

True to Norm

A Literature Review of Socially-Constructed
Student Typologies and Their Consequences

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THESIS

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*Dedicated to my parents,
who taught me about good and bad
and all the nooks and crannies in between*

and

*to the memory of Tamon,
who reminds me that the work is far from finished*

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Introduction

In high school, I was tracked into the lowest level math class, called “Stupid Math.” Obviously, this wasn’t the *official* name for the course – it was actually called *Honors* Math in contrast to the more advanced class called *Extended Honors* – but the nicknames “Stupid Math” and “Smart Math” were all that anyone ever used. Despite attending one of the top public high schools in the country, those of us in the lower math track often felt like we were hopelessly bad at math. Compared to the more advanced classes, ours were significantly less challenging, moved at a slower pace, and were regularly taught by the lesser teachers. Once I was on this academic track, it was nearly impossible for me to change or remake my math identity from marking period to marking period, or even year to year. Eventually, being “bad” at math became a feature of who I was. In elementary school, I hadn’t had any particular opinions about my math abilities, good or bad, but by the end of high school I had decidedly become *not a math person*. In college, I avoided math classes and struggled through the one quantitative class I was *required* to take, confirming my theory that I was just not good at math. Nearly a decade after graduating high school, and four semesters of graduate-level statistics later, I have finally convinced myself that I am not actually *bad* at math.¹

Early in my professional life, as a high school teacher in Chicago, I encountered a binary similar to that of “stupid” and “smart” math. In a neighborhood with staggeringly low high school graduation and college attendance rates, not to mention high levels of poverty and gang violence, the charter school at which I worked was considered a gem, a “good” school in the

¹ This story also reveals the way that larger cultural constructions of difference play into individuals’ experience. In this case, I think it is fair to assume that my gender played at least a small part in reinforcing my assumption that math was not for me.

midst of many “bad” schools. As teachers, we all knew this and were taught to use it to our advantage. I was supplied with an informal institutional language to share with students who were not meeting the school’s expectations: “This is a *good* school, for serious students who want to go to college,” we would remind the students when they challenged the rules. “So if you don’t want to be a *good student* and work hard enough or behave well enough to excel here, then we would be more than happy to transfer you to one of *those* [meaning “bad”] public schools down the street and give your spot to someone who *really* wants to be here.” It wasn’t enough to tell students that they were lucky to be attending *this* school; we had to also remind them of the alternative, the many “bad” schools in the area – schools with outdated textbooks, teachers who did not want to be there, dismal graduation rates, and armed guards and metal detectors at every entrance. If they were “good” students they could stay at this “good” school, but if they wanted to misbehave, they should go to a “bad” school. The unintended consequence of this strategy was that we were consistently and institutionally reinforcing a binary between “good” and “bad” students and “good” and “bad” schools.

As a graduate student, I’ve reflected quite a bit on my experiences as a student and as a teacher through the lens of a variety of educational theories and research findings. The fact that I so vividly remember my identity as a “Stupid Math” student, despite my overall confidence in my academic abilities throughout high school, tells me a lot about the power of externally-imposed labels on a young person’s identity. I have no doubt that my students in Chicago were aware of, and likely internalizing, the messages being given to them about what constituted “good” and “bad” and how they fit into that dichotomy – and hierarchy.

With these two versions of a student’s school experience in mind, I decided to look to the literature to explore the way that institutionally-defined student *types* or categories shape

students' identity and academic options, and how the stratification and ranking of students in schools is perpetuated and legitimated within the school and the larger culture. In particular, I want to know how the "good" and "bad" student binary influences students' experiences: How do individual students get marked as either "good" students or "bad" students and what specific behaviors or characteristics constitute those labels? In what ways are the "good" student and "bad" student *real* vs. performed identities? If performed, at what benefits or costs do students choose to play certain versions of the "student" role? What is the effect of being marked "good" or "bad" on a student's identity development and academic achievement? And finally, in what ways do schools both depend on and legitimate the "good"/"bad" framework?

Historical and Philosophical Context

Each of us is constantly being sorted into different categories of personhood and different strata of society throughout our lives – indeed even before birth. It is, as Sizer and Sizer (1999) put it, "human nature to sort ourselves out" (p. 65). The kind of parents we have, the part of the country we live in, our early experiences, even the kinds of foods we eat all help to determine, to some extent, the type of person we will become (p. 61). The factors we can't control – like our gender, race and ethnicity, and family's financial situation – interact with our own individual genome and experiences to forge a distinct set of opportunities and available spaces within the social milieu of this country and world. A certain amount of sorting is good, even necessary. The division of labor calls for the specialization and distribution of strengths: society needs bankers as well as mechanics, janitors in addition to teachers.

But just because the practice of sorting is ingrained in us and necessary to the functioning of society, it is not necessarily also the case that the *process* of sorting is fair or based on a

natural order. A simple peak at the rates of unemployment (U.S. Dept. of Labor, 2012), incarceration (Alexander, 2010), or academic achievement and attainment (Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Teachers College, 2005), for example, signal that something is awry in the way that fates get handed out to our citizens. In fact, many societal sorting practices reflect – indeed reproduce – historical prejudices, inequalities, and injustices (Bowles & Gintis, 1976).

Once public schooling institutions, originally available only to the male children of the elite class, began to open their doors more widely, one line of thinking was that they would offer the key to social mobility – the chance for people to be sorted into ranks above that of their parents. Education could be “the great equalizer of the conditions of men,” Horace Mann proclaimed in 1848. Schools can reduce poverty – Mann even proposed that education could “prevent” poverty – and level the playing field giving both the rich *and* the poor access to the tools for advancement (Cremin, 1957, p. 87). Even earlier than that, in the first years of the Republic, Thomas Jefferson and others lauded schools as the creators of a true meritocracy, ensuring that “men of talent might rise whatever their social and economic origins” (Greer, 1972, p. 16). Schools would be normative, that is, they would give all who walked through their doors the chance to learn and internalize the values that would lead to social, financial, and civic success in our society. The rhetoric of American education, from its earliest days, has been powerful and largely optimistic (Greer, 1972).

In many respects, the idea of school has lived up to that optimism. In theory, every moment in school is designed to advance each learner from where they were yesterday to a different, better place today. Hopefulness and growth are the basic premises of education. Teachers have the explicit goal of imparting a specific skill or piece of content with each new lesson. Tests, in theory, allow both students and teachers the chance to witness improvement

over time – or make appropriate adjustments if there has been no change. In theory, at least, every day is a new day; each semester or marking period another chance to improve; the new school year an opportunity for students to remake themselves, to learn from new teachers, to seek redemption for the mistakes they made the year before. In the most basic sense, schools are structured to foster and assess positive variance over time – variance in knowledge, skills, competence, and character.

Sociological Context

If we assume that positive change over time is the explicit purpose of school, then we must also wonder why the hopefulness and the optimism of Jefferson and Mann have not been born out. In the years since their proclamations of the democratization of education, it has become clear that schools are indeed normative. But rather than leveling the playing field, the norms have largely become just another mechanism for sorting students, often based on intrinsic traits (like geography, class, and race) over which they have little or no control. Students are measured against a set of very rigid values or “rules” and provided with few opportunities to make up for early breeches of their contract (Meyer, 1977, p. 115). As Greer (1972) puts it, the school “present[s] a...threatening set of cultural norms [and] projects and imposes deadening conventions” on its students (p. 5). Rather than offering students regular opportunities to demonstrate improvement, students are allocated into relatively inflexible groups or tracks which predict – in fact, often *promote* – specific and divergent future opportunities, including college options, careers, and socioeconomic prospects (Meyer, 1977). Schools not only sort students into categories; they rank them too, assigning different value to different types of people (Sizer & Sizer, 1999, p. 69).

Because it is the schooling institutions themselves who get to define what constitutes “merit” or achievement, schools legitimate their own sorting, ranking, and allocation processes (Meyer, 1977). It appears as if the educational awards go to those who are most deserving based on their ability and/or performance, but the legitimation process veils underlying prejudice that is often part of sorting and ranking. As Bowles and Gintis (1976) put it, the links between social identity and school performance are consistently reaffirmed and reproduced through these kinds of institutional cultures and practices. They argue that

schools legitimate inequality through the ostensibly meritocratic manner by which they reward and promote students, and allocate them to distinct positions in the occupational hierarchy. They create and reinforce patterns of social class, racial and sexual identification among students which allow them to relate “properly” to their eventual standing in the hierarchy of authority and status in the production process. Schools foster types of personal development compatible with the relationships of dominance and subordinacy in the economic sphere. (p. 11)

In other words, schools normalize the positions that various class, race, and gender groups hold at different levels of the capitalist labor hierarchy. In this way, our educational system has been able – and continues to some degree – to maintain the myth that it, and consequently America as a whole, is a true meritocracy.

Schools are constantly undermining their own optimistic and meritocratic premise. Even if we ignore the formal and systemic sorting practices, such as the persistence of school segregation and tracking practices (both of which have been widely discussed in the literature: see Anderson & Jones, 2002; Kozol, 1991; Lee, 1996; Oakes, 1985, 1994; Orfield, et. al., 1996; Tyson, 2011), we still find a persistent, informal – and even unintentional – kind of sorting that takes place within schools and classrooms. This is the grouping of students into general categories – the *types* of students they are – often loosely based on their perceived pro- or anti-school sentiments (Eckert, 1989), but also informed by deeply ingrained social prejudices.

The limited student typology also reflects a larger social tendency to perceive people's identity based on oversimplified, or stereotyped, observations. In this culture, we tend to judge – or at least try to understand – each other's personhood based on how it fits into pre-constructed categories. In schools, this tendency has been exacerbated by the industrialization of education: the shift, for example, from one room schoolhouses to comprehensive high schools with large, age-graded classes. The effect of this move towards efficiency has been the de-contextualization and de-individualization of instruction and assessment, meaning that, rather than focusing on process or the outcomes of small learning moments, schools seek to quantify gross and standardized outcomes across classes, grades, schools, and districts. Inevitably, this reinforces a simplified understanding of who each student is, casting him or her neatly into one of only a few pre-constructed institutional identities, ranging from the “good” student to the “bad” student.

This is true of the way we understand and come to see our own identities as well. Hacking (1986) has made the argument about roles or categories in general that as their social definitions change, so too do people's own identities: “Social change creates new categories of people [and] elaborately, often philanthropically, creates new ways for people to be. People spontaneously come to fit their categories” (p. 223). In other words, as new ways of describing and organizing people come about, new “possibilities for personhood” also emerge (p. 229). We only define ourselves using categories that already exist. And certainly, the way that students construct and conceive of their identities in response to these categories hugely impacts their success or failure at school (Sadowski, 2003).

The Project Ahead

The aim of this project is to better understand the impact of school culture on the identity and achievement opportunities of students through an evaluation of the relevant literature. In

particular, I am asking what the literature says about the way that institutionally-defined student *types* or categories shape students' identity and academic options and how the stratification and ranking of students in schools is perpetuated and legitimated.

I have chosen to focus on the extreme categories – the “good” student and the “bad” student – because I believe that in order to fully understand the way that students are sorted and ranked in school contexts, it is necessary to understand the margins of student identity. There are many students who may fall somewhere in the middle, who are neither wholly “good” nor wholly “bad,” but these are not the students who get talked about in the teachers' lounge. The *middle* students do little to confirm or challenge the norms of the school. In fact, students who view themselves as in-between, or as occupying some space *outside* of the typical categories, usually still define themselves “in terms of which choices they share with either [extreme] category” (Eckert, 1989, p. 71). It is the extremely “good” and the extremely “bad” students whom the school institutions worry about or praise, and whom the rest of the student body chooses to model themselves after.

The review of the literature is divided into three main parts: an exploration of the construction of the “student” identity and typology, a close examination of the “good” student category, followed by a detailed study of the “bad” student. The organization of the paper in this way allows us to see both the distinctness of each of these typologies as well as the ways in which they are parallel. Looking at both “good” and “bad” identities as a single unit can often hide their social constructedness because we are most attuned to what makes the categories *different* from each other; my hope is that examining each one separately, yet in conversation with each other, will allow us to more easily see the ways in which they *each* limit students' identity options.

Chapter 1, entitled *The “Student,”* lays out the basic foundations for school categories and ranking systems. Within this discussion, I try to understand how these categories reflect larger cultural constructions – often oppressive ones – around race and gender in particular. I also review literature about the way that our culture and educational institutions perceive adolescents and young people in general and how that influences the school’s efforts to *control* its students. Finally, I will look at the specific binary of the “good” and “bad” student and explain the relationship between the two, including the way each is dependent on the other for its definition and reproduction.

Chapter 2, *The “Good” Student,* reviews the literature that has explored the defining characteristics of this student type. I argue that “good” students are defined and identified mostly by behavior, not necessarily by academics – which is contrary to the general expectation that schools evaluate students based on academic ability or achievement. In this chapter, I further explore the ways in which the “good” student identity is based on and reinforces a number of other socially-constructed terms often associated with school. Then, I summarize a number of studies which demonstrate the way that “good” students, once marked as such, receive benefits in the form of increased avenues for learning, leadership and extra-curricular opportunities, and lenience for their misconduct – making the “good” student label a self-fulfilling prophecy. Finally, I argue that because of the way the “good” student role is defined and the benefits it offers, some students choose to “play the game” of school, performing the “good” student role, but not necessarily pursuing true learning experiences.

Chapter 3, which focuses on *The “Bad” Student,* follows a similar format. First, I share evidence of the way that “bad” students are behaviorally and subjectively defined, and the influence that cultural prejudices around race, class, and gender have on the identification of

particular behaviors as “bad.” Then, I use a number of relevant research studies to argue that students labeled “bad” are limited in their learning and leadership opportunities and receive excessive surveillance and increased punishment for their perceived misconduct. This contributes to the self-fulfilling prophecy of the “bad” student identity. Finally, the chapter explores some of the specific responses that students have to being labeled “bad,” including stereotype threat, secondary deviance, and resistance strategies.

A Few Caveats

Before we dive in, it is important to understand a few things about this literature review. First, this exploration of students and school is slanted towards the middle and high school years. This is partly because it is my primary area of interest and partly because most of the literature about school-based identities focuses on that age group. However, there are some important exceptions and crucial research that has examined the construction of “good” and “bad” student identities in younger children and I have tried to bring in as much of that evidence as possible.

Second, any description of student *types* within a school is going to be immensely effected by the unique culture of the particular school. When I refer to specific research in specific schools, I have tried to offer as much context as I have or believe is necessary, but this is not always possible. In general, unless otherwise stated, the examples offered throughout this paper will be from traditional (i.e. neighborhood) public schools with the idea that findings in this school type are the most generalizable. There are important distinctions to be made between the way the “good” and “bad” student is defined at a neighborhood public school than at, say, a “no excuses” charter school, and I have tried to make those distinctions when necessary. But there is certainly more work to be done in this area.

In a similar vein, a study of student typologies and categories would be incomplete without a discussion of peer groups and peer influence. While there has been a great deal of research done on the complex effects that students' peers have on their identity and achievement (for example, Datnow & Cooper, 1997; Epstein & Karweit, 1983; Fordham, 1988; Merten, 1996; Staff & Kreager, 2008), this project focuses on the way that schools as *institutions* define and label students. I review some literature which explores the intersection of school adult and peer identification and ranking, but this is of secondary importance to the main argument of the paper which is about the way culturally and institutionally-defined categories of "studentness" shape a young person's identity options and performance.

Third, I have tried to provide examples of specific identity groups who seem to be more or less likely to be grouped into the "good" or "bad" student categories. Due to the limited nature of these examples, they are not as nuanced as they would be if they were to be explored on their own in a full-length project. For example, in Chapter 2 when I discuss Asian Americans as the "model minority," I do not differentiate between students from different countries of origin or of different immigration status. Similarly, when I explore the assumption that many black students, particularly boys, are "troublemakers" or "bad" students in Chapter 3, I do not address the differences between African American and black immigrant students, or between black students of different socioeconomic classes, nor do I fully explore gender differences. There is simply not the space to do all of this.

