U.S. education, schools were designed to meet the needs of members of society's upper class, preparing them for the rigors of college and the demands of corporate, social, and governmental leadership roles (Davis & Bauman, 2013). With this mission, the curriculum was canonical and narrow, with learning funneled through the assumption of American "exceptionalism" and the superiority of Western culture. This focus implicitly conveyed the message that anyone who didn't belong, or didn't fit, should drop out and get a job. (See Table 12.1 for the way in which one state, Georgia, has shown a gradual increase in the number of people earning high school diplomas.) The students' responsibility was to adjust to how schools operated given that formal education provided their primary conduit to the credentials and knowledge that would serve their careers well. Expecting the school to adjust to the students—especially those whose home lives required great adaptations to the expectations and practices of extant

TABLE 12.1. Georgia High School Graduation Rates

Year	% of Georgia adults with high school diplomas
1940	17%
1950	20%
1960	32%
1970	41%
1980	56%
1990	71%
2000	79%

educational traditions—would undermine its mission to prepare a college-ready student population that could ultimately rise to leadership roles in society. Given the difficulties of adaptation and questionable payoff for persistence, students from outside this elite subgroup often accepted the message, dropped out of school, and went to work.

Over time, a separate and ultimately competing vision of education arose in the United States: to reduce dropout rates and provide a comprehensive education for the broadest range of students possible, at least through the age of 16. Youth who did not fit the college-bound profile remained in school well beyond what had been required of their grandparents, even attending college when some systems went to open admissions in the 1970s, making college available to any high school graduate from a public university's designated feeder districts. Curriculum and instruction remained largely the same, however, with some adaptations to the more diverse student body now within schools' purview to educate. Such accommodations, however, have often been ridiculed by those for whom education remains a fairly elite enterprise (see, e.g., Morici, 2015). For every advocate of expanding and broadening the curriculum to include possibilities such as young adult literature that addresses issues of contemporary youth culture and society (e.g., Wolk, 2009), or diverse texts that speak to the experiences of students from outside the White Western canon (e.g., Fisher, 2007), a belligerent response has followed, claiming that rigor is being undermined and learning diluted by moves away from the most classic of educations (e.g., Stotsky, 1999).

My purpose in this chapter is to consider the fit between schools, particularly those adhering to "traditional" educational practices centered on formalism and factual knowledge, and the kinds of students they are now expected to educate and graduate. The education of diverse populations has raised questions about the degree to which various population subgroups have been served by the historical and current conduct of schooling. I next review research that documents the poor fit that many people have experienced with those educational structures that have endured well beyond their initial purpose of educating the elite for their inevitable societal leadership roles. With the recognition that all social categories are problematic, I organize this review around familiar classifications of race, gender, and social class. Based on this overview, I discuss the issues and suggest one implication that would help make school a more humane and enlightening place for students, teachers, and administrators.

RACE

Many researchers have begun to inquire into the reasons for differential school performance of racial groups in school. I am aware that "Big Five" racial theories (White, Black, Latin@, Asian, Native American) are entirely social constructions rather than true biological classifications (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013). I rely on them for this review because demographics are often categorized racially, even as I recognize the dubious benefits of adhering to what are now widely understood as questionable means of sorting people into groups given how much of the earth's population must be force-fit into the Big Five races, how much cultural and ethnic variety exists within each group, and how often mixed-race people are typically assigned to the lowest status race of their heritage, at times against their own sense of identity. Dissatisfied with the conclusions of White researchers such as Hernnstein and Murray (1994), who used intelligence test data to

argue that Blacks are genetically inferior to Whites, these scholars have looked beyond traditional academic measures of literacy to reveal the ways in which youth compose and read texts outside the purview of the assessment machinery.

This effort to study literacy through investigations into authentic literacy practices in community settings rather than through achievement test data produced through forced school examinations got traction in the 1970s. In a decade-long linguistic ethnography, Heath (1983) studied Southeastern U.S. Piedmont residents, documenting the degree to which school expectations were matched with the home and community literacy practices of rural families. The Black neighborhood that she studied was oriented to play and performance, with silent, sequestered reading discouraged as antisocial and inappropriate to community life. Heath found that the expectations for silent compliance during reading lessons in school felt alien to children who were encouraged at home to get outside and interact with other people in the neighborhood, to engage in the performative practices of their community rather than the relatively asocial experience of silent reading.