Fourth, even as I try to deconstruct the dichotomy of the "good" and "bad" student and expose its falsehoods, I recognize that I am likely buying into other false frameworks. For example O'Connor, et. al. (2007) have shown the way that educational research so often falls into the dangerous trap of either viewing racial groups as objective categories with homogenous

cultures, or treating race as a simple variable that is stable across time. As O’Conner and her colleagues show, both of these approaches are problematic because they treat race as a uniform predictor of identity. While I have tried to avoid this pitfall, it is an ongoing challenge in a culture that generally conceives of race, gender, and class in this way.

And finally, anyone attempting to review a body of literature about schools is bound to run up against more than her share of explanations and critiques of our failing education system. In choosing to explore just one area – the sorting of students into limited categories or typologies – I have had to leave out many other related discussions about the sorting and ranking of students as well as the multitude of other structural and cultural explanations for the problems in our education system. Though this review explores only a small part of the complex struggle our schools face in trying to educate every student who walks through their doors, my hope is that it will shed some light on the processes through which our optimistic educational vision is being undermined.

CHAPTER 1

The “Student”

The ‘performative’ dimension of construction is precisely the forced reiteration of norms. In this sense, then, it is not only that there are constraints to performativity; rather, constraint calls to be rethought as the very condition of performativity... Moreover, constraint is not necessarily that which sets a limit to performativity; constraint is, rather, that which impels and sustains performativity.”

--Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter*²

Judith Butler argues that most of the identities by which we define ourselves and others are not reflections of our internal or intrinsic qualities, but rather, are *performed* in response to cultural expectations and contexts. According to this view of the world, the “reality” of social identities – like race or gender, but also roles like *student* or *teacher* – is “created through sustained social performances” (Butler in Salih, 2004, p. 115). Schools, as sites of tremendous cultural production and reproduction, not only offer the stage from which students hone and perform their identities, but schools also write the script and direct the performance of generation after generation of students. The “sustained social performance” of *studenthood* has created a set of “constraints” which simultaneously prescribe the “student” identity *and* become its very foundation. These persistent and prescriptive constraints or typologies represent one of the major forces stifling the hopefulness of school as a place where every student has the opportunity to advance and improve over time.

In this chapter, I will explore the socially-constructed typology of the “student” with an eye towards the way that this typology works against the very premise of education. First, I will examine the roots of the “student” construct in the larger culture’s categories and distinctions

² Butler (1993) cited in Salih, 2004, p. 344.

across gender, race, and age and the limiting effects of each of these frameworks. Then, I will describe the standard script that schools offer to their actors based on what they conceive as the challenges and needs of young people and examine the specific identity categories that are constructed within this context as well as the interdependency of these categories. Finally, I will draw on some literature that sheds light on the way young people negotiate their identities inside all of these socially constructed categories and discourses.

The Source Material for “Student” Typologies

If we accept that there is at least a rough script for *studenthood*, then we must also understand the necessity of examining the discourses beyond the school walls which influence the writers. After all, identity construction is “a social and political matter” just as much as it is a personal one (Raible & Nieto, 2003, p. 156). Hawkins (2005), for example, argues that “situated environments (in this case, schools) have their own institutionally and culturally defined categories, ranked hierarchically through the community’s values, beliefs and practices” (p. 62). The question, then, is what constitutes the “community” which defines the hierarchies of the school’s identity typology? Certainly, there are many possible levels of community that might have influence: “Widely circulating categories of identity [such as gender, race, class, or age] are in fact crucial resources that people use, and that operate through people, as they identify themselves and others” within particular contexts and for specific purposes (Wortham, 2008, p. 205). For the purposes of this project, I will explore three major categories of identity – gender (and its overlap with sexuality), race (and its overlap with class), and age – with the understanding that many others are being left out.

THE INFLUENCE OF GENDER(ED) CONSTRUCTS

Although it is a topic that is relatively under-discussed, schools can often be gendered spaces, as well as sites of hetero-normalization, subject to the dominant group's cultural standards. In the early years of formal schooling, there was concern about the feminization of schools. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the increased presence of girls in schools was becoming noticeable – and this was not necessarily a welcome change. Lesko (2001) reports that “in response to an enrollment of 60 percent girls, Los Angeles educators’ ‘fears of feminization’ fueled curricular reforms such as manual training and domestic science, higher salaries for male teachers, and a ‘thorough masculinization of interscholastic sports and student government’” (p. 79). At the time, it seemed to be a common understanding among those in education that the increased presence of girls in secondary schools was a problem; in particular, the worry was that if boys left school to join the workforce and girls continued attending through their teenage years, then “intelligence itself is pretty sure to smack of femininity” (Graves, 1998 quoted in Lesko, 2001, p. 80).

The worry about intelligence, or at least “book smarts,” becoming gendered did not disappear with the advent of women's rights. Even today, there are conversations about the feminine nature of schooling itself. Many researchers have found that boys perceive dedication to academic studies and school success to be feminine endeavors (hooks, 2004; Korp, 2011; Willis, 1977; Young, 2007). But there are also important ways in which schools are, and have again become, *masculine* spaces. For example, Lesko (2001) writes that, in “the United States, the remasculinizing of schools includes a number of features: the spread of competitive sports; higher standards through increased testing; a more rigorous curriculum; zero-tolerance policies; and redoubled efforts in math, science, and technology” (p. 151). The interplay between the

“masculine” nature of school competition and the “feminine” nature of disciplined study limits the ways that both boys and girls can perform school roles.

Another limitation, particularly for boys, is the presence of heteronormative – and homophobic – discourses within the school. Pascoe’s (2007) research demonstrates the subversively homophobic effects of many of the taken-for-granted rituals of school. She argues that, through daily interactions, boys – as well as girls, teachers, administrators, and other school personnel – have to “repudiate[e] the threatening specter of the fag” in order to reaffirm the traditional “masculinity” of schools (p. 81). Even school subjects like Science and Mathematics, which may appear on the surface to be relatively neutral, have historically “normalize[d] only certain ways of being [and] served as a tool of colonialism and imperialism” (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 54-5). Thus, “policing heterosexual masculinity” has become a deliberate and distinct task of the American school (Martino, 2000).

The way we talk about gender in schools has an effect too. Just as racial “differences” get institutionalized through constant discussion of the Achievement Gap (see Hilliard, 2003; Kirkland, 2010), the constant reiteration of the supposedly “different” strengths and weaknesses of girls and boys (and particularly the current “boy crisis”) can become a self-fulfilling prophecy too (Husain & Millimet, 2009). Newkirk (2002) finds this practice troubling: “The focus on ‘gaps’ tends to pit boys against girls, to emphasize either/or. Yet surely it is possible to focus on boys’ difficulties in school *without* rejecting claims that girls may experience different difficulties or inequities” (p. 20). Thus the historical back-and-forth negotiation over the gender of school spaces has persisted as school cultures continue to be influenced by, and indeed are a large part of, broader dialogues about gender and sexuality.

THE INFLUENCE OF RACIAL(IZED)CONSTRUCTS

Although the conversation around gender in schools is still relatively underdeveloped, much has been written about the way that racial and class-based oppression and perceived “cultural” difference play out in institutions of education. As Lewis (2006) explains, most American students spend their days at schools that are arguably “‘white’ institutions” in terms of their structure, and also their culture” (p. 177-8). In addition to the white hegemony of school spaces, “the demographic dominance of white middle-class teachers” also makes the school implicitly a site for the reproduction of white middle-class cultural values (Lewis, 2006, p. 181). Accordingly, in order to be successful, students must acquire the dominant cultural capital and learn to perform – in their dress, speech, and behavior – the academic identities recognized in and by school (see Bourdieu, 1986). Therefore, for students who do not enter school in possession of white middle-class cultural capital, “cultural adaptation functions as a prerequisite to skill acquisition” (Perry, 2003, p. 85). The profound danger of hegemonic whiteness in schools is its ability to “occupy the empty space of ‘normality’ [in that it becomes] that seemingly ‘neutral’ yardstick against which cultural behavior, norms, and values are measured” (Lewis, 2006, p. 198). In this way, students can come to be seen as either “good” or “bad” based on how well they fit into the white middle-class mold.

In some situations, the “good” student is categorized and coded by superficial symbols – like clothing choice, gesture, and language – which are recognized in the school environment as markers of a true identity. Of all these exterior markers, language has been the most studied. Schools privilege a certain type of language and categorize students based on their linguistic abilities: “language is not simply an instrument of communication; it also provides... a more or less complex system of categories” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000, p. 73). The famous Ann Arbor Black English case of 1978 as well as the Oakland Ebonics Resolution of 1997 are reminders of

the potential for a student's language – particularly when it is not Standard American English or when it is a language system associated with a particular minority group – to influence his educational opportunities (Perry & Delpit, 1998). Language and other superficial markers often become the proxies for educational prejudice against certain groups of students on the basis of their race or class (Bernstein, 1971).

The influence of larger cultural oppression and prejudice is also visible in educational curricula; it has been argued that school's choice and implementation of curriculum can be, and usually is, a racialized practice. Castanell and Pinar (1993) posit that the question of what we teach to young people is not just a question of what kind of knowledge we value, but also a question of “who we perceive ourselves to be, and how we will represent that identity, including what remains as ‘left over,’ as ‘difference’” (p. 2). In schools or classrooms where the histories or contributions of particular groups are left out, it is not only the students who come from those backgrounds who miss out; it is also students from the dominant groups. As Castanell and Pinar explain, “by refusing to understand curriculum as racial text, [white] students misunderstand that they are also racialized, gendered, historical, political creatures” (p. 6). And, as Wortham's studies (2003; 2004; 2006; 2008) make clear, the curriculum and the texts employed in the classroom are not passive players in young people's conceptions of who they are as students.

What is perhaps most dangerous about the infiltration of race-based oppression in the schools is its subversiveness. Many of us believe schools to be neutral sites, free from divisive political and social conflict. This *colorblind* approach to schools and teaching can be seen at all grade levels, and particularly in schools that serve mostly white students. Lewis (2003) found just this scenario in her ethnographic research of Foresthills Elementary, a school in a mostly white, mostly middle- and upper-middle-class suburb, with a student body that is 90% white (p.

13). Although the consensus among faculty and parents was that students were blind to racial difference (i.e. “Everybody’s the same” (p. 32)) and that race was not an issue at the school because it was so homogenous, Lewis proposes an alternative interpretation. She noticed moments in which the few non-white students were marginalized or mocked, and then their mistreatment was ignored or downplayed by teachers because of a refusal to recognize its racial roots. Over time, Lewis recognized “this explicit color-blind discourse [to be] mask[ing] an underlying reality of racialized practice and color-conscious understanding” (p. 32). This is an example of Omi and Winant’s (1994) concept of the “small racial projects” through which daily activities become “racially coded” and “race becomes ‘common sense’—a way of comprehending, explaining, and acting in the world” (p. 60). However, in this case, because the racial projects were disguised as “colorblind,” they became even more subversive and destructive.

Like Freire (1993) and Bowles and Gintis (1976) who argue that the society’s dominant groups can normalize unequal conditions by hiding the structures that create them, Lewis (2003) explains that “the power of ideologies lies in their ability to facilitate collective domination in a way such that they often make vast inequalities understandable and acceptable to those at both the top and the bottom of the social order” (p. 32). In Foresthills Elementary, a space of social and cultural (re)production “peopled almost entirely by members of the dominant social group,” challenging the status quo or the racial hierarchy was never proposed (p. 36). The silencing of social justice efforts is perhaps made possible by racial divisions and distrust within the adult culture of the school (Lipman, 1998). And even when it is not a specifically racial issue, the division of teaching styles in desegregated public schools often rests on deeply held beliefs about what poor and minority students most need from schools or how they learn best – debates which

can be incredibly divisive and debilitating to a school (Metz, 1978). In other words, the mythology of colorblindness – which individuals may subscribe to with the best of intentions – rather than fighting injustice, actually provides legitimacy to the already-present inequalities and prejudices in schools and society by “couching [that inequality] it in the language of ‘normalcy’ and ‘common sense’” and in making it taboo to discuss (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 45). In order to break free from hierarchical and oppressive binaries, we cannot ignore them; rather, we must confront them head-on if we have any hope of eventually deconstructing them.

ADOLESCENTS “AT RISK”

In addition to our tendency to describe specific groups of young people as educationally “at risk” – because they are boys or black or poor – and to then ignore the socially constructed categories that influenced our description, there is also a decidedly modern stereotype that teenagers or adolescents, by virtue of their age alone, are troubled and troublesome. Although our sense of the uniqueness of that time of life has become ingrained in our cultural psyche, the evidence suggests that it is actually a relatively new social construction designed to serve a very specific social purpose. Beginning in the early 20th century, an American trope emerged proclaiming adolescents to be “at risk” – that is, not only *in the process* of becoming adults, but also struggling, causing trouble, and in need of guidance. The concept of the *teen age years* did not emerge until the early 1900s and the word *teenager* itself did not enter our language until about 1940. According to Metcalf (2012), this new phase of life was primarily constructed and promoted by “pedagogical and religious authorities” who distinguished and labeled thirteen to nineteen year-olds “more with worry than with approval.” The creation of this new group of young people filled a need in the social and cultural milieu of the time: in the early and mid-twentieth century, “a time of national uncertainty, massive cultural change, and nervous

masculinity, the adolescent came to occupy a highly visible and recognizable place, as a being who was defined as ‘becoming,’ as nascent, unfinished, in peril” (Lesko, 2001, p. 49). Thus, even today, our culture tends to throw its social worries and concerns on adolescents, ascribing them a generalized identity and developmental trajectory.

Research in the field of identity development has further marked adolescence as a unique period of growth and discovery (Baumeister & Tice, 1986; Raible & Nieto, 2003). Erikson (1968), for example, one of the early pioneers of adolescent identity development research, proposed that during that period, individuals are tasked with integrating their identifications from earlier stages into a more complete identity. He further argued that the outcome of the identity work of the adolescent period – whether it is identity diffusion or achievement, moratorium or foreclosure – greatly impacts the individual’s future stages of development. Research in this field has taken on a prescriptive quality, marking adolescence as a time when particular changes and developments *should* be happening (Eccles, et. al., 1993).

As young people collectively have become increasingly bracketed together and thus alienated from the rest of society, they have also sought to more visibly define themselves. For the last few generations, the high school and university settings have been the primary sites for the development and advancement of a *youth culture*, a collective set of values, interests, and ways of being for adolescents and young people in general. Looking historically, Rury (2004) describes the perceptible and sudden arrival of a

vibrant, pervasive, and commercially expansive youth culture in the postwar period... With growing high school attendance, followed by rising college enrollments, educational institutions became the location in which these emerging forms of adolescent culture could develop most rapidly. (p. 46)

Whereas in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s, young people began to create a “culture” of their own, emphasizing their interests in “dancing, dating, fashion and social status” (p. 53), in the 1950s

this “youth culture” became radically more well-defined and oppositional. According to Rury, the postwar youth culture was similar to its earlier counterpart in that it “defined itself in distinction to the adult world,” constructing its own norms and values often deliberately in contrast to and in defiance of traditional institutions (p. 53). Today’s youth experience and take on an inherently more “oppositional” stance, which is at least partly a response to their alienation from and by adults.

The Construction and Reproduction of “Student” Identities

The typologies of *studenthood* generally mirror the larger cultural fascination with dichotomies and binary hierarchies (Davies & Hunt, 1994). As we have just explored, our culture tends to define and group people as if two simple categories were enough to create a full picture: male/female, straight/gay, white/black, rich/poor, young/old, and the list goes on. Eckert (1989) proposes that in the school context, “the oppositional social structure, based on the extremes of school orientation, focuses adolescent attention on the narrow set of choices that define the differences between [for example] the Jock and Burnout categories” (p. 3), or similarly, the “Brother” and “Hallway Hanger” cliques (MacLeod, 2009), the “Lad” and “Ear’ole” groups (Willis, 1977), the “School Kids” and “Street Kids” (Flores-Gonzalez, 2002), the “Schoolboys” and the “Troublemakers” (Ferguson, 2000), or the “Stayins” and “Dropouts” (Fine, 1991). By suggesting that students fit simply into either one category or the other, even these scholars reinforce an oversimplified and pre-constructed structure for describing individuals’ place in both schools and society.³

³ I recognize that I am falling prey to my own criticism of the researcher’s tendency to reproduce prescriptive and dichotomous categories for studenthood, even as I try to critique and deconstruct it.

THE SCHOOL SCRIPT

The sense that young people are both “at risk” and inherently “oppositional” has provided a justification for the prescriptive and controlling nature of many school environments. If one of the primary stated roles of education historically has been to socialize the next generation and bring children into the fray of civil life (Meyer, 1977), then it is not surprising that across many schools it is possible to identify a general and consistent way that young people are expected to behave in regard to both their academics and their social interactions.

Several researchers (cited in Hemmings, 1996) have found that, across geography and social class, high schools tend to offer a “common script” to both teachers and students. Using the dramaturgical frame for describing social interaction made popular by Erving Goffman (1959; 1963), a “script” refers to a generally accepted way of being, acting, or speaking in the performance of a specific role or identity. *Front*, the term Goffman employed more often, specifically describes the fixed aspects of an individual’s identity performance which generally define the performance for observers. He explains that “when an actor” – a word he uses to refer to any person *performing* in a social interaction – “takes on an established social role, usually he finds that a particular front has already been established for it” (Goffman, 1959, p. 27). The school is a perfect example of a space in which many social roles have already been established with specific scripts or fronts designated for each actor. Particularly in secondary schools, Hemmings (1996) insists that

the script persists not only because of its technical function of providing a more certain structure for uncertain instructional tasks but also because it serves a vital symbolic purpose for society. The script symbolizes educational equity and unity, and gives teachers and students a sense that they are participants in a “real” high school. (p. 29)

This script includes taken-for-granted aspects of everyday modern school life like bells, lockers, the gravitas of “the principal’s office”, etc. The general structure of typical instruction – with

students sitting in seats facing front, or perhaps in a circle, and the teacher standing at the front of the room periodically making use of a writing utensil and a chalkboard, a dry-erase board, or even a Smartboard – is ingrained in our collective imagination because it follows the “script” of school we have all seen performed numerous times and likely performed ourselves as students. Schools are also full of universal and unique rituals which surreptitiously indoctrinate students (and even the adults) into the hegemonic culture of “school” (see McLaren, 1986 for a review of the literature on school rituals).

The school script not only affects the overall structure of the school, but also the individuals who act within it each day. McLaren (1986) describes the seemingly natural process by which students, upon entering the school building, “realign and readjust their behavior” and shift from what he refers to as their *streetcorner* or *home state* to their *student state*. McLaren argues that it is in the *student state* “that the students give themselves over to the powerful controls and enforcement procedures available to teachers” (p. 88). In the school environment, students must forfeit some of their “natural” selves in order to “write their student roles and scenarios in conformity to the teacher’s master script” (p. 88). Using this dramatic metaphor, McLaren suggests that schools have become places where both teachers and students have pre-written role descriptions and perhaps even rough scripts – from which they can, of course, improvise.

Since the school is a stage on which the student actors perform their roles for an audience including their peers, teachers, and school administrators, the script focuses more on externally-visible actions or behaviors than on internal attitudes or emotions. Thompson’s (2010) study of three high schools in and around Perth, Australia found that, in general, the school institution was most concerned with “the ways that the students comported themselves physically: for

example, what they wore, how they wore it and how they used their body as an aspect of their performativity” (p. 422). The school script for student performance dictates the way that students’ bodies can move and interact within the school space.

CATEGORIES OF “STUDENT”

One aspect of the generalized student script is that students expect, and are expected, to sort themselves into categories. These categories can be differentiated most simply based on their orientation toward school: “The basic division into pro- and anti-school categories is a social process common to virtually all public school, and it generates and institutionalizes differences among adolescents on the basis of responses to the school” (Eckert, 1989, p. 21). In most schools, it is incredibly difficult for students to avoid constructing (or being seen to perform) identities that fall within limited binary categories – the *popular kid* or the *nerd*, the *jock* or the *burnout*, the *good student* or the *troublemaker*. In the highly symbolic environment of school, every action or activity of a student has meaning – from where he eats lunch to whether he smokes cigarettes, from his decision to remove his jacket in class to his choice of extra-curriculars. Therefore, students are constantly being categorized and categorizing themselves whether they are aware of it or not (Eckert, 1989).

Yet, the scripts for specific student categories can look different depending on the background of the students. Wexler (1992) argues that the available identities in the school “are not random”; rather, in each school, “types of selves are set by the central image of the school” (p. 9). Put differently, the school’s location, structure, mission, social class, and other factors influence the variety of student identities into which students are organized – and organize themselves. In particular, Wexler stresses the role of social class in stratifying student images and creating “a binary division between those students who will become...winners and those

who will be losers[,] between good and evil” (p. 10). In other words, he argues based on his research in three very different types of schools that categorical moral and value judgments are made about students based on the socioeconomic class of their individual families and the school itself.

It is not just the generalized script of the school as an institution that defines the categories students can fill, but also the specific structures and practices of individual institutions. Tracking, for example, has long been argued to be a system that creates inequality of educational experiences and limits future opportunities for the students in lower tracks (for example, Nieto, 1996; Oakes, 1985; Rist, 1970). In one of the schools in Lipman’s (1998) study of school restructuring, she found that “teachers, administrators, and most students [viewed] a student’s placement in either of [the two academic tracks, regular or honors] was central to the construction of her/his identity and place in the school” (p. 55). The research suggests that the division of students into separate academic tracks not only affects their learning opportunities and future prospects (Dei, et. al., 1997), but also their development of school-based identities, particularly when they “send messages to students...about the relationship between race and academic ability” (Noguera, 2003, p. 26).

Tracking practices are not just formal structures, but can also function informally or implicitly. Anderson-Levitt (1996) compares the early schooling experiences of U.S. and French children and finds that, in both countries’ systems, children are often labeled as “on time” or “behind” in their very first year or two of schooling and that these designations tend to, not just predict, but to constrain the children’s later outcomes. She explains,

teachers’ use of “ahead” and “behind” as the idiom of achievement makes going to school sound like running a race, and the racetrack metaphor fits well[:] In the United States, children held back because they are “immature” will probably not improve their

situation by repeating a grade, while children placed in the low group because they are not “ready” fall further “behind”. (p. 70-1)

Thus, part of the script students are expected to perform in school is a strict and relatively inflexible timeline which may not fit each individual’s developmental trajectory.

Students’ scripts and opportunities for identity construction can also be influenced by the structure of individual classrooms. “As a *formal organization*, the classroom can be described as a setting wherein the teacher (a local actor) tries to mobilize sets of students through tasks” (McFarland, 2001, p. 617). Quite often, however, this undertaking bumps up against various levels of student resistance. McFarland’s (2001) research demonstrates the way a close examination of student disruptions at the classroom level can reveal important but subtle differences in the way teachers organize their classrooms and the effect it has on students. In one high school classroom, for example, McFarland focused on the ebbs and flows of student coalitions and cliques to try to understand under what circumstances “student challenges [altered] the classroom situation for good” (p. 613). Among other things, he noticed that the mid-year roster shifts (one girl dropped out of school and another transferred in) significantly altered the tightly-knit clique structure of that particular class. The slight change in membership led the three main cliques in the class to re-align their coalition with each other, this time building stronger alliances across racial lines and ultimately creating more challenges for the teacher. McFarland argues that the teacher’s use of student-centered versus teacher-centered formats made it easier for students to establish elaborate social coalitions, adjust them to the changing demographics of the room, and leverage their social power to ultimately disrupt learning in the classroom.

In addition to the *structures* of a specific classroom, the curriculum – the actual texts for learning – can also affect the identity categories and opportunities available to students. For

example, in her study of a number of desegregated secondary schools in the late 1960's, Metz (1978) found a difference between high and low track students in the way that they conceived of the school's purpose and their place in it. The low track students

took the school as they found it and did not question the administrators' and teachers' right to define what they should learn, how they should learn it, or how they should behave. ...They did not question the school's proper character, but they held themselves apart from it. They remained alien and separate within it. (p. 81)

Whether this attitude was the cause or the effect of being in the low track (or some combination of the two), is not entirely clear, but it is evident that the specific curriculum and structures of the separate tracks created and fostered a very different relationship to school for those groups of students.

In a more concrete study of the way classroom texts can shape identity development, Wortham (2006; 2008) explored the shifting provisional identities of one student in a combined history/English classroom for her entire ninth grade year. Wortham's (2008) study revealed the way that teachers and classmates came to identify and label a particular student "in part, using categories from the curriculum" – meaning character types from the literature they were reading and ascribed motives to her reminiscent of the texts from their course (p. 211). Tyisha, the student Wortham (2006) focused his observations on, "was identified in four different ways across the year" – ranging from "good student" to "disruptive outcast" – and her understandings of herself were very much shaped by these outside views (p. 149-151).

Ultimately, Wortham (2008) argues that students' complex and dynamic identities involve a combination of sources:

Institutional expectations about appropriate student and teacher behaviour, stereotypes and expectations about how working-class African Americans relate to mainstream institutions like school, and other widely circulating models and processes were relevant to Tyisha's social identification in this classroom. But these more widely circulating models are not sufficient to account for her shifts in identity, because the shifts were mediated through more local categories...If the curriculum had not been organized as it

was in this particular classroom, Tyisha's identity would probably have developed somewhat differently. (p. 225)

Thus, we find that it is difficult to explore or understand a student's identity development process in school without also examining the way her school community understands (even if stereotypically) students *like her*, the curriculum of her studies, the local environments of particular classrooms (McFarland, 2001), and the culture at large. The interaction of these various environments contributes to a relatively limited set of categories that students can fit into and roles they can perform.

THE INTER-DEPENDENCE OF CATEGORIES

Like other cultural binaries – male and female, white and black, straight and gay – the “good” student and the “bad” student exist in contrast to each other. Using Judith Butler's *performativity* framework, we might call the “bad” student or the “troublemaker” the *object identity* of the “good” student. As Butler (1993) explains, the “exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of object beings, those who are not yet ‘subjects,’ but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject” (p. 3). Each category of student – “good” and “bad” – is dependent on the other for its boundaries of identity, and for its very existence. Individuals in both categories are defined in large part by the opposing category: “the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an objected outside” (Butler, 1993, p. 3). In Butler's terms, then, binaries we conceive as opposite are actually inextricably linked to each other.

Butler takes this idea a step further arguing that individuals and groups continually lay claim on their own identities by repudiating the *object identity*; in fact, the identity categories can

validate their existence *only* by acknowledging the existence of those who are excluded. Thus, it becomes the work of the “good” student and those in whose interest it is to maintain that division to prove their position in one category by constantly disavowing and distancing themselves from the other category. In other words, groups of students like the “good” and “bad” students exist “in a state of intense mutual awareness and thus of continual mutual influence: each category defines itself very consciously as what the other is not” (Eckert, 1989, p. 5; Lanuza, 2008). In the process, the abject category holds just as much weight as the “normal” or dominant category. In the school setting, we see this take shape in many forms: students dichotomize “book smarts” and “street” or “life smarts” (Hatt, 2007) and theoretical and practical knowledge (Korp, 2011); the meaning of high grades is dependent on other students getting low grades (Metz, 1978); or “good” takes on different meanings when performed by male or female students, further reinforcing the binary structure (Thompson, 2010).

The dichotomy between “good” and “bad” also functions at a broader, systemic level. Both in and out of school, we tend to view *success* in the context of *failure* and vice versa; the meaning of one is dependent on the other. As my second anecdote in the introduction illustrated, we understand the failure of urban public schools in the context of the success of private, suburban, or charter schools – and this contrast often serves as leverage for “good” schools to retain “good” students and push out “bad” ones (Therstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). Varenne, Goldman, and McDermott (1998) remind us that

successful children in good schools have always been the reference point in studies of failure, whether personal or institutional. Legitimately identified success is made the ground against which failure stands out as ‘the problem.’ In the process, success hides itself, and the intimate dependency of success and failure is difficult to discuss. (p. 109)

Just as we do when we proclaim *colorblindness* and then reinforce unequal power dynamics, ignoring the fact that both failure *and* success are socially constructed allows them to continue to

exist uncontested. Our unwitting “cooperation” in these categories serves to “maintain the hegemony of the American class system in the school” (Eckert, 1989, p. 5).

IDENTITY NEGOTIATION

In the midst of the oversimplified binary of the “good” and “bad” student – and framed by the complex discourses of gender, sexuality, race, class, and age – young people are constantly negotiating and renegotiating their identities in relation to their peers, their teachers, their families and communities, their future aspirations, and other influences. Identity theory purports that rather than having a singular identity, we have an identity that “is an ever-developing repertoire of available characteristics, viewpoints, and ways of being that are both learned from and recruited through participation in discourses...[It is] an ongoing negotiation between the individual and the social context or environment” (Hawkins, 2005, p. 61; also see Lee, 1996). Thus, young people are continually reevaluating and reshaping their identity in response to social cues and contexts.

Although each of us has agency in this negotiation process, we are limited to the identities seemingly available to us. There are socially-constructed categories of people which, over time, “define positions or subjectivities available to people” (Hacking cited in Hawkins, 2005, p. 62). In other words, people can only become the *kind of person* that they know exists, so the categories actually provide quite powerful limitations on the varieties of identities that can be formed and performed. The tension for the person in his social context, then, “is between agency and imposition of identity categories” (p. 62).

For a student in school, this is a constant and ongoing process. Each time individuals enter new communities or spaces – the school, an individual classroom, the presence of a new group of students, etc. – they engage in a

complicated dance in which they present themselves as certain sorts of people (either consciously or unconsciously), while being invited or summoned into certain categories and positions, in part based on how their self presentation aligns with reified categories. ... Thus, students entering school may negotiate an identity that enables them to be successful in school or one that marginalizes them as a student, based in part on how the experiences, behaviors, values, and ways of engaging in language and literacy practices that they bring align with those privileged in schools, but based also on what it is that they understand the place to be and who they imagine they can be there. (Hawkins, 2005, p. 62-3)

In her analysis, Hawkins reminds us that the process of identity construction and presentation is continuous, multi-layered, and collective – that is, it largely depends on the perceptions and contributions of others.

Even at the highest levels of academia, people police the boundaries of each other's identities as they also construct their own sense of selves in relation to others (Young, 2007). As Varenne and McDermott (1998) put it, “the successful and the failed do not originate all made up in their particular qualities. They are slowly fashioned until the overall picture looks right enough that other active powers do not get upset by what was done, or not done, more locally” (p. 14). The dominant group has both more power and more at stake in the policing of others' identity.

Given the school's interest in maintaining a certain “student” identity, the collective youth culture's investment in a group identity that is sometimes anti-institutional, and the cultural tendency to construct over-simplified binary categories to fit people into, we can see how the school becomes a backdrop for intense (and high stakes) identity negotiation. And the daily “micro-interactions,” which serve as building blocks for larger and longer-term negotiations, “come to shape broader trajectories of learning and identity” (Nasir, 2012, p. 131; also see Eckert, 1989).

In the next two chapters, I explore in detail the specific constructions the “good” student and the “bad” student, the processes by which young people get marked as one or the other, and the consequences those labels have for students’ learning and identity trajectories.

CHAPTER 2

The “Good” Student

A natural-born child of the meritocracy, I'd been amassing momentum my whole life, entering spelling bees, vying for forensics medals, running my mouth in mock United Nations, and I knew only one direction: forward. I lived for prizes, plaques, citations, stars, and I gave no thought to any goal beyond my next appearance on the honor roll. Learning was secondary, promotion was primary. No one ever told me what the point was, except to keep on accumulating points, and this struck me as sufficient. What else was there?