Since then, scores of scholars, many of them from an African American heritage, have expanded on Heath's (1983) findings, investigating African American literacy development in a variety of regions and settings. These scholars (e.g., Kirkland, 2013) have found that although Black students are continually measured to have low and declining literacy rates in school, they live rich lives with print, spoken, and multimodal texts in their teeming literacy lives once outside the range of tolling school bells.

Kirkland (2014) makes a key distinction in considering how such opposing research-based conclusions could be found on the same population. School achievement tends to be measured in single-sitting examinations that are based on problems posed by test-makers, with scores computed for statistical manipulation. Ethnographies tend to be conducted outside school over time, with detailed documentation of social and cognitive processes through which self-chosen literacy goals are pursued, often with feedback, affirmation, critique, and other forms of response helping to shape literacy products, including readings. Such studies of Black students'—primarily urban in most research—literacy activities focus on what the youth consider to be authentic, meaningful processes and products, and typically find that literacy achievement is high, sustained, and of great social value. These literacy practices are characterized by their profoundly social qualities as youth perform for one another and use texts to position themselves in the midst of youth culture and others in their environments—a stark contrast to the solitary, detached manner in which their literacy is measured in response to culturally remote texts and tasks in school assessments.

Kirkland (2014) finds a set of related problems associated with relying on conventional school assessment to stand as definitive measures of literacy attainment. First, the literacy problems on which they are tested are not posed by the students. Rather, they are designed by adults paid to generate test problems that meet some psychometric standard for reliability across the whole testing population, often one dominated by middle-class students whose practices are more congenial to such testing. This approach of norming answers according to one dominant demographic produces feelings of alienation from the examinations, and consequently from school, on the part of those from other cultural groups given that school becomes associated with punitive testing that is indifferent to what the kids find important in their literacy lives.

Second, the exams assume that their test items are isomorphic across test-takers; that is, they are premised on the idea that the learning tasks they present to students are

understood in the same manner by all within the test-taking population. In particular, the test designers tend to assume that the task *as they envision and intend it* is in turn taken up by all students in the same fashion in which they offer it. Newman, Griffin, and Cole (1989; cf. Smagorinsky, 2011) refer to this phenomenon as the problem of assuming a *task* or *problem isomorph* in which a learning problem is presented to people of different backgrounds in different settings, under the assumptions that this standardized procedure will be interpreted identically by all who encounter it, because that is how the designers believe it should work. The likelihood that the tests are constructed in relation to *autonomous texts*—texts with an inherent meaning that is not subject to reconstruction and instantiation of additional meanings by readers—is highly unlikely given the dubious nature of the assumption in light of virtually any social or constructivist perspective on textual composition and interpretation (for a general critique, see Nystrand, 1986; for an elaboration of a cultural theory of reading, see Smagorinsky, 2001).

Such attention to contexts is not only not available in the standardized world of assessment but it also obliterates such matters as "exogenous" or outside factors, particularly poverty, from the calculations, reifying the assumption that the tasks are isomorphic (Berliner, 2014). The ethnographic work assembled by Kirkland (2014), however, demonstrates that literacy practices and tasks are situated and constructed, and not amenable to standardized treatment.

Finally, school-based definitions of literacy are securely grounded in print, ignoring the vast compositional means available to youth elsewhere. Kirkland (2014) concludes that "as they age, Black males learn literacy less in school and more outside it. This literacy learning is defined less by print . . . and more by a variety of social and cultural assets/flows necessary for achieving meaning and message making important to their lives." As many have noted (e.g., Kajder, 2010), the Black population is one of many social groups in which print literacy serves as but one compositional tool among many in the digital world of the 21st century. What is starkly evident from Kirkland's (2014) comparison is the fact that young African Americans who are consistently measured as having low literacy in school assessments are reading and composing texts of great social value in nonschool contexts.