--Walter Kirn, *Lost in the Meritocracy*⁴

In his memoir, *Lost in the Meritocracy*, Walter Kirn ascribes his journey from a low-ranking small town Minnesota high school to Princeton University to knowing how to *play the game* of school. He achieved success in “scaling the American meritocratic mountain” by playing the role of the “good” student – at whatever cost to his own learning (Kirn, 2009, p. 188). Kirn’s story offers a window into many of the features that constitute the “good” student role in most school settings. His tale of prizes and privilege also hint at the rewards offered to the students who are willing to play the game and, ultimately, the way that the “good” student identity contributes to the reproduction of privilege in school.

In this chapter I review literature, including a number of school-based ethnographies from the U.S. and other Western countries⁵, which explores the meanings and effects of the hegemonic “good student” category. I will look at the way schools generally define “good” and the variety of social constructs that contribute to that definition, including “smartness,”

⁴ Kirn, 2009, p. 9

⁵ Interestingly, I found several studies on this topic coming out of other Western nations – most notably the U.K., Sweden, and Australia. In some ways these projects were better able to capture the nuances of student identity and the subtle negotiations that take place in classrooms than many of the American studies I read. My hypothesis is that, because these countries (particularly Sweden and Australia) don’t have as much racial and ethnic diversity as the U.S., their researchers feel more free to focus on individual differences between students without feeling compelled to move quickly to generalizations about racial or ethnic differences.

“knowledge,” and “success.” Finally, I will explore the multiple processes through which being labeled as a “good” student can often become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The Hegemonic “Good” Student

DEFINING “GOOD”

A number of scholars have explored the way that the “good” or “model” student is defined institutionally in a variety of school types and grade levels. Although the research suggests that the specific school context affects the limitations and flexibility of the performance of student identity, there appears to be a basic set of criteria that define the “good” student regardless of context. Indeed, common to many of these studies, is the idea that schools do “not allow for a variety of ways to be a good student” (Rubin, 2007, p. 243). In other words, the script for school performance that is read as “good” leaves very little room for improvisation.

Behavior, more so than academic skills or accomplishments, appears to define the “good” student (Lanuza, 2008). In urban public schools in particular, meeting institutional expectations for goodness seems to require silencing the self and giving up a certain amount of individuality. In other words, if students want to get by, they are better off being unseen and unheard. Fine (1991) highlights this in her study of high school dropouts and “stay-ins” in a New York City public high school. She asked a sixteen-year-old high school dropout: “Eartha, when you were a kid, did you participate a lot in school?” Eartha’s response – “Not me, I was a good kid, I made no trouble” – suggests that in the space of the urban public school, being compliant and silent is what makes you a “good” student (p. 36).

Conducting research in two very different school sites, Hemmings (1996) found that the “model students,” or those considered “good” by their peers and teachers, had the following characteristics in common: they were able learners, willing learners, intellectually aggressive,

solitary learners, deferent to school authority figures, culturally mainstream, and college bound. The first three “good” student traits are no surprise. The next two traits (“solitary learners” and “deferent to school authority figures”) remind us how important behavior – and particularly not-seen and not-heard behavior – is to the categorization of a student as “good.” The final two traits of the “model” student (“culturally mainstream” and “college bound”) suggest the limitations of the category. According to Hemmings, “culturally mainstream” students are ones who have

adopted middle-class or mainstream language, patterns of discourse, values, and mannerisms. The students spoke and were literate in standard American English. They valued independence and hard work; attempted to resolve disputes through rational, informed dialogue; cultivated an appreciation for classic Western literature, music, and art; and displayed other traits they and their teachers associated with middle-class groups and professionals. (p. 30)

Like “college bound,” this trait of the “model student” implies a singular – and quite narrow – path through school and beyond. To be considered a “good” student, one has to be good in accord with the conventions of the dominant culture.

The limited definition of the “good” student does not just apply to American schools. In a similar study of Australian high schools (Thompson, 2010), the three main paths to “goodness” in the school’s eyes were quite similar to those articulated by Hemmings. Thompson documented that successful students enacted one or more “good” performances: either *the docile and disciplined good*, *the pastoral good*, or *the bureaucratic good*. Although he argues that each represents a slightly different (though not mutually exclusive) approach, all three evoke a sense of compliance, diligence, and silence. In general, the “hegemonic good student [role] privileges a range of dispositions, behaviours and compartments” which fail to recognize the complexities of the young person’s experiences, the processes of his growth and development, and the variability of the contexts through which he moves in and out (p. 415).

Skilled and polite social interactions are also a necessary prerequisite for the “good” student. She must be aware of the socially-accepted norms of the school and classroom, conform to them, and project a pleasant, compliant, and non-threatening disposition. “Many of the most crucial social interactions in school settings are highly charged with emotion and regularly interpreted with regard to ‘attitude,’” argues Gilmore (1985a, p. 114). The ways in which these emotions and attitudes are displayed and interpreted, Gilmore explains, can have a profound effect on the quality and quantity of learning that takes place.

In his three-year ethnographic study of an urban elementary school, Gilmore (1985a) demonstrated that, in the eyes of teachers, parents, and administrators, a “‘good attitude’ seemed to be the central and significant factor in students’ academic success and literacy achievement in school...students who were viewed as having good attitudes were also viewed as being good kids” (p. 111-12, 113-14). More than any test score or other academic achievement, “attitude” was the primary method for sorting students into the school’s honors track and also the major source of complaints about students from the adults.

For older students, having a “good attitude” often means showing a willingness to engage in the demands of the classroom, however un-engaging they are, and not requiring too much of the teacher’s extra attention. For example, in Oakcity High, a majority Latino and African American-populated urban public school, Rubin (2007) found that

to be a good student in this figured world called for compliance with rote, repetitive tasks that were distanced from meaning, amid humiliating interactions and unflattering categorizations. ...In this world, a ‘good student’ was compliant, worked quickly and alone, and did not present problems or difficulties requiring a teacher’s attention. (p. 240)

In this school, students were categorized “two-dimensionally” based on how quickly they could complete their worksheets (p. 234). The teachers appreciated and rewarded those students who did the assigned tasks without complaint or fuss.

When school tasks are not particularly challenging (as above) or when maintaining order – as opposed to academics – is the primary concern of school adults, performing the role of “good” student need not always be accompanied by particularly accomplished academic performance. As Metz (1978) explains, “for schools the most difficult instrumental goal is the maintenance of order among a student body which is only half socialized, comes and remains by legal compulsion, and frequently includes persons with radically different educational and social expectations” (p. 17). Given the school’s need to maintain order among its student population, studies like McFarland’s (2001) which suggest that students who are academically successful are also likely to be less rebellious in school, raise questions about the direction of causality. Could it be that academic success, in this case measured by GPA, is at least partly a reflection of a student’s classroom behavior? Could that explain the fact that, in his study of two vastly different Midwest high schools, a one standard deviation rise in first semester GPA was associated with “a 23% decline in student disruptiveness” (p. 656)? In other words, it seems likely that students get better grades *because* they are well-behaved.

The “good,” or compliant, student is not necessarily academically successful. Students who are quiet, “who generally conform to teachers’ directions, are easily corrected when they do not, and rarely offer challenges to the teacher” are considered to be “good” students (Metz, 1978, p. 89). Unless teachers are asked to share the subtle nuances of each student’s strengths and weakness in all areas, this label generally holds up even if the student in question does not do particularly well on academic assessments of any kind. Flores-Gonzalez’s (2002) definition of “school kids” reveals a similar concatenation of compliance and achievement in school. The students she described as enacting a “school kid” identity were not all strong academic students, nor did they necessarily have high aspirations for their school accomplishments in high school

and beyond. What they all did have in common and what made them “school kids” – as opposed to what Flores-Gonzalez refers to as “street kids” – is an overall understanding of the need to perform the *student identity* and a general sense of connection to school.

Feeling attached to school, for many young people, is preceded by a feeling of belonging and engagement in all areas of student life – extra-curricular, social and relational, as well as academic. Eckert’s (1989) description of the high school “Jock” demonstrates the way that being a “good” student requires an enthusiasm for all aspects of school. This category of student is described by one of her interview participants as:

Someone who gets into school, who does her homework, who, uh, goes to all the activities, who’s in Concert Choir, who has her whole day surrounded by school. You know, “tonight I’m gonna go to concert choir practice and today maybe I’ll go watch track, and then early this morning maybe, oh, I’ll go help a teacher or something.” You know. (p. 1)

“Getting into school” implies an all-around in engagement with the institution and the sense that the majority of one’s identities (like *soccer player, student government representative, friend,* etc.) are somehow tied to school as well (Flores-Gonzalez, 2002).

Thompson’s (2010) concept of *the affiliated good* is also apropos here: “students were very aware that schools rewarded those who involved themselves in the life of the school and made the most of opportunities offered” and successful students were often also those who sought out avenues for “belonging” in school and found ways to “attach themselves to the institution” (p. 426). “Good” students have to contribute to their institution, and in return, they are rewarded with a place in which they can belong.

In general, the definition of the “good” student is behavior- and compliance-based, rather than defined by a student’s internal drive for learning, critical thinking, or academic skills. Even in the cases where goodness seems to be defined in terms of “attitude,” attitude is still judged only on its outward appearance. When school adults discuss a student’s “attitude,” they are

rarely talking about the student's internal state, his deep investment in school, or her personal connection to the academic work; rather, they are judging the student's behavior.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE, SMARTNESS, AND SUCCESS

The institutional definition of the “good” student is helped by the persistence of a number of other socially-constructed aspects of the school. The definitions of *studenthood*, and of “good” or “bad” *studenthood*, are specifically bound up inside our culturally-specific model of education. Schools often ask that their inhabitants ignore or put aside their *local* definitions of knowledge, skills, or wisdom, and instead subscribe to the “extra-local” educational mission (Levinson & Holland, 1996, p. 1).

Schooling institutions, then, have the formidable power and responsibility of defining their terms – terms like “knowledge,” “smartness,” and “success.” It is the institution of education that defines “certain types of knowledge as extant and as authoritative...[and certain] categories of persons who are to be treated as possessing these bodies of knowledge and forms of authority” (Meyer, 1977, p. 122). Fields of study and classes of professionals are effectively constructed by the institution and confirmed by the fact that we, as a society, continue to accept the construction as legitimate. According to Meyer, the reproduction of modern society depends on this ongoing process of *legitimation*. New categories of knowledge are developed and new professional fields are created – and then new degrees are conferred to legitimize both. Society develops expectations about the meaning and necessity of credentials and those expectations become second-nature to most of us. The process becomes, in its own way, a self-fulfilling prophecy.

This is perhaps even more the case now than in Meyer's day. In the early years of the 21st century and in the final years of the No Child Left Behind mandate, our increased testing

culture means that the state is defining the knowledge and skills that make a student “smart” or “successful.” As Leslie Siskin (2003) argues, “through establishing standards, choosing which subjects (and what content) will be tested, and then attaching stakes to achievement scores on those tests, the states materialize what kinds of knowledge counts, and for how much” (quoted in Goldwasser & Bach, 2007, p. 4). In other words, it is the schools and the policy makers who regulate them that construct and control the valuation of certain kinds of knowledge in our society and our schools.

The ramifications of this cannot be overstated: the categories and hierarchies (of knowledge and personhood) that we take to be objectively real are, in fact, socially and culturally constructed. The discourse around an idea like “smartness,” for example, is constructed in a school building, a school system, and society at large through specific “artifacts,” such as standardized test scores, grades, labels (such as gifted or honors), the diploma, participation in advanced courses, the use of a large vocabulary, and the presence of books. According to Hatt (2007), these “semiotic mediators...make smartness appear ‘real’ and as something tangible or biologically based rather than as something socio-culturally produced” (p. 151). We are reminded that even words like “smart” are burdened with notions of power, and because the word is so regularly used in relation to formal education, the connection between smartness and school success has become “invisible and difficult to question or challenge” (p. 146).

The invisible nature of social and cultural production makes it almost impossible *not* to perpetually reproduce these artifacts as “real” symbols for smartness. The construction of “smartness” then, comes to operate within “students as spoken discourse and embodied practice. Smartness operates as a figured world that shapes how ability is talked and thought about in school and larger society” (Hatt, 2007, p. 149). Thus, the presence of these kinds of artifacts of

“intelligence” or “good” studentness make it all the more difficult to challenge the definitions of these categories and make it that much easier for one to internalize one’s own “smartness” or “goodness” – or its opposite.

Several ethnographers have documented just this narrow construction of “smartness” in the schools they studied. In the urban Oakcity High, for example, “smartness” was defined externally by grades and by the school’s and teachers’ rules. “Smartness in this figured world was linked to diligence in completing assigned tasks. ...Smartness also included maintaining a compliant demeanor in class” (Rubin, 2007, p. 240). “Smart” students paid a price for their performance. To be considered “smart,” students had to sit complacently through boring and meaningless lectures and were subjected to humiliation from school adults. Most notably, in the context of “this understanding of smartness, students criticized each other as ‘slow,’ ‘retarded’ and ‘stupid’ for not being able to accomplish rote tasks quickly” (Rubin, 2007, p. 241).

Similarly, for several of the students in Hatt’s (2007) study, the

narrow definition of smartness that focuses upon grades and test scores made them feel as if school was not something they were good at. They did not feel smart or capable within school walls, which directly influenced their decisions to eventually drop out of school. ...To maintain their sense of self-worth and agency, they *have* to disengage. (p. 161)

Thus, the cultural construction of what constitutes being “smart” appears to limit students’ opportunities to engage with school and with learning.

There are also examples of the narrow construction of “smartness” beyond our own national boundaries. In her study of a Swedish vocational secondary school, Korp (2011) found that the students and adults in the school collectively participated in producing and maintaining a “front culture” which defined the *limited* ways in which smartness could be performed. In this particular environment, signifiers of smartness included “mastery of the masculine jargon” including explicit mocking of anything “coded as feminine or gay” and “the ability to find clever

solutions to any situation and problem that might occur in work and life...and to manage on one's own" (p. 27). The accepted hyper-masculine "front" which seemed to pervade almost all corners of the school posed challenges for students when it conflicted with the behaviors necessary to complete a particular task in the workshop courses which were specifically preparing them for real-world employment.

The potential conflicts between constructions of "success" in school and in the real world are complex and often confusing. In our culture, the (successful) completion of school is a marker of general success for many people. In other words, "traditional ideas about success and failure tend to be fairly prescriptive and narrow, laying out seemingly divergent and mutually exclusive pathways for youth" (Dimitriadis, 2003, p. 33). There is no doubt, then, that schools are powerful institutions, with the ability to confer personhood on individuals – and also the ability to deny that label. Schools are spaces for "becoming somebody," but the types of persons you can become or the types of persons who will be recognized and valued are often limited – sometimes by the structure and culture of the schools themselves (Luttrell, 1996; Wexler, 1992). In order to reveal the falseness and performative nature of the "good" student identity, we would also have to expose and deconstruct these other socially-constructed concepts.

VARIATIONS IN "GOODNESS" ACROSS INSTITUTIONS

It is not just individual students who can receive differential treatment when seen as "good," but entire schools as well. For example, in an upper-middle class suburban junior high school in the Northeast researchers noted the permeation of "identified success." In this context, one teacher

gave the class the opportunity to take a test on the same material for a second time because 'the majority of the kids in the class shouldn't have failed.' Because they 'should' not fail, they *could* not fail. ...The teacher had to work hard to erase noticeable

failure and inscribe it in her books as legitimate success. (Varenne, Goldman, & McDermott, 1998, p. 110)

In general, given the “overall identification of success” in this school environment, “any single instance of failure was reconstructed as an aberration—in the same manner as a single instance of success at an inner-city school is reconstructed as an aberration within an overall identification of failure” (p. 110). In this example, because the school as a whole maintained a designation as “good,” all of its students were so labeled and thus reaped the benefits.