At about the same time that Heath (1983) conducted her study of Piedmont populations, Philips (1983) conducted her ethnographic study of the experiences of Warm Springs Indians on an Oregon reservation. These young people were often stereotyped as "silent" in school, yet they were found to be quite vocal on the playground, suggesting to Philips that the problem was not that Native Americans are silent, but that the structures and practices of schools provided such an alienating environment for them that they shut down. Since then, others (e.g., Four Arrows, 2013) have contended that Western approaches to schooling embody values of consumerism and disengagement from nature that continue to make school a hostile place for Native American students. As Deloria (1974) and many others have documented, the primary goal of the "Indian Schools" to which Native youth were sent a century ago, away from their families and heritage, was to eviscerate their Indian soul and replace it with sensibilities fully assimilated to White society, with their native languages forbidden and English required. For this cultural, ethnic, and racial group, the schooling experience has been one of colonization and oppression, with such seemingly routine practices as writing distrusted because of the manner in which written treaties were historically used to confiscate tribal lands through legal obfuscation and treachery (Belgarde, LoRé, & Meyer, 2009.

Other racial groups have been found to fit poorly with school as well. Moll (2000), for instance, found that Mexican American families in Arizona were oriented to cultural practices that made participation in school activities difficult. In home and community, families relied on *funds of knowledge,* or collective ways of knowing and acting in society, that were at odds with their schools' value on independent, competitive performance. At home, people might pool their resources to flourish as a social group, such as when they would pitch in to buy a vehicle so that many could travel to work together. They might trade services, such as exchanging mechanical work for food, as a way to gain collectively rather than compete individually. They might further share knowledge about newly posted jobs or other valuable information through which the community as a whole, rather than the individuals within it, benefits from opportunities. In school, however, such collaboration and group work were discouraged and indeed punished when collaboration was treated as cheating. This poor fit between community and school has been documented by many others since (e.g., Portes & Smagorinsky, 2010), particularly within the New Latin@ Diaspora, in which areas of the U. S. that have historically not hosted immigrant populations from Mexico and Mesoamerica become the destinations of refugees seeking work opportunities.

Immigrants in general have had a difficult time adjusting to U.S. schools. Fu and Graff (2009) look more deeply than the superficial gaze taken by policymakers to understand the immigrant experience, one that has no single pathway but is variable by ethnic and racial group, area of settlement, and much else. They argue that newcomers encounter circumstances much different from those cultivating the development of native-born youth. They often are placed in the role of translating for their elders, often in their capacity as workers in their family businesses. They often "become role models and surrogate parents for other young children in the community and their families. They care for their young siblings or cousins, take them to see doctors, and attend parent conferences" (p. 402). Taking on adult responsibilities both shows remarkable social, cultural, and linguistic competence in life outside school, and undermines school-sanctioned success, in that their familial duties may result in school absence, poor grades, and an increased likelihood of dropping out of school altogether (Perreira, Harris, & Lee, 2006).

Similar to Kirkland's (2014) account of African American youth, immigrant youth are not restricted to print literacy in their home and community lives. Fu and Graff (2009) find that the Digital Age, through which immigrant youth are immersed in a world of multiple literacies, helps to shape their identities as new Americans (cf. Vargas, 2006). Fu and Graff (2009) argue that "more research on popular culture and literacy identities for newcomers would illuminate their resilience and adroitness, thereby dispelling current and questionable conceptions of them as illiterate individuals in need of saving" (p. 402).

Policymakers rarely are privy to these rich literacy lives, because they rely on superficial data such as standardized test scores administered under alien and intimidating circumstances to make an absolute judgment about literacy development and achievement, and in turn, about teaching effectiveness. Yet those who study youth engagement with literacy in authentic (i.e., self-chosen) contexts consistently find that literacy comprises a critical aspect of their development and socialization. Even within school settings, careful observers have learned that taking kids' abilities at face value can lead to false and debilitating conclusions and assumptions. Primary school teacher Cynthia Ballenger (1999), for instance, when puzzled by the behavior of her Haitian immigrant children in her classroom, instead of forcing them to fit in the structures of conventional U.S. schooling,

inquired into how they engaged with the world and adapted her teaching to accommodate their interactional styles and learning needs. But that solution—for teachers and schools to adapt to diverse learners, rather than for students to adapt to educational practices long engrained in schools—appears to be the exception rather than the rule, if the research base has accurately characterized how schools tend to be organized to the disadvantage of newcomers and others from outside the cultural mainstream.

The Asian racial group is often touted as a "model minority" culture, so successful that its members out-achieve Whites in academics and are therefore an ideal fit with U.S. schools. Asians are, for instance, the largest racial minority group at The University of Georgia, a surprising development given their relatively low numbers in the general state population (Shearer, 2015). Shearer clarifies that "the Asian category actually includes many ethnic and racial groups, comprising students of both Indian and Chinese descent," demonstrating the difficulty of using Big Five racial classifications for demographic purposes. Le (2012 online article), however, asserts that the "model minority" reputation is both mythic and overly homogeneous:

> It's true that 42% of all Asian American adults have at least a college degree, the highest of all the major racial/ethnic groups. It's also common for Asian American students to have the highest test scores and/or GPAs within any given high school or college cohort. But what usually gets left out is the fact that not all Asian Americans are the same. For every Chinese American or South Asian who has a college degree, the same number of Southeast Asians are still struggling to adapt to their lives in the U.S. . . . [Southeast Asians] have the highest high school dropout rates in the country. *Again, not all Asian Americans are the same*. (emphasis added)

Like other immigrant groups, Asian Americans are both highly diverse and include ethnic and national groups that have often waged war on one another, making them difficult to homogenize into one big, uniform race of people. As Le (2012) asserts, some Asian nationalities fit U.S. schooling patterns much better than others, have stronger familial models for school success, immigrate with differential cultural capital with which to undertake life on a new continent and in a new society, and in many ways disrupt the notion that they represent a stable and invariant racial group ready-made for school success. This assertion is supported by demographic data compiled by *Asian-Nation. org,* which provides the breakdown reported in Table 12.2. As this table makes clear, aggregating Asian American data for demographic purposes is quite unreliable given the variation in poverty levels, English language proficiency, and other factors that predict school success.

Furthermore, argues Yoo (2010), "People often assume that students with excellent academic performances have excellent psychological well-being. The model minority myth may motivate Asian American students to achieve higher test scores; but with often unfair and unrecognized burden, pressure, and discrimination, they may struggle emotionally feeling overwhelmed and socially disconnected" ("Doing Well vs. Feeling Well" section of online article, paragrap. 1). This affective dimension of schooling, which runs throughout the literature on school engagement, remains unacknowledged by policymakers who believe that schools serve solely academic purposes, and that students' feelings about their relationships with school and its people are irrelevant to educational processes. Such a view is roundly contradicted by the sources I have consulted for this review.

TABLE 12.2. Socioeconomic Characteristics by Racial/Ethnic and Asian Ethnic Groups

	Not proficient in English	Less than high school	College degree	Advanced degree	High skill occupation	Married, spouse present	Home-owner	Median personal income	Median family income	Living in poverty	Public assistance
					Numbers are in percentages, except for income.						
Whites	0.7	15.3	25.3	3.0	21.4	64.5	78.2	$23,640	$48,500	9.4	1.3
Blacks	0.8	29.1	13.6	1.2	12.3	38.0	54.4	$16,300	$33,300	24.9	4.5
Latinos/Hispanics	30.3	48.5	9.9	1.6	9.6	56.3	52.4	$14,400	$36,000	21.4	3.5
Native American Indians	2.6	27.4	10.8	0.9	11.9	50.2	64.2	$14,500	$32,240	25.1	6.1
Indians	8.4	12.6	64.4	12.5	51.6	74.9	56.8	$26,000	$69,470	8.2	0.9
Cambodian, Hmong, or Laotian	44.3	52.7	9.2	0.4	9.8	66.6	53.3	$16,000	$43,850	22.5	9.9
Chinese	31.3	23.6	46.3	8.5	41.9	67.1	65.7	$20,000	$58,300	13.1	1.8
Filipinos	7	13.1	42.8	4.3	29.7	62.7	67.6	$23,000	$65,400	6.9	1.6
Japanese	10	9.5	40.8	4.6	32.0	60.7	70.8	$26,000	$61,630	8.6	0.9
Koreans	32.9	13.8	43.6	5.6	27.0	69.0	51.9	$16,300	$48,500	15.5	1.6
Pacific Islanders	7.1	21.7	13.6	1.6	13.8	61.4	48.1	$19,100	$50,000	16.7	4.4
Vietnamese	40.4	37.8	13.8	2.5	22.6	61.2	60.0	$16,000	$51,500	13.8	4.8

Note. Numbers are in percentages, except for income. From *www.asian-nation.org/demographics.shtml*. Reprinted by permission.