Indeed, the legitimation of the school’s allocation process in essence condones and naturalizes a practice of collective labeling for both students *and* non-students. A school with a distinctive charter of “college prep” in effect labels its students “college bound” whereas a school chartered for a vocational field pins all its students with a quite different label. Students who do not complete high school are labeled “drop-outs” as they are also allocated into certain status positions within society, different from their peers labeled “graduates.” The legitimation theory suggests that these charters are understood by society as representing *real* differences and thus *create* real differences, at least in the “adopt[ion of] personal and social qualities” (Meyer, 1977, p. 118). Both students and non-students internalize these identities and come to view them as self-defining because their “social audience” has made them so (Goffman, 1959).

Just as the type and quality of a school can mark the overall image of its student body, so too does the specific school context affect the way individual students are judged and ranked within its walls. Over the last several decades, a new breed of schools – sometimes referred to as the “new paternalism” movement – have opened up across the country. These elementary, middle, and high schools, mostly operated by charters, preach a “no excuses” philosophy and stand by the assumption that kids from low-income and minority backgrounds can be held to the same standards as their wealthier and whiter counterparts. The “good student” in these schools

learns and embodies decidedly middle class values and the schools are unapologetic about that vision arguing that poor students need to learn the skills and habits to survive and thrive in polite society (Delpit, 1988). Students in these schools are trained in proper posture and formal dinner behavior; they are required to track the teacher with their eyes in the classroom and walk down the hallways of their school in absolute silence; they are punished for swearing, engaging in “street talk,” being tardy, teasing, and using electronics during the school day. In other words, these schools “sweat the small stuff” (Whitman, 2008, p. x).

Students in schools like these are trained to be aware of their every behavior and gesture. While these schools are considered academically rigorous and pride themselves in their students’ leaps in test scores and college acceptances, their policies often stress behavior over intellectual engagement. For example, the “Student Commitment” posted on the KIPP Schools website has three parts, two of which focus exclusively on behavior – towards peers and adults (ex. “I will follow the teachers’ directions”). The third part, the only one to mention academic work, is vague in its orientation towards schoolwork as something that requires more than *performing* the correctly scripted behavior:

I will always work, think, and behave in the best way I know how, and I will do whatever it takes for me and my fellow students to learn. This also means that I will complete all my homework every night, I will call my teachers if I have a problem with the homework or a problem with coming to school, and I will raise my hand and ask questions in class if I do not understand something. (KIPP Foundation, 2012)

In these schools, populated primarily by poor and minority youngsters, the “good” student is held to high academic standards, but to even higher behavioral ones.⁶ The schools emphasize “old-

⁶ I witnessed the preference for behavioral compliance over academic engagement at a recent visit to a first grade classroom in a Brooklyn branch of the Uncommon Schools charter network. Students were not recognized or called on unless they raised their hands “correctly” (i.e. sitting up straight with one straight arm extended to the ceiling and the other arm on their desk or lap). In one poignant moment on the classroom carpet, about half the class had their hands raised with excitement to answer the teacher’s question, but because they were made to wait several minutes, many of them got tired and their hands began to droop. The teacher scolded the class saying that she didn’t see any correctly raised hands and was disappointed that no one knew the answer. The previously gleeful and engaged

fashioned character education,” which requires students to demonstrate their growth through compliance to strict behavioral codes (Kirp, 2010).

While these “no excuses” schools boast unprecedented closures to the achievement gap (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003; Tilson, 2009), they have been subject to tremendous criticism from proponents of progressive education. The structured, even *militaristic*, approach to discipline and even daily interaction, it has been argued, reeks of deficit-centered and racist thinking. Fitting the “good” student mold at these schools requires subscribing to and performing a very specific and inflexible role.

The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

MAINTAINING AND REPRODUCING “GOOD”

Students do not enter school as either “good” or “bad,” but are rather molded and shaped to fit those categories based on the school’s structure and culture. Flores-Gonzalez’s (2002) study of Latino high school students in Chicago serves as a reminder that young people negotiate the complex world of school as well as other arenas and explore and develop *multiple* identities – not just a singular idea of self. In her language, the “school kid” identity can include within it several identities related to school. Using the framework of role-identity theory, Flores-Gonzalez identifies seven factors integral to the development and maintenance of the “school kid” identity:

1. School kids have opportunities to take on the socially appropriate role of students.
2. They can count on the support of their teachers and peers.
3. They get recognition and rewards.
4. They develop close and warm relationships with teachers and other school kids.
5. They receive constant positive feedback for their adequate performance as students.
6. They are given opportunities to explore and incorporate into their school-kid identity various other school-related identities.

children were sent back to their desks and didn’t get to finish that lesson until much later in the class period. By then, most of the excitement had been lost.

7. They are encouraged to explore possibilities for their future and to aspire—and expect—to become socially mobile. (p. 154-5)

Listed in this way, the path to becoming – and remaining – a “school kid” appears possible, perhaps even simple. Yet, Flores-Gonzalez’s ethnographic narrative of multiple students who lost their way and relinquished this identity, or never developed it in the first place, is a reminder of just how difficult it is, in the day-to-day life of a school, for all of these requirements to be fulfilled for each student.

Although it is ultimately necessary to the maintenance of a “school kid” or “good” student identity that students are exposed to all of the factors Flores-Gonzalez enumerates, it is clear that each one builds upon the next: For example, positive relationships with teachers can lead to recognition and rewards for strong academic work. And opportunities to “play” the role of student can generate other opportunities to explore future roles. Although sometimes this can mean that if one link is missing the whole chain falls apart, the generative process often works to students’ advantage.

In other words, a single performance of the “good” student identity can be transformed into a larger identity label. In the intensely symbolic environment of school, “single behaviors, words, or other kinds of signs become representative of the self” (Wexler, 1992, p. 9; also see Eckert, 1989). In this way, one positive behavior can define – or even alter – a teacher’s view of a student. For example, one study of minority students in an AVID untracking program at a primarily white school (Mehan, Hubbard, & Villanueva, 1994), found that many teachers reported that, “when they saw AVID students with notebooks, taking notes in class and turning in neat assignments on time, it indicated to them that [those] students were serious” (p. 109). Similarly, in this particular program, the “highly visible markers of AVID [did not] stigmatize AVID students in the eyes of their peers,” as one might expect, but rather made other students

jealous. AVID students' peers saw them playing the role of "good" student and taking advantage of valuable resources for academic success and they "wanted in" too (p. 111). In this way, we can see that once students are somehow marked as "good," they are offered more opportunities to learn in the school environment. In a cyclical way, constructing an identity as a "good" student can lead to further opportunities to continue in that role. Hawkins' (2005) research shows that "students who collaboratively construct identities as learners in classrooms gain access to the specific varieties of language and literacies that they must master to perform an identity as a learner, that is, a student successful in school" (p. 67).

The "good" student label can also be reproduced through formal structures in the school. Through tracking practices and access to advanced courses, some students are "provided the tools to 'play the game' better than others" (Goldwasser & Bach, 2007, p. 10). "Good" students have more doors opened to them just because they are marked as such. Rist (1970) came to just this conclusion after spending three years studying one set of elementary school students who were informally tracked in their kindergarten classroom. His groundbreaking study showed that the "ability" groups five year-olds were put into on the eighth day of kindergarten – largely based on social class and other demographic factors – followed them at least through the second grade, when his study ended, but likely well beyond that. In Rist's view this was less an indication of the teacher's skills at evaluating student potential, and more a sign that being explicitly marked as "good" or "bad" early on in one's schooling career can become a "self-fulfilling prophecy." According to Rist, the children who, in the first few days of school, appeared to "closely fit the teacher's 'ideal type' of the successful child" were put at the "advanced" table and treated in a way that allowed them to learn at a much faster rate than their less "advanced" peers (p. 276).

Another study, focusing on the early years of school, reveals the way the ability labels placed on students and groups affects their freedom to enjoy undisturbed learning. In one first grade classroom in McDermott's (1976) study, slight differences in the structure and pacing of reading groups for "high" and "low" readers ultimately reinforced the levels of the groups: "high" readers were allowed to rotate through student readers independently of the teacher's instruction, while "low" readers had to be called on for each new section of the text, generating constant stops and starts and disruptions to students' focus. Perhaps an even more powerful example of the differential treatment of the two groups was the liberty the "high" readers had to interrupt the "low" group's reading time to speak with the teacher while the "low" readers were not afforded the same rights while the "high" group was working with teacher (McDermott cited in Davies & Hunt, 1994).⁷

Other evidence has shown that "good" students not only receive better academic opportunities, but also often have more access to participate in extra-curriculars which give them occasions to develop their talents, learn leadership skills, and build bonds with peers and school adults outside of the typical classroom relationships. Extra-curricular activities also offer students access to the inner workings of the school:

This information allows Jocks to chart relations among people elsewhere in the network, gain access to them and their resources, and call upon their roles as justification of this access. Above all, the Jocks' view of the structure of the institution is essentially the same as the institution's own view of itself, so that their understanding and manipulation of the dynamics within the institution is maximally effective" (Eckert 1989, p. 181).

The "Jocks" or "good" students come to see their own interests and goals to be in line with those of their school, which increases their commitment to it and vice versa. Lee's (1996) research also found that student who participated in extra-curricular activities, like the school newspaper –

⁷ Davies and Hunt (1994) found a similar scene at play in their own research in a high school classroom where the teacher freely pulled her attention from Lenny, a struggling "troublemaker," to respond to queries from "good" students but would not let her work with them be interrupted by Lenny (p. 401-405).

which is considered a white, middle-class space – were afforded “insider status” in the school (p. 80-1). In general, the evidence shows that students who are able to actively participate in school-based programs and activities *outside* of the classroom are generally more successful *and* that these opportunities are generally offered first and primarily to the “good” students (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Spady, 1970).

Just as students marked “good” are offered increased opportunities to learn and lead, they are also afforded more freedom to make mistakes or behave in ways that might otherwise be considered “bad.” Wexler’s (1992) ethnography of image-making in schools reveals the way “good kids” can get away with doing bad things because of the “selective punishment” of the school’s discipline system. One “good kid” in his study explains how she can pull off taboo roaming of the halls during class periods without a pass because she “dress[es] up a lot” (p. 22). Similarly, during Metz’s (1978) study of desegregated schools in the 1960’s, she would often hear teachers describe the

‘sneaky’ quality of the high track white children’s misbehavior... They would break rules because there was something else they wanted to do, or to ‘get away with something,’ not to tease the teacher openly or to challenge the rule itself. [In contrast,] the black children in the lower tracks seemed more often to break rules openly and partly for the fun of flouting a rule or the teacher. (p. 94)

The fact that teachers ascribed a difference in intention to the two sets of students, different in both track and race, suggest that they likely labeled – and perhaps punished – the behaviors differently. Across grade levels and school types, then, there appears to be some consistency in the benefits afforded the students labeled as “good,” whether they earn that label based on “real” qualities or not, which make it easier for them to continue to earn that label, day after day and year after year.

WHICH GROUPS ARE ALWAYS “GOOD”

Jane Elliot’s famous “blue eyed/brown eyed” experiment, first done with her third grade class in the days following Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination in 1968, demonstrated the problematic way that “goodness” or “badness” can get attached to (and internalized by) groups of people on the basis of something as simple and superficial as eye color (Peters, 1985). Indeed, the research shows that there are certain groups of students who are almost automatically marked as “good” merely by their inclusion in a particular social identity group.

The most obvious example is the “model minority” stereotype that is often applied to Asian American students in American schools. This stereotype holds that Asian Americans are “quiet/silent and hardworking people who achieved success without depending on the government” (Lee, 1996, p. 7). As we have seen, in school being “quiet” and submissive to the teacher gives most students an automatic pass to “good” studenthood. For Asian American students, the expectation of a “quiet” persona is coupled with an assumption about the pro-school and pro-hard work values of Asian culture. Whether or not these stereotypes hold true for individual students, their persistence in our culture has great influence. Some teachers in Lee’s (1996) study openly admitted that they favored Asian American students because they were “easy to teach and don’t cause any trouble” (p. 62).

Although there may be many high-achieving and academically successful Asian American students, it is certainly not the case that *all* Asian Americans are *good* students. The work of Lee (1996) and Lew (2006), among others, reminds us of the heterogeneity of the students we call “Asian” and the differences between various groups within that larger category. Some of these students hold positive attitudes toward education and try “to live up to the model minority standards,” while other students are resistant to engaging in the types of behaviors that lead to academic success (Lee, 1996, p. 68).

The “model minority” stereotype, which marks most Asian American students as “good” students, “silenc[es] the wide range of Asian American experiences...[and] denies the poverty and illiteracy in Asian American communities” (Lee, 1996, p. 6). This makes it particularly hard for students in that group who are struggling in school to overcome their challenges. The persistent “good” student label holds them back; the “model minority” stereotype is so ingrained in our culture and in schools that Asian American students may feel embarrassed to reveal their academic problems to their friends or family and they may suffer in silence. Even worse, the “Asian ethos which states that an individual’s first loyalty is to his or her family and that ‘bad’ behavior (i.e., disclosure of failure) on the part of an individual shames the entire family” makes it nearly impossible for a student who is not finding easy success in school – despite, perhaps, projecting the image of a “good” student – to seek out support or additional academic help (Lee, 1996, p. 61). The automatic typing of students becomes prescriptive, telling students how they ought to behave because of who they are. Asian American students, therefore, are prone to judge their self-worth off the stereotype; in the process, they may, as one student explained, “lose [their] identity” (Lee, 1996, p. 125).

Teachers’ perceptions of Asian Americans as “good” students also hinder their learning possibilities because teachers may pass those students despite unsatisfactory academic performance if they unconsciously buy into the stereotype. For example, Lee (1996) found “on several occasions [that teachers] had given passing grades to Asian American students who had not earned them. In each case, the student who was passed was described as a quiet and polite student. The teachers reported feeling sorry for the student because he or she had been a ‘good kid’” (p. 62). Although it is easy to fall into the trap imagining that “positive” stereotypes are not so bad, it is clear that the automatic typing of Asian American students as “good,” as well as

smart and hard-working, actually holds them back from achieving their true potential and individuality.

Of course, the “model minority” stereotype is not just harmful to the Asian American students it labels “good,” but also to all other students who share their school buildings – and their school culture. Lee (1996) argues that “the stereotype is dangerous because it is used against other minority groups to silence claims of inequality” (p. 125). It gives merit to the question of why African Americans, Latinos, and other minority groups have not been as economically and academically successful as Asian Americans and Asian immigrants have. As Rosenbloom and Way (2004) show, “the stereotypes about [Asian Americans] relied and were built on the stereotypes about [African Americans and Latinos],” and vice versa (p. 444). This pits one group against the other, making it even harder for either group to break out of the prophetic cycle.

THE MYTH OF MERITOCRACY

Given the ingrained nature of class, race, and gender discourses in the school, it is not surprising that certain assumptions of who will be successful in school and who will not get normalized, not only in individual school buildings but in the culture at large. Of course, maintaining the myth of meritocracy – that those who are successful deserve it because they are smarter and have worked harder – is in the best interests of the school; any other model would suggest that schools are participating in reproducing illegitimate inequalities. Therefore, many contemporary Western societies, and by extension their schools, still promote “the idea that high intelligence and hard work together constitute the legitimate basis for high positions and incomes... As a distributor of merits in terms of grades, it is in fact fundamental to the legitimacy of the mass educational system generally” (Korp, 2011, p. 22). In other words,

although it may operate to greater or lesser degrees in different schools, in general the authority of the school institution and its personnel relies on the maintenance of the meritocratic myth.