SOCIAL CLASS

Readers might infer that schools are designed to suit the White population well, given that non-White students tend to fit poorly with schools' social and academic emphases. Yet the White demographic is so large and varied that it is difficult to make any generalizations about the White population and its members' fitness for school. For many years, Whites were the only people likely to attend school at all, so presumably schools are suited to their orientation to literacy and school practices. Yet the White population attending school was not characteristic of the population at large, being more affluent and advantaged than most. I next review the challenges that face subpopulations within schools to illustrate how a great many White students feel just as distanced from mainstream school practices as do members of minoritized racial groups.

Heath's (1983) study of literacy practices in the Southeastern Piedmont region included two additional groups beyond the Black neighborhood featured previously. The other population of principal interest was the White fundamentalist Christian community, whose orientation to reading came through their engagement at home and church with the *Holy Bible*. In these settings, fundamentalist families learned that The Word is literally true and not to be disputed, a stance that enabled them to appropriate Biblical narratives and morals that stand above the questioning of human minds. This conception of the written text as essentially true and beyond question served these students poorly in school, where reading tasks required questioning and inference-making that violated the whole value system on which the children were being raised. Like the Black students studied by Heath, these students had developed home literacies that were at odds with those practiced in school, leading to poor academic performance in relation to the "mainstreamers," those more middle-class, less literally oriented families (often the children of teachers) whose home literacy events mimicked the sorts of reading practices emphasized in schools. These mainstreamers comprised Heath's third population, one whose youth fit school as conventionally carried out and were less likely to struggle through prior orientations that made silent, isolated reading with a critical stance difficult to undertake.

Other ethnographies have found similar struggles with other White population subsets. Eckert (1989), for instance, studied an upper Midwestern community school that enrolled a range of White students, from "jocks" to "burnouts." Jocks were those students who felt a strong affiliation with the school institution and bought into its values and activities. They might be athletes, as suggested by the term, but might include any youth who participated in the school's sponsored activities and events: clubs, student government, afterschool and extracurricular activities, and others. This demographic tended toward affluence, given that people who can spend time in extracurriculars rarely hold down jobs after school.

At the other end of the spectrum, Eckert (1989) found burnouts, those students who lacked a strong feeling of affiliation for school. Often from blue-collar families, they were oriented to the adult world of work and all of its trappings, such a smoking cigarettes. These students considered school an adolescent holding pen in which their path toward maturation was stunted by the control exerted by adults and student leaders. Their goal instead was to become financially independent by working in adult settings after school rather than staying in school and being treated like kids. The scripts of compliance embraced by the jocks were rejected by the burnouts, who cut class, hung out in

parts of the building avoided by their affluent classmates, rejected academic rewards as worth pursuing, and left school for jobs once the final bell rang.

Eckert's (1989) study, though dated in some ways, retains currency in its general characterization of the manner in which students' levels of affiliation with the school institution, often following familial patterns, affect their willingness to accept school structures and practices as normative and fitting their rate of maturation. Students who reject the idea that school grades will have an impact on their future prospects tend to engage less with schoolwork than do those who accept the educational maxim that school performance sets the stage for the next step in life, often college. With little respect for the value of schoolwork, such students engage minimally with its demands, adding to the population of misfits who must remain in school until old enough to check out legally.

Eckert therefore argues that social class orientation is typically reproduced from generation to generation, with "the perpetuation of class inequalities through the funneling of children into their parents' place in society, and the enculturation of children into hierarchical social forms through explicit and implicit educational practices" (p. 7). This reproduction of the social division of labor channels youth toward particular types of experiences and outcomes through both explicit and implicit means, based on their social class of origin (see Williams, 1977).

People living in poverty—perhaps the social class most in need of educational support—find it difficult to escape the generational cycle implied by the notion of the reproduction of the social division of labor. Gorski (2013), who himself broke out of a low socioeconomic status (SES) background to become an educator, sees the problems as systemic: "We deny people in poverty access to equal educational opportunity, access to healthcare, and even access to air unspoiled by environmental hazards. We do this for generations and then, when some low-income youth don't do well on standardized tests or drop out of school or seem disengaged in class, we forget about these inequities and blame it on their 'culture'" (p. 54). Gorski has his sights set on the ways in which people of low (or no) income are pathologized in society at large, and in educational discourse in particular. This notion that the poor are agents of their own poverty has a long history in Western culture, in which income and character are often seen as mutually causal (Smagorinsky & Taxel, 2004, 2005). When poverty coexists with race, multiple factors collude to make it difficult to develop the resources required to elevate one's financial status such that it endures through succeeding generations.