The myth is reconfirmed each year by the power of the diploma; in our culture, the (successful) completion of school operates as a marker of general success for many people. Schools are such an important institution in our culture that they have the power, not only to define and construct the knowledge that is valued, but also to define and construct valuable *personhood*. For example, two subjects in Lutrell's (1996) study reveal the power of schooling to make them feel like "somebody":

I don't think the world ends if you didn't finish high school. I didn't finish and I'm not a bum. But I always wanted to finish, just so I could feel like I was somebody.

If you know how to read, write, do your figures—if you have that diploma, then you feel like you're somebody, you know. (p. 93)

The school's and society's production of what counts as the "educated person" has a cyclical effect. Because not only is "the educated person...culturally *produced* in definite sites, [but] the educated person also culturally *produces* cultural forms" (Levinson & Holland, 1996, p. 14).

This means that those who are rewarded by the system's definitions, find it in their best interest to maintain and reproduce those definitions through their own production of culture.

In a supposedly meritocratic school, the "good" students and the "bad" students function not just as momentary locators in the system of acceptable behavior and expected accomplishment, but begin to take hold in more permanent ways. The subjectivity of categories, hierarchies, and labels become legitimated in the school building and across schools within the generalized school script. As Wexler (1992) explains that the organization of the school

is an economy because it sets up standards or values and social instruments to achieve them, moving and shaping identities and the interactional resources used in their accomplishment. 'Getting detention' is not only an organizational sanction that restricts student movement, but a message from the social instrument of the discipline structure that shapes a more general image of who you are in the context of school life. 'Good

kids' get detention, but 'burn outs' and 'scum' are processed, defined and recycled within the detention punishment structure. Likewise, 'elites' and 'stars' are created in the gymnasium and its corridors, the school literary magazine or in the official student councils. (p. 9)

The school "economy" treats students who belong to different social groups differently and in doing so, it sends vital messages to students about who they are and what identity options they have. Thus, just as social class categories in the larger social world tend to reproduce themselves over time, so too do student identity categories.

PLAYING THE GAME

The game of school demands that successful students are constantly produced, and produce themselves, within the framework of the "good." The problem is that the majority of what is "constructed as 'good' in the good student is best thought of as a set of discourses that, perversely, limit the possibilities for students to be creative and experimental of their selves" (Thompson, 2010, p. 413). In other words, the framework within which students can develop, perform, and maintain their school-related identities is *limited* and *limiting*. Because "goodness" in schools, as we have seen, is so often defined in terms of behavior and compliance, there is a tremendous danger that students who desire to be "good" will learn to focus their energies on pleasing authorities and *looking* "good" rather than on learning.

Some students are explicit about their intentions to "play the game" in order to reap the institutional benefits of being seen as a "good" student. Goldwasser and Bach (2007), who interviewed high school students about what it meant for them to do "good work," found that many students understood that "their teachers equated achievement with classroom behavior. In this sense, not questioning the teacher's authority, keeping quiet in class, and generally accepting

the role of passive student resulted in good grades” (p. 9). One student from their study explained his achievement philosophy:

School is a game you learn how to play. Like, my grades are good, but it's not because I learned a lot and I did so well on the test. It's because...I'm not rude to teachers, so they're just grateful for that, so they give me a good grade. (p. 9)

It is a sad day when students clearly recognize that their grades – the supposedly *objective* measures of achievement (or the artifacts of “smartness” as described earlier) – have nothing to do with their learning or mastery of material.

Even for students who really enjoy school-related activities, like writing and reading, pleasing a teacher or doing an assignment in the desired way often takes precedence over the pure enjoyment of learning a new skill or accomplishing a meaningful task. One student in Phelan, et. al.'s (1994) study explained,

I like writing except that writing is fun until you have to do it for a grade. Like I'll think of schemes or something for my ships—like a history—and I'll write it down. It's fun to write, but I always worry that I'm going to get a bad grade when I do it for school. So it seems like for school you have to write the way your teacher wants you to write. (p. 423)

For some students, the intense pressures of school and their desire to get good grades lead them to sacrifice authentic learning for simply mastering “the game” of school.

Some students get so wrapped up in their desire to please their teacher and be seen as a “good” student that they genuinely misunderstand the learning goals of the classroom. In a poignant example, Davies and Hunt (1994) relate the story of an elementary age girl, Jody, who constantly received poor marks on her assignments because of her nearly illegible handwriting. After months of frustratingly slow improvement, she turned in an assignment written out by her classmate with much better handwriting. She proudly accepted her teacher's congratulatory sticker on her work, but when the teacher put a sticker on Jody herself, she faced a “moral dilemma” which she quickly remedied by admitting that she had not done the work herself.

Jody, however, did not understand why this was a problem; she knew that her teacher wanted her to turn in better work and she had figured out a way to do this, not comprehending the problem with her actions (p. 399-401). We so often assume that students who feel positively towards school will also produce good work, that “‘trying harder’ will produce the right results, that is, that genuine commitment to being a “good” student will be revealed by having tried hard enough” (p. 400). But the two things do not always neatly follow each other and our insistence that they should produces situations like Jody’s where she understood that being a “good” student – something she deeply wanted to be – meant producing *good work*, even if it was done by someone else, not improving her own skills or abilities.

For some students who were once motivated and disciplined in school, receiving the “good” student pat on the back can have a detrimental effect on their willingness to work hard and achieve academically. Lanuza’s (2008) research at Brooklyn Academy High School, a school considered to be comparatively “good” by most of its incoming students, revealed the way the “good” student identity, once solidified, created a set of expectations on the part of the student. “Good” students believed that they deserved “rewards” and that they ought to receive high marks even if they did not put in the work because, after all, they were “good” and their teachers liked them. Lanuza argues that “good” students became “too comfortable” in school, meaning that they “relinquish[ed]...some behavioral traits useful for better academic performance” (p. 33).

In settings like these where being becoming, or at least remaining, a “good” student appears to have little to do with learning, the idea of academic engagement gets muddled. We know how important it is that students embrace their learning goals as their own (Metz, 1978). We also know that there is a positive relationship between attaching a “learning” meaning to

one's understanding of being a student and having intrinsic motivation (Bachman, 2005, p. 92). In other words, children who think that being in school is about learning – as opposed to getting a grade, pleasing their parents, preparing for their future, etc. – have deeper motivations to work hard. Unfortunately, the same study also found that in the early years of elementary school, an academic identity built around learning decreases significantly over time as the “future” component increases (Bachman, 2005). This is not surprising when we consider the kind of “learning” activities that take place in many schools. Rubin (2007) makes this distressing point clear:

In a school in which the most frequent educational activity was filling in worksheets, for example, students would develop particular understandings of learning and knowledge (that learning is equivalent to choosing the correct fragment from a fixed set of information and inserting it into a predefined space). (p. 221)

It is no wonder, then, that many students have difficulty understanding actual *learning* to be particularly relevant to their lives as students or otherwise.

By choosing to *play the game* of school, the “good” students contribute to the classroom and school-wide order and become *unmarked* – they don't stand out from what is expected or desired by the institution. As Davies and Hunt (1994) explain,

Within the discourse of teaching-as-usual there is a sense in which competent students are also unmarked in terms of the good/bad student binary. These students with their teacher create the context that is recognizable as the classroom. They know ‘how to behave’ and in doing so become members of those social scenes in which the teacher is positioned as authoritative teacher and they are positioned as co-operative students. (p. 390)

In other words, the taken-for-granted classroom space is dependent on having “good” students and the “good” students, specifically, operate to reinforce the teacher's authoritative position – and perhaps the students' lack of real power within the school.

Playing the game of school requires a performance, an intentional effort to appear to be a specific kind of person. One student in Thompson's study argued this point precisely, explaining

that “being seen to be good is more important than being good” (p. 415). Another said, “The good student is a good actor. You don’t notice it, but you are putting up a shield around what you say and what you do” (p. 416). And yet, despite students’ best efforts to perform the “good student” role, with all of its dependent behavioral and moral qualities – and who would blame them for wanting to, given all of the benefits that come along with the label? – becoming the “good” student does not guarantee future success. Recent evidence has shown that high grades or test scores do not necessarily translate to future outcomes: “even students who are successful on conventional measures of achievement are failing to develop the skills and dispositions needed for the 21st century” (Lipman, 1998, p. 2-3). Perhaps this is because of our test-crazed educational system, our traditional teaching models, or simply ineffective schools. Whatever the reason, this fact creates “a ‘catch-22’ for students in that both compliance and non-compliance with the demands of the [school] would achieve the same result—a lack of preparedness for higher education due to emphasis on rote, low level skills and lack of access to adults who could guide them toward their goals” (Rubin, 2007, p. 244). Whether in traditional or the new “no excuses” schools, the institutional definition of the “good” student limits students’ identity explorations and forces them to conform to a set of rigid behavioral expectations – or suffer the consequences. But the costs of meeting the expectations may be just as problematic.

The studies reviewed in this chapter remind us that “there are specific ways of doing school that count; others are markers for failure” (Hawkins 2005, p. 78). Becoming a “good” student requires a performance that meets the behavioral expectations of the school. It is no surprise that being labeled a “good” student can become a self-fulfilling prophecy when we look at all the ways in which students so labeled get advantages in school. While this certainly can

have a positive effect by affirming the “good” choices made by students, it also reinforces a dichotomous hierarchy that is not necessarily based on *real* differences between students. And students themselves are not oblivious to the unequal way in which rewards are handed out (Sizer & Sizer, 1999); therefore, because of the tremendous benefits for being marked as “good,” many students choose to *play the game* and perform the identity the school desires. This works to everyone’s detriment because it not only reinforces the structures that keep the “good” student identity in place and limited, but it also limits authentic learning opportunities for students.

CHAPTER 3

The “Bad” Student

*I'm slowly drifting into the arms of trouble and trouble holds me
And nothing else is close to me more than pain unfortunately,
Like a self-fulfilling prophecy I'm supposed to be...strugglin'.*

--K'Naan (Somali-Canadian rapper), “Strugglin’”⁸

The “self-fulfilling prophecy” of the troubled—or troublemaker—youth that rapper K’naan speaks of is the reverse side of the “good” student coin. In fact, I would argue that the “good” student script of behavior and attitude is wholly dependent on the existence of a second – and opposite – script, the “bad” student. And just as “good” students depend on their abject identity to define their characteristics and boundaries, so too do many schools themselves depend on the existence of “bad” students to maintain their culture. Varenne and McDermott (1998) use the metaphor of a house or mansion to describe the persistence of these typologies in *the school America builds*. This house has

many rooms, positions like success and failure, Learning Disability and talent, positions that eventually get filled generation after generation with people who are at any time required to fill them. There would be no schools or families, successes or failures, if no one performed what needed to be performed for the event to have happened. (p. 14)

In other words, the schools are structured to have multiple kinds of students and behaviors and achievements – the good and bad – but the structures would not be maintained if individuals, year after year, did not continue to perform in ways that fit the pre-existing categories. Thus, just as the “good” student reproduces itself in each new class of students at every school, so too does the “bad” student.

⁸ K’naan, 2005, “Strugglin’” lyrics.

Schools have structures which not only specifically serve the “bad” – or “troublemaker” – students, but are dependent on their existence and reproduction in each successive generation of students. For example, Bowditch (1993) describes the all-black inner city high school where she did three years of fieldwork. She discovered that the school’s discipline office was the most well-staffed space in the building with five full-time disciplinarians (three for boys and two for girls), three or four assistants, two district security officers, and two police officers who regularly assisted. The extensive procedural instructions for the school’s discipline practices were regularly ignored in favor of a more subjective approach which allowed the school to target their energies on “repeat offenders” and take into account “situational factors” in order to disregard other students’ behaviors (p. 499). Depending on the method of counting used, somewhere between 35 and 63% of boys who were suspended were cited as repeat offenders, and we account for 81.4% of suspensions when we add in the label of “disruptive and offensive use of language.” For Bowditch, this reveals just how often this school “relied on suspensions to punish behaviors that threatened the school’s authority rather than its safety” (p. 499). The paradox here is apparent: on the one hand, the school has set itself up so that numerous staff members’ jobs are dependent on the repeat offenses of students and their labeling as “bad,” yet on the other hand, those personnel make it their mission to maintain the institution’s authority in opposition to those “bad” students.

In this chapter, I will look to the literature to determine the behaviors that constitute the “bad” student label and the detrimental effects it has on the students to which it is applied. I will then look more closely at the mechanisms of cultural reproduction with the school, including the role that race and gender play in the construction of the “bad” student identity – using black males as a case study.

Defining the “Bad” Student

BADNESS AT LARGE

Before we examine the processes that are at work in the construction and performance of the “bad” student role – as we did in the previous chapter with the “good” student – it is important to briefly note the role that “badness” plays in youth culture at large. Particularly in the middle decades of the twentieth century, a number of scholars engaged in debates about the nature of an emerging broad youth culture largely undifferentiated by region, race or ethnicity, and class. Many scholars of this period argued that the “common experience of adolescents imposed by the place of their age group in society” as well as their “isolation...in age-segregated institutions” outweighed group cultural differences and produced a relatively uniform youth culture characterized by a desire to rebel against older generations (Eckert, 1989, p. 13, 15; see also Brake, 1980; Coleman, 1961; Rury, 2004; Steinberg, 1996). Similarly, McFarland (2001) reminds us that although we typically recognize the nonconformist nature of working-class youth, like the now famous “Hallway Hangers” of MacLeod (2009) and the “Lads” of Willis (1977), this does not mean that middle-class youth are necessarily passive and conformist. Instead, he argues that “most adolescents are a disaffected class or subculture in relation to adults” regardless of their social class (p. 616). He goes on to explain that “since every student is subordinated in the school, they all seek to acquire greater autonomy. Hence, the struggle for identity and control is endemic to every classroom” not just those of working class students or those who come to be labeled as “bad” (McFarland, 2001, p. 665).

One aspect of young people’s quest for autonomy from adults is embodied in the idea of “coolness.” Said another way, being “cool” is something that most students strive for; and being perceived as a “nerd” by one’s peers is something, in most school environments, to avoid at all

costs (Kinney, 1993; Rosenbloom & Way, 2004). According to Wexler's (1992) ethnographic study,

one reason that students give for non-involvement [in school-based activities] is that being too involved, too readily participant shows that you are 'not cool'. 'Cool' requires a certain level of reticence, a style of reserve. 'Everybody is talking about how boring this school is' ... 'Cooling' or 'mellowing out' is one way to cope with the pressures. (p. 70)

The notion of "coolness," or the "cool pose," has been explored extensively in relation to young black males (Hall, 2009; hooks, 2004; Majors & Billson, 1992; Majors, et. al., 1994), but the emphasis on toughness and emotional stoicism, two features of what we often consider "cool," are part of our broader stereotypes and expectations of masculinity across race and ethnicity (Way, 2011). But the desire to be "cool" and not be labeled a "nerd" or "geek" is not limited to boys.

Over the course of any given day, week, or school year, many—probably *most*—students choose to commit numerous small acts of resistance or opposition to their schools, their teachers, or their learning in general – sometimes in search of "coolness." McFarland (2001) speculates that students commit *everyday forms of active resistance* "in an effort to change the social situation of the classroom." More than just "harmless jokes, whining, and private socialization" – which he considers examples of more *passive* resistance – active resistance involves acts of "overt defiance" (p. 613-14). These active and passive forms of resistance are sometimes coded and labeled as "bad," and thus the mark of a "bad" student. But sometimes they are not, and the difference likely has little to do with the actual behavior. Instead, students and teachers together participate in "negotiated social practice" which produces different kinds of "disruptive moments" depending on the specific actors involved and their social identities in that space (Vavrus & Cole, 2002, p. 89).

WHAT IS “BAD” BEHAVIOR

The quest for high status among peers may be, to varying degrees, a part of many young people’s experience at school, and certainly the achievement of that status requires an emphasis on “coolness” which may be detrimental to academic success (i.e. distancing oneself from school-related activities or engaging in risky or deviant behaviors) (Staff, 2008). However, this does not mean that the same behavior is perceived in the same way for all students. As studies of the “good” student revealed, the institutional typologies have a tendency to cast labels in broad strokes on individuals whose attitudes and behaviors are much more nuanced. These judgments seem to be particularly subjective when it comes to the “bad” student.