The "culture of poverty" perspective on low/no-income people is well-evidenced in the work of Ruby Payne, a White, middle-class Midwesterner whose self-published books (e.g., 2013; the fifth edition of the book that made her a star on the inservice circuit) on educating poor children are both wildly popular among teachers and roundly excoriated by university theorists (see, e.g., Bomer, Dworin, May, & Semingson, 2008; Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009; Kunjufu, 2007; and many others).

This perspective on people in poverty is not new, and is not exclusively American. Honore-Antoine Fregier, speaking in Paris in 1840 (quoted in Smagorinsky & Taxel, 2005, p. 82), asserted that

> the poor and the vicious classes have been and will always be the most productive breeding ground of evildoers of all sorts; it is they whom we shall designate as the dangerous classes. For even when vice is not accompanied by perversity, by the very fact that it allies itself with poverty in the same person, he is an object of fear to society, he is dangerous.

In France, "les classes dangereuses" horrified the bourgeoisie, who believed them fated for lives of crime, not because of their circumstances but because of their moral deficiencies. Such a belief in the inherent moral decrepitude of people who lack money remains in society at large and in many policy positions. For example, many states receiving character education grants targeted people of low SES for character interventions designed to fix their personal deficiencies, which presumably will level the playing field so that their opportunities in life are the same as those of people of affluence (Smagorinsky & Taxel, 2004, 2005) in the sort of "no excuses" solutions offered, for example, by Jensen (2005), whose "brain-based" teaching ideas efface poverty as a factor in teaching and learning.

Much work in understanding poverty, while considering race, does not associate race with SES, even though the two are inextricably related (American Psychological Association, n.d.), a phenomenon known in sociological studies as "intersectionality." Undoubtedly, being a member of a racial minority group invites additional negative perceptions and assumptions to those that accompany low SES, leading to such overgeneralizations as the existence of a "thug class" permeating urban settings (as argued by Murray, 2001, among many others). One need not foreground race, however, to consider that low SES, whether urban, rural, or otherwise in location, produces systemic challenges for those who live under its oppressive conditions.

In school, students of low SES tend to be tracked into low-level classes in which pathologizing assumptions obtain (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2010). As Gorski (2013) notes, these students are most likely to be given a "basic" education administered through worksheets and other means of instruction designed to keep them quietly at work so as to presumably mute their thuggish tendencies. Yet such instruction makes school even more alienating than it is already, given that the students find schoolwork to be tedious, mind-numbing, and useless. Pedagogies of this sort are surely imposed on other students as well; their ubiquity in low tracks, however, virtually ensures that children and youth from low/no income families will find school to be a place in which they fit quite poorly.

SEX AND GENDER

Racial, ethnic, and cultural groups are not the only ones found to be at odds with how schools work. The American Association of University Women (AAUW; 1991) argued that schools shortchange girls by acceding to and reinforcing patterns suited to males, such as the tendency to argue against each other rather than to work relationally toward consensus and collaborative solutions. Schools, according to the report, reify extant social dynamics that privilege males over females in society at large, contributing to problems with self-esteem that lower girls' expectations over time and produce generational effects that perpetuate social hierarchies. This perspective, rooted in the first wave of feminist psychology launched by Gilligan (1982) and others, found that when men are entrusted with the task of defining matters such as morality, and do so by norming responses such that they correspond to those produced by male research samples, the research inevitably finds women to be lacking. In contrast, these feminist scholars posited that men and women are fundamentally different in their orientation to the world, such that male samples produce deficit conclusions about women, who are more likely to collaborate than compete.

The AAUW (1991) report, while getting great traction among university researchers and theorists, found less acceptance elsewhere. Sommers (2000)—a self-styled "equity feminist," in contrast to what she considers the "victim feminists" who authored the AAUW report—rebutted their claims, arguing that instead of seeking equity, feminist scholars were seeking to depress the growth of boys. Girls, she argued, in fact, outperform boys in just about every scholastic arena, raising questions about the degree to which boys are advantaged over girls. The discrepancy between girls' academic success in school and men's domination of the job market continues to vex those who see a causal relation between school achievement and work success, with patriarchal views and entrenched power elevating males in the workplace in spite of academic underperformance and its presumably predictive potential.

Given that the AAUW report is now nearly a quarter-century old, it's difficult to say whether the problems they identify existed at the time (per Sommers's [2000] critique), or if they persist today. There is at least anecdotal evidence that assumptions about girls' ability to work in STEM fields remain in place. In a book produced to accompany a new Barbie Doll, for instance, author Marenco (2013) provides the following question and answer:

Q: How many young women does it take to design and program a computer game?

A: None. Only boys know how to do that.

Techno-dolt Barbie tries to create a computer game, but crashes her laptop and calls upon friends Steven and Brian to fix it for her. The good news is that reviewers have uniformly excoriated the book on Amazon reviews. The bad news is that Eisenhower-era beliefs about girls' helplessness and boys' savvy have persisted well into the next century. If these assumptions are at work to any degree, then girls still face an uphill climb finding validation in the mixed company of school.

But Sommers (2000) and her feisty battle with other sorts of feminists is not isolated in thinking that schools are alienating places for boys. Smith and Wilhelm (2002), drawing on extensive interviews with teenage boys, found that they find the dry, dull reading assigned in schools to be repellant, and the isolating practices of schools to work against their desire to work on projects with friends. In contrast, the boys undertook reading for personal knowledge and interest outside school with vigor, particularly when it helped them with hobbies and pursuits such as playing video games. Indeed, the young men in their study reported that they preferred difficult texts and games that advanced their skills to those beneath their ability levels, a stance that contradicts assumptions about their rejection of school reading as too difficult. But the researchers conclude that school reading is repugnant to them not because of its difficulty, but because of its tedium and disassociation from their lives. If school provides a poor fit for girls, then it appears equally incommodious for boys.

Researchers into the school experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth further find that school is an alienating place for those outside the male–female binary. Perhaps the most flagrant abuse concerns bullying by heterosexual students and teachers who cannot open their hearts to those of LGBTQ orientations (Miller, Burns, & Johnson, 2013). To Martino (2009), just including books with LGBTQ characters to promote acceptance is bound to fail. Rather, he asserts that a pedagogy that

overtly interrogates heteronormativity is required to get students to understand the social construction of sexuality.

The heteronormative assumptions made by many in school institutions render those outside its spectrum into "others," who are viewed in deficit terms. Society has surely changed dramatically early in the 21st century in terms of legal shifts toward LGBTQ marriage, workplace rights, and other extensions of rights; the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* declassified homosexuality as a mental illness in 1973, nearly three decades after Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin (1948) found gay and lesbian orientations to be within the normal range of human sexuality. Yet obstacles remain in schools to feelings of affiliation by the typical LGBTQ student. Occasional national news of transgendered homecoming queens (see Nichols, 2013) and gay football players (see Pettigrew, 2015) give hope that, eventually, schools will become hospitable places for students across the sexual and gender spectra. Just as racism has persisted well beyond the Civil Rights laws of the 1960s, however, deficit views of LGBTQ youth, often fueled by the beliefs of religious extremists, continue to undermine the degree to which they find school to be a place that supports their growth. As with other youth who feel alienated by the school institution and its general population, the lack of feelings of belonging undermine engagement with curriculum and instruction, promote dysphoric feelings and thus reduce affiliation, contribute to feelings of depression and self-harm, and in general make school a difficult place to fit in and profit academically.

DISCUSSION

This chapter's titular question, "Misfits in School Literacy: Whom Are U.S. Schools Designed to Serve?," has no easy answer. My tentative conclusion is that schools serve the same people they were originally designed to accommodate: students of relative affluence who affiliate with the institution's promise that school achievement will pay off in life success. A century ago, these were just about the only people who persisted through to public school graduation. My own grandparents' generation was typical of that era. My mother's father left home at age 13—part of a great sweep of the first batch of children when his father remarried and his new wife wanted a new brood of her own to raise—to become a plumber's apprentice. My father's parents were refugees from Eastern European pogroms, and their two Belarussian-born sons were put to work as sign painters without attending school upon immigration to New York. My father and his U.S.-born brother attended school, with my father being the family's sole graduate from a secondary school. I focus here on males, because I am aware of no records of school attendance for my female ancestors of that era, although my mother, born in 1915, graduated from high school at age 15, earned an undergraduate degree, and was working on a master's degree when her studies were interrupted by marriage and her dedication to raising five children. She, however, was the exception in her own family and others like it.