The subjectivity of deviance is not a new concept in the social sciences. In Howard Becker’s (1973) seminal work on the social construction of deviant behaviors and the effect of society’s labeling of “deviants,” he explains:

All social groups make rules and attempt, at some times and under some circumstances, to enforce them. Social rules define situations and the kinds of behavior appropriate to them, specifying some actions as ‘right’ and forbidding others as ‘wrong.’ When a rule is enforced, the person who is supposed to have broken it may be seen as a special kind of person, one who cannot be trusted to live by the rules agreed on by the group. He is regarded as an *outsider*. But the person who is thus labeled an outsider may have a different view of the matter. (p. 1)

Deviance is neither an inherent quality of an act or of a person, but constructed, defined, and enforced by the social context. Certainly there are some “social rules” that have been formalized into laws in this country; many schools, too, also have their own explicit guidelines for appropriate behavior. But there are informal social markers of deviance that may change, for example, depending on which classroom one is in, who is doing the “deviant” act, or who is watching it.

When observed from the outside, the elements that peg a student into one particular category or another (i.e. the “good” or “bad” student) are superficial – more about one’s image

and how one looks than about what one does or believes. For example, the characteristics which mark someone as a “Burnout” (the label for “bad” students in the particular setting of this study) are almost all physical and behavioral according to one student in Eckert’s (1989) study:

You know, maybe somebody who smokes all the time, you know, smokes marijuana and stuff, but you know, everybody does that. You could call me a Burnout. You know, I’ve did that...maybe, maybe it’s the way they dress. It’s a lot of things, I think. Your look, you can wear these leather—and these wallets with chains and look really bad, you know—lot of people say, “Oh, that guy’s got to be a Burnout.” (p. 49)

Students can be distinguished based on what types of clothes or colors they wear, the style or color of their hair (Davies & Hunt, 1994), what substances they use (Wexler, 1992), where in the school building they like to hang out (Eckert, 1989; Wexler, 1992), what kind of language they employ (i.e. obscene or sexual), what kinds of greetings they engage in with their peers, among other surface-level markers (Eckert, 1989; Willis, 1977).

From the perspective of teachers and other adults in the school, what makes someone a “good” or “bad” student can be equally superficial, although appearing to be grounded in a *real* identity. In Gilmore’s (1985a) study, “bad” and “good” students were marked by their “attitude.” The key behavioral event that marked the presence of a student’s “bad attitude” was what Gilmore called “stylized sulking.” He explains,

These displays of *stylized sulking* were usually nonverbal and often highly choreographed performances which seemed, in the teachers’ words to convey ‘rebellion,’ ‘anger,’ and a stance of ‘uncooperativeness.’ The displays were themselves discrete pieces of behavior which conveyed information. They were dramatic portrayals of an attitude. They were postures that told a story to the teacher and to onlooking peers. They were portraits of resistance. They were face-saving dances. And they were black: they were regularly interpreted as part of black communicative repertoire and style. Students who frequently used the displays were also students who were identified as having bad attitudes. (p. 113)

The racialization of this behavioral resistance should not be overlooked, but what is important to note here (in my exploration of the “bad” student more generally) is the subjectivity with which the label of “bad attitude” is applied. Gilmore suggests that students are *performing* – actively

creating and displaying their constructed identities and attitudes towards school. School adults may interpret these performances differently at different moments just as students may choose when and where to perform their “stylized sulking” for particular ends.

Similarly, Wortham’s (2008) study⁹ reveals the micro classroom-level contexts that influence the interpretation of a student’s identity. He finds that because identities are shaped by classroom texts and discussions, they are utterly provisional. For a full academic year, he observed one middle school girl moving, in the eyes of her peers and teacher, and even her own, “from being a normal female student, to being a disruptive outcast, to sometimes being a reasoned dissenter and sometimes being a disruptive outcast” (p. 225). The particular identity categories which this student moved between were “made available through the curricular themes of individualism/collectivism and loyalty/resistance” (p. 225). In other words, the same academic behaviors and personality traits can be interpreted in vastly different ways depending on the classroom context and the available identities offered by the dominant conversations.

Certainly an actively performed “bad attitude” – whether enacted intentionally by the student or made available through classroom discourses – is cause for the teacher’s concern. Even the slightest disruption can be dangerous to the classroom order. Student resistance and rebellion, even when the intentions are not malicious, has the power to reveal the tenacious foundations of the classroom contract, which as we saw in the previous chapter primarily rest on the students’ agreement to comply with teachers’ authority. Acts of disruption, McFarland (2001) argues, have “transformative potential” in any classroom (p. 615). Therefore, many teachers resent the students who – implicitly or explicitly – challenge their authority and expertise. Labeling those students as “bad” and punishing them accordingly helps the teachers save face and maintain control in the classroom.

⁹ Further description of this study is in Chapter 1.

While this cause and effect model seems reasonable in many cases (teachers need to maintain a certain amount of control and order to teach effectively), it can produce unintended outcomes. According to the observations of Davies and Hunt (1994), the “visibility of the coercive, constitutive nature of the [classroom] context comes about, not necessarily because [students] struggle against it, but more often...in their very struggles to be part of it” (p. 391). In other words, there is evidence that teachers sometimes misinterpret students’ efforts to be a *part* of the class and *engage* with the learning activities (especially when that effort or engagement is expressed unconventionally), perceiving it instead as a threat to their authority.

Rubin’s (2007) ethnographic field notes from an urban high school offer a chilling example of the way a student’s *critical* engagement with the material is understood by his teacher as troublesome and disruptive. She describes a social studies class watching an educational film about the Caribbean:

The opening music begins and the camera pans to snow white beaches, blue crystal waters, and white people frolicking at the beach, dining in fancy restaurants and perusing jewelry in expensive shops. As these scenes unfold, an unseen narrator intones that the Caribbean offers ‘European luxury,’ and Kareem is moved to comment,

Kareem: Why they got to say ‘European luxury?’ Why not ‘Black luxury?’

Someone is clicking a pen.

Teacher: Put your pen down and watch the film. This is one of the best films you’re going to see.

Kareem gets up several times for Kleenex.

Teacher: (commanding) Kareem, take your books. Prep room. (p. 231-2)

In this example, we see the teacher interpret Kareem’s insightful and provocative comment as an affront to the classroom order she has created. His comment is not only ignored, but the teacher then seems to make a point to watch him more closely – perhaps looking for his further “disruption” as an occasion to send him out of class and into the “prep room.” We could easily

imagine that in another classroom, Kareem might be praised for his provocative question. Perhaps he would have been encouraged to raise his hand and not call out in the future, but in a different school environment or a different teacher's classroom, he might very well have been rewarded rather than penalized for his speech and actions. But in that moment with that particular teacher, Kareem is marked as a disruptive student, punished and exiled, and his (and his classmates') learning opportunities are cut short. Unfortunately, this story is not the only one of its kind; numerous researchers have documented similar incidences in the classrooms they studied (Bowditch, 1993; Ferguson, 2000; Gilmore, 1985a; Davies & Hunt, 1994; Vavrus & Cole, 2002).

FROM DISRUPTIVE MOMENT TO IDENTITY

Kareem's story hints at the way that one "bad" behavior – or misunderstanding between student and teacher – can escalate. In this case, after Kareem's remark about the film, his teacher seemed to be on the lookout for further disruptions from him, ones which might have been ignored otherwise. Once the teacher found a reason to, she sent Kareem from the classroom which, depending on the discipline policies and structures of the school, might have had further harmful implications for him. This example hints at another important feature of the "bad" student identity, in addition to the fact that "bad" is often subjectively defined: a single disruption or period of "bad" behavior can be seen to represent a complete "bad" student identity. As Becker (1973) has written, once one is labeled a "deviant," one's social identity – at least in relation to the group whose "social rules" were broken – is permanently altered. The label can transform into an identity and thus become an indicator to others of additional features that may or may not be true.

Several studies have found this to be the case in the school environment. Rist (1970), after following several black students through their first three years of school, concluded that the initial labeling and grouping of five year olds – based on subjective factors – during the first few days of kindergarten, over time, became “*objective* records of...’readiness’ (emphasis added)” for first or second grade work (p. 284). Similarly, by hanging around the discipline office of an urban public high school, Bowditch (1993) discovered the disturbingly ironic fact that “the indicators used to identify ‘troublemakers’ were the very ‘risk factors’ that emerge in the research on dropouts” (p. 494). School personnel simultaneously noticed that the students labeled “troublemakers” (or deviants) were often in danger of dropping out *and* consistently applied the label to students who were showing early signs of dropping out. In other words, her study forced her to ask whether the supposedly objective “risk factors” that were constantly being discussed in this school were “correlated with ‘dropping out’ [only, or at least, mostly] because they are used routinely by school workers to expel students” (p. 507). Bowditch argues that the labeling of students as “troublemakers” contributes to an inescapable cycle that reproduces the social status of the students – or a “self-fulfilling prophecy” as Rist would say.

The self-fulfilling prophecy of labels is not just relevant to those *behaviors* that are labeled “bad” and punished, but it also applies to what is considered “bad” (or “good”) at the academic level. Varenne and McDermott (1998) argue that academic labels are socially constructed and context-dependent as well. They eloquently describe the way one misstep becomes immensely meaningful and can have enduring consequences on a child’s path through school. Referring to the moment in Maxine Hong Kingston’s autobiographical educational coming of age story when Kingston’s sister’s “delay is *noticed*,” Varenne and McDermott (1998) write:

It is noticed by another human being, not just any human being in a neutral setting. It is noticed by *a teacher* (not a janitor), *in a school* (and not at home), *during classtime* (and not on the playground). Suddenly, the difference between the performance and the teacher's expectations has been made into a difference that can make a difference in the biography of the child. The delay has become a 'failure' in need of explanation, evaluation, and remediation. The child's act (in this case, the nonact) has been recognized and identified as a particular kind of act that must lead to further actions by possibly a host of other people. In certain kinds of schools but not in others, the act-made-into-an-instance-of-school-failure can itself be used as a token justifying an even more consequential identification. The particular act is taken as exemplary of the kind of acts performed by this kind of person; it is now the child, rather than the act, that is identified as a success or failure. (p. 5)

The authors go on to describe how the characterization of this "act" can justify the labeling of an entire school as a *success* or a *failure*, or an entire category of people (i.e., by race or immigrant status) as generally *successful* or not. In this way we see the way that one "deviant" symbol or one "delayed" skill can come to represent an entire child's identity.

The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

REPRODUCING "BAD"

Just as students who get marked as "good" often garner special attention because of that label, so too does the label of "bad" student *limit* the opportunities and second chances for those students to whom it has been applied. As we saw in the story of Kareem, this can mean that once teachers or disciplinarians pinpoint a "problem" student, they are explicitly on the look-out for even minor infractions. For example, Davies and Hunt (1994) share the story of Lenny, a high school student considered a "troublemaker" by his teachers and peers. During one class period, the researchers observed, he spent several minutes politely requesting work from the teacher while she attended to other students. Finally, frustrated by being ignored, Lenny caused a scene ultimately getting his teacher's attention, but not the assignment he was after. The researchers note that because Lenny was already viewed as a "bad" student, "his swearing was presumably

more visible to the teacher than his [initial student-like] posture and his request for work” (p. 404). In this case, the teacher didn’t attend to him until he had disrupted the entire class.

This form of selective listening can function at the administrative level of the school as well. Bowditch (1993) describes the way disciplinarians at DuBois High School were more interested in a student’s profile as “troublemaker,” or at least as *not* a “good” student, than in his specific reason for misbehaving in that moment. In other words, the school “sought to punish ‘types of students’ more than ‘types of behavior’” (p. 500). She describes one incident in which a student is sent to the disciplinarian’s office with the standard “pink slip” for “talking in class”: whereas generally this type of behavior, especially when it was recurrent as it was in this case, would warrant a formal punishment from the disciplinarian, the conversation with the student changed the disciplinarian’s mind. This particular student’s good grades “altered the meaning of his behavior”; rather than viewing this student as a “bad” kid who always disrupted class, the disciplinarian’s revelation that he was actually strong academically changed his perspective. Suddenly this student was a “good” kid, or a particularly “bright boy,” who had acted out because he was bored in his low-level class (p. 501). Bowditch explains the generalization at work here:

In most school workers’ minds, students who received high grades demonstrated that they accepted the school’s requirements and, presumably, acknowledged the value of the school’s work. According to this reasoning, [this particular student’s disruption]...even if it recurred weekly, represented not a ‘repeated violation of school rules’ but a problem with the teacher’s ability to control the class. (p. 501)

The boy was given a free pass from punishment with the understanding that he was not “bad,” he was just mismanaged by his teacher.

Students may also receive differential *academic* treatment based on the category into which they fall. Recent data reported by the Civil Rights Data Collection found that schools with high minority population tend to provide a less advanced and varied course selection

(Lewin, 2012). And certainly within the school, a great deal of research has exposed the lack of rigor in lower track classes and the difficulty of catching up once one has been labeled “behind” and tracked accordingly (Anderson-Levitt, 1996; Oakes, 1985). According to Wexler (1992), students experience certain tracking practices as “an organized process of self derogation” (p. 80). In other words, students understand their categorization into supposedly objective groups like “special education” to be a moral judgment, and worse, one that “assault[s] the self and threaten[s] the quest to become somebody” (p. 80). The experience of being labeled and categorized into an academic group that is known to be less advanced can affect students’ sense of their own abilities and self-worth.

When “goodness” or “badness” is measured by simple performance – both in the classroom and on high stakes tests – students who are struggling academically get hurt even more. One New York City student, speaking of the 11th grade Regents exams, explained:

All you get back is a score. You don't know what you did good on or what you didn't do good. It's like, OK, I got this score, but I don't know what I got right or what I got wrong. (Goldwasser & Bach, 2007, p. 11)

For the student who is already doing well, high stakes assessments offer a nice pat on the back, but for the less successful students, receiving a low or non-passing score only adds to the discouragement and confusion. Performance-based measures aren't being used to help students learn, and even worse, they are making the weak students feel helpless in their own learning process (Ball, 2001). As we saw dramatically in Texas after the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, when worries about low-performing students reach the school or district level, the consequences can be dire. Rather than giving all students the opportunity to learn (which would, in theory, eventually increase their test scores), the high stakes testing culture encourages schools to “game the system.” In the long run, the losers are the low-performing, often minority,

students whose opportunities for learning and academic advancement are erased through their exclusion from testing and, ultimately, school (Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008).

Not only does the “bad student” label prevent opportunities for learning, it also limits other important and formative experiences that take place in school. Extra-curricular involvement can have a powerful effect on academic achievement and general pro-school attitudes (for example, Eccles, 1999; Eckert, 1989; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Nasir, 2012; Spady, 1970). Unfortunately, there are often not enough activities and leadership roles to go around – particularly in under-resourced urban schools. And the students who get these opportunities are the ones already considered “good.” Eckert (1989) explains that, as student enter high school,

[extra-curricular] activities, in which adults allow students a degree of control not encountered in the classroom, ...merge with the informal social structure of the student population [i.e. the groups of kids identified as “good” or “bad”]. At this point, the disaffection of non-mainstream students attains a new high, as extracurricular activities become the exclusive domain of mainstream students. (p. 12)

The exclusion of “bad” students from many extra-curricular opportunities – either formal processes (such as GPA or attendance requirements or exclusion based on discipline records) or informal ones (such as teacher recommendations and peer networks) – severely limits their chances to become or remain connected to school. In this way, the students are already marked as outsiders are discouraged from finding pathways back to the inside.