Today, all would be required to stay in school through age 16 or 17 (see Wikipedia [n.d.] for a list of global compulsory education ages). Many might even stay through graduation. The website *governing.com* (2015) reports that most states now claim graduation rates of 55–75% for students who are economically disadvantaged, speak limited English, and are diagnosed as having disabilities. Whether this persistence is due to schools'

greater accommodation to youth of difference, to the manipulation and falsification of statistics, or to schools' more aggressive policing of attendance is not answerable through the simple report of these rates.

If the work I have reviewed in this chapter suggests anything, however, it is that schools expect students to adapt to their institution more than schools accommodate a diverse range of students. This problem has been greatly exacerbated by the 21st-century accountability movement that has shifted attention from the imperative a few decades ago to celebrate diversity to a quite different charge: to standardize teaching, learning, and assessment according to the values of schools' most durable stakeholders. These remain the most affluent, typically White students. I was not able to locate any demographic data on the population of people involved in standardized test design, but my sense is that they are Whites from privileged backgrounds. When I did some consulting for the Educational Testing Service in the 1990s, that's about the only demographic I met in many visits to their New Jersey campus. Given continual concerns with cultural bias in standardized assessment—a seeming inevitability when uniformity is the goal—I can only assume that this problem remains intractable (see Padilla, 2001). Introducing the possibility of variation into a standardized system seems destined to produce confusion of the sort rarely accommodated in the policy world, at least in the ideal world in which policymakers seem perpetually to be ensconced, one that can fabricate assumptions—such as the canard that poverty is irrelevant to teaching and learning performance—so that the ideals of the system remain blissfully intact, if quite removed from reality.

The reality is that schools have always accommodated some students better than they accommodate others, perhaps most. The current effort at standardization is entrenching this problem further, making schools a place where too many kids struggle to fit within structures that suit them poorly. The problem of adaptation falls largely on students, and the greatest challenge for adaptation is required of those students who are least prepared to undertake it. In spite of the proliferation of posters featuring kittens of different colors accompanied by exhortations to celebrate diversity, then, schools remain primarily in the business of making students as similar as possible. Such an approach makes school more accessible to those already well-matched to its policies and practices, and less accessible to those whose home and community backgrounds, and possibly genetic disposition, in the case of the gender question, are least amenable to adaptation.

IMPLICATIONS

Traditionally, it is the role of the author to give research recommendations on what the scholarly community should investigate in order to better inform policy and pedagogy. The fact is, however, that for roughly 35 years, researchers have convincingly demonstrated that schools that adapt to students produce more enriching educations, and schools that remain rigid and dedicated to formalist, authoritarian instruction are exclusionary and alienating for the majority of students (for references, see the work cited throughout this chapter). I am not persuaded that more research demonstrating the same results will effect changes when policymakers rely on anecdotes, ideals, and ideology, and ignore libraries full of empirical studies. I'll relate a story told by Roy O'Donnell in the 1980s, concerning a young boy from O'Donnell's rural South. The boy, speaking to his elders, referred to a classmate as "iggernant." No, interrupted the

adult; the term is *ignorant,* not *iggernant.* Nope, replied the boy. Ignorant, that's when you don't know nothin'. Iggernant—that's when you don't know nothin', *and you don't want to know nothin'.*

And that's who is developing and implementing educational policy and therefore shaping teaching practice: the "iggernant" among us. Journals produce volumes of work that are overridden by politicians' wishful thinking, all the way up to the U.S. Secretary of Education and his fanciful basis for his agenda (Ravitch, 2014). If this chapter has any implication that matters, it's not for more research. It's for policymakers to have some understanding of what they are doing by getting acquainted with what's already out there, so that they do not impose programs that work splendidly on paper but are disastrous to schools, students, teachers, and communities in terms of helping youth find school meaningful and educational.

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