Perhaps the ultimate example of the way that “bad” students are prevented from taking full part in learning and leadership opportunities is when they drop out, or are pushed out, of school. Administrators and disciplinarians at DuBois High School – which is probably much like most large urban public high schools in this country – readily admitted that they had little vested interest in continuing to serve students who were constant troublemakers. In one particularly poignant anecdote from her ethnographic research, Bowditch (1993) describes a conversation between the principal, a “repeat offender” student, and his mother in which the

principal threatens to “drop” the student from the school if he does not improve his grades and attendance. When the student and mother leave, the principal admits to Bowditch that it was all a bluff and that it is, in fact, illegal for him to “drop” a student in that way. What the conversation showed, though, was the ease with which school administrators viewed students through only one lens (in this case, “repeat offender”).

There are at least two competing theories of the “drop out” at play in this anecdote from Bowditch’s research and other similar stories. The first theory pins most of the blame on the students, arguing that

by failing to support and respect the existing institutional norms, values, ethos, and rules of the school, students run the risk of being branded deviants. Consequently, these students may be denied privileges and rewards that the institution accords to well-behaved students. With time, the ‘deviants’ internalize such institutional labels by redefining themselves in terms of their deviant behaviour. (Dei, et. al., 1997, p. 19)

The result of this process is that “deviant” students begin to focus their time and energy on “behaviours that offer their own rewards, rather than the institutional sanctions of the school” (p. 19). These oppositional behaviors have legitimacy and prestige in the world of the “deviants” but prevent the students who engage in them from fulfilling the institutional expectations of school, resulting in a gradual process of dropping out – or being pushed out.

However, the second view of school “drop outs” places less blame on the students and more on the system itself. Contrary to the typical view of the “dropout” as a failure, Fine (1991) argues that he should be applauded for being “critical of social and economic injustice...willing to challenge an unfair grade and unwilling to conform mindlessly” (p. 4). Fine’s distinction between the “dropout” and the “stayin” implies that those who persist through school are not necessarily better off than those who actively object and leave school. She goes on to argue that “dropouts could be reconceptualized as critics of educational and labor market arrangements. The act of dropping out could be recast as a strategy for taking control of lives fundamentally out

of control” (p. 4). This perspective recognizes that when “bad” students leave school, their critical voice is lost from the conversation. This is not only damaging to those students who lose the opportunities that school and graduation provides, but it is harmful to the conversation they have left and it reinforces the cycle that “bad” students do not belong in school.

WHEN BEING BLACK AND MALE MAKES YOU “BAD”

It is bad enough, as we have seen, that the label of “bad” student can be applied to young people who express a critical view of a schooling process that often expects them to conform to a standard way of behaving and learning; it is worse that the label, once applied, is maintained and perpetuated through school structures, school culture, and social interaction. But what may be even worse is the fact that certain groups of students seem to be more prone to categorization as “bad” students simply because of their race and gender. Wortham’s (2008) *timescales* model for understanding identities suggests that although we must consider shorter-timescales like how a student comes to be identified in a specific classroom over a short period of time, we also cannot forget about the longer-timescale identities, like race or class, and the fact that the stereotypes about particular groups frame the way students construct their identities in and out of school.

It hardly needs to be cited that at this moment in history, black males exist in the public imagination as a group that is both *in danger* and *dangerous*. Some scholars have called black men an “endangered species” (for example, Gibbs, 1988). Michelle Alexander’s recent book (2010) announced the staggering statistic that the more than 800,000 black men currently incarcerated or on parole in this country is more than the number of black men who were enslaved in 1850. Numerous books and studies have focused on the specific experience of black boys in America’s schools, with titles ranging from *The Trouble with Black Boys* (Noguera, 2008) to *Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys* (Kunjufu, 1995). In some of the

most recent data released from the Civil Rights Data Collection's 2009-2010 study, the fact that our schools' "bad" students are overwhelmingly black boys, and black boys are overwhelmingly marked as "bad" students – at least when being suspended or expelled is the marker of "bad" – is clear (Lewin, 2012).

Indeed, the self-fulfilling prophecy of being viewed and labeled as a "troublemaker" or "bad" student (and suffering the consequences of that label) may be particularly powerful for black males because our culture has constructed such a specific and limited image of their identity. The essentializing nature of race not only operates in the development of one's own identity, but also in others' perceptions. Omi and Winant (1994) remind us that, even if it is not easy or politically correct to admit it,

we expect differences in skin color, or other racially coded characteristics, to explain social differences. Temperament, sexuality, intelligence, athletic ability, aesthetic preferences, and so on are presumed to be fixed and discernible from the palpable mark of race. Such diverse questions as our confidence and trust in others (for example, clerks or salespeople, media figures, neighbors), our sexual preferences and romantic images, our tastes in music, films, dance, or sports, and our very ways of talking, walking, eating, and dreaming become racially coded simply because we live in a society where racial awareness is so pervasive. (p. 60)

This does not necessarily mean that most of us are overtly racist, but Omi and Winant suggest that we are more conscious of race than we might think, or might like to think – and our race consciousness is not neutral or objective. Given our general inability to escape a racialized framing of the world and the people in it, it is not surprising that historically perpetuated racial stereotypes serve a limiting function on the availability of identity performances for all of us, but perhaps most dramatically for black males.

Although Omi and Winant's argument above is about racial differences in general, it is true that when we speak specifically of *Blackness* in America, we are often talking about males. As Kumashiro (2002) explains, when we talk about Black people in the popular media, are we

really only talking about “those people whose difference is specifically and only their race (and not also, say, their gender, sexuality, or disability) and, in the process, ignoring what it means for Black American women or Black American queers or disabled Black Americans also to be Black (but to be Black in perhaps a different way)” (p. 56). The gendering, classing, and weighting of *Blackness* towards specific features makes it that much harder for those who may superficially fit the “type” (i.e. young, urban, working class males) to break out of the stereotypical mold (O’Connor, et. al., 2007; Peterson-Lewis & Bratton, 2004). And given the mold for black male identity in the United States (see Dance, 2002; Dimitriadis, 2003; Ferguson, 2000; Gibbs, 1988; hooks, 2004; Majors & Gordon, 1994; Noguera, 2003), it is hardly surprising that many black boys struggle to escape the “bad” student label and be seen as individuals in school.

Understandably, “the influence of informal cultural prescriptions for what it means to *be black* [emphasis added]” is crucial to the process of identity negotiation that many black males experience during adolescence (Hemmings, 2006, p. 92). Research on the performativity of “blackness,” while relatively scarce, is revealing: One study (Peterson-Lewis & Bratton, 2004) found that even high-achieving black students consistently described the multidimensional behaviors and traits associated with “acting black” in “largely negative” ways (p. 85). Many students cited aesthetic or stylistic characteristics associated with blackness (such as “listening to rap music” or “wearing expensive name-brand clothing” or “walking with a stroll”) which are arguably neutral; however, descriptions associated with general behavior or disposition were almost uniformly undesirable (for example, “not speaking well,” “being violent,” “acting ignorant,” “having a negative attitude,” or “loud”) (p. 86). The notion that even a young person’s *streetcorner state* – his mode of being when not in school and just hanging out in the neighborhood or with peers – is an identity performance influenced by larger cultural

expectations was described by McLaren (1986) who explains that this outside-of-school-state is not “raw,” but is “actually...already ‘cooked’ (i.e. their roles are informed by their social experience in the sense that they sustain a set of social standards expected of them by both their peers and the authorities)” (p. 88; also see Dance, 2002 and Schaffer & Skinner, 2009)

In the school domain, characterizations of typical “black” performances are just as prescribed *and* unfavorable. The students in Peterson-Lewis and Bratton’s study offered examples of “acting black” behaviors like: “not going to class,” “[acting] street-smart instead of school-smart,” and “[trying] to impress [peers] rather than doing what is necessary to achieve” (p. 86). Interestingly, their responses all represented inputs rather than outputs: “the respondents did not conceptualize ‘acting Black’ as guaranteeing failure; instead, they imbued ‘acting Black’ with qualities that tend to lead to failure” (p. 87). In other words, according to these students, “acting black” is about performing the kinds of behaviors that tend to be marked as “bad” in the school context.

For black boys, the confining conceptions of blackness are only amplified by America’s limited view of acceptable performances of masculinity. Males are expected to “be activity oriented, emotionally illiterate, and interested only in independence” (Way, 2011, p. 2). Scholars like Way have argued that our culture’s obsession with men who are tough and self-sufficient burdens and limits adolescents just at the time when they are doing perhaps the most important personal identity work of their lifetime. And for black males, these expectations are likely even more constraining because of the powerful link between their race and gender (e.g. Ferguson, 2000; hooks, 2004).

Gender performance restrictions can often play themselves out for boys in school in dramatic ways. Some boys feel that the school is a feminized environment, demanding and

rewarding traits that are more socially acceptable in girls than in boys. Especially during adolescence when, as we have seen, social acceptance is of chief importance, boys may interpret the compliance with school expectations as counter to their efforts to develop and assert their masculinity. As Peterson-Lewis and Bratton (2004) contend,

many behaviors that school officials think of as gender-neutral, culture-free, or universal ‘good student’ behaviors—for example, solicitousness toward authority figures, eagerness to verbalize ideas, and quiet conformity to all rules—are the same behaviors that some teen males perceive as ‘soft,’ ‘punk,’ ‘sissy,’ ‘girly’—in short, feminine—and thus, in the teen male mind, to be avoided at all costs. (p. 89)

But there is an additional layer to this conflict for *black* boys, because, for some, it may be that the “good” student behaviors are not only feminine, but also “white.” For example, Young (2007) proposes that those boys who resent the fact that school requires them to perform identities they perceive to be incompatible with their gender and race, “may be acting out their own feelings of rejection by schools” when they shun their peers who *do* perform “white-identified, effeminate, or homosexual” identities (p. 5).

Thus, the pressure to perform both *authentic* (male) blackness and (black) maleness is intense for black boys, particularly in school. One student in Dei, et. al.’s (1997) study of a Canadian high school spoke of the specific pressures he feels based on his identity:

I think Black guys have it worse ... the teachers and all the fight people come to fight the Black boys and you have to act like you want to fight even if you don't want to fight ...And, you're pushed to just do sports. And if a Black guy's smart, they don't admit it, they don't want to talk about it ... They just want to just do enough to pass to be like the rest of their friends, just wear the clothes and that's it ... if you're Black and you're smart it's usually female that'll admit it, not male – it's awful. (p. 98)

The popular consolidation of “blackness” into a relatively singular image can limit the identity performance options for young people: “The danger is that in the desire for recognition, the subject of one’s identification becomes [that singular image of] the fantasmatic threatening figure of black masculinity. The act becomes the reality” (Ferguson, 2000, p. 125). In an effort

to perform “authentic” blackness, some black boys may wind up confirming and reproducing the stereotype of “blackness.”

Of course, our culture’s limited conceptions of black male identity don’t just affect students’ behavior, but also their teachers’ expectations of them and responses to them. Whether conscious of this or not, teachers have grown up amidst the same reductive stereotypes of blackness and masculinity. Some teachers are brave enough to admit their subconscious stereotypes and are aware of the ways they may play in to their interactions with students. One teacher in a racially diverse Canadian high school, for example, shared:

I don’t want to put myself in the position that I am above having these stereotypes, and it’s not pleasant to admit them, but I have found them ... There was a Black student who won an award for something and I was surprised ... I’m quite sure that race entered into it, and that was very upsetting to acknowledge in myself. (Dei, et. al., 1997, p. 122)

It is also upsetting to read, but in some ways, it is not this teacher we should be worried about it. We all live in a culture ripe with stereotypes, so having them is hard to avoid. The real danger is when people – particular people like teachers who hold tremendous cultural power over young people – ascribe to inaccurate stereotypes *without* any awareness.

Lipman (1998), for example, found many instances of teachers’ unconscious stereotyping of black students. She noticed that sometimes students are labeled “at risk” “when teachers, proceeding from their own norms, equated typically African American interactional styles, dress, looks, and language with behaviors such as gang membership, drug use, and belligerence” (p. 75). Lipman found that this type of deficit view of black students, and males in particular, especially when supported by school personnel often leads to a greater emphasis on discipline and social control: “In general, the deficit model was reflected in lower expectations for academic performance, a watered-down curriculum, more rote learning, and an emphasis on controlling behavior” (p. 82). It is not surprising, then, that a deficit perspective regularly

confirms itself by maintaining a cycle of underachievement while never actually dealing with the true causes of students' weaker school performance. The failure of many black males in school is (at least part of) the reason for their being labeled "at risk," but it is also possible that the preemptive labeling of these students as "at risk" may be (at least part of) *the reason for their failure*.

While the chicken-or-egg question of how the cycle begins may be beyond the scope of this paper, what is of interest is the way that the relationship between the race and gender of black males distinctly and dramatically limits their ability to perform the role of the "good" student. Many scholars have articulated this dual identity as a "double threat" (Waters, 1990) or "double jeopardy" (hooks, 2004, p. 88), implying that black males are doubly disadvantaged in white-dominated institutions, like schools. Prudence Carter (2006) provides a helpful explanation:

Paradoxically, a stratified gender system underwritten by patriarchy works against many black and Latino boys. Historically, masculinity has been synonymous with social privilege. However, race and racial meanings complicate how low-income African American and Latino males' gender performances are accepted. Cultural gatekeepers in schools and in the workplace perceive the hard masculine behaviors of many men of color as troublesome and as a potential threat to proper decorum. (p. 130)

In other words, slight misbehavior – or even "normal" masculine behavior – has dire consequences when performed by black boys. As Fordham (2008) explains, "because race functions as the master status...[black boys] are often denied access to the reigning hegemonic notion that 'boys will be boys.'" In this way, the behavior of black males is pathologized and demonized just because it is coded as black.

We can find disturbing examples to that effect in several educational ethnographies whose authors relate stories of school personnel foretelling jail cell or welfare futures for their black male students (for examples, see Ferguson, 2000 and Noguera, 2008). These brazen

prophecies are representative of a larger pattern of the differential treatment of black males in contrast to their white or female counterparts. Ferguson's (2000) extensive study of the school discipline procedures affecting black boys reveals that this population is not privy to the same excuses or justifications that other children get. She argues that

the exemption of black males from the dispensations granted the 'child' and the 'boy' through the process of adultification justifies harsher, more punitive responses to responses to rule-breaking behavior. As 'not-children,' their behavior is understood not as something to be molded and shaped over time, but as the intentional, fully cognizant actions of an adult. This means there is already a dispositional pattern set, that their behavior is incorrigible, irremediable. Therefore, the treatment required for infractions is one that punishes through example and exclusion rather than through persuasion and edification, as is practiced with young white males in the school. (p. 89-90)

Black boys are not given the same opportunities as other students to learn "proper" behavior, but instead are assumed to be automatically, and always, "bad" at the first sign of trouble.

The recent report from the Civil Rights Data Collection (Lewin, 2012) confirms this finding at the national scale: their 2009-10 statistics, which used data from 72,000 schools representing about 85 percent of students in the country, found that black students accounted for 35 percent of those suspended once, although they only constitute 18 percent of the student population. Even more dramatic is the percent of suspended more than once who are black: 46 percent (Lewin, 2012). Despite findings that black students, and even black males, do not misbehave more than their white counterparts (Losen & Skiba, 2010), they are hugely over-represented in the suspension data.

Young people are, of course, not blind to hypocritical treatment or double standards in school (see Sizer & Sizer, 1999), and when black boys come to feel that they are being labeled as "bad" – or "stupid" or "at-risk" – some may respond, perhaps unconsciously, by fulfilling these roles. Dena Swanson and her colleagues (1998) have proposed that "the cumulative effect" of the experience daily discrimination under the pretense of fairness "potentially leads to...denied

personal efficacy” (p. 29; also see Tyson, et. al., 2005). Over time, the accumulation of experiences of failure – for whatever the reason – can reduce academic motivation and increase “oppositional” behaviors (Downey, 2008; Harris 2006, 2011; Tyson, 2002). In other words, when black boys feel that their race and gender elicit negative assumptions on the part of those in power, they may begin to internalize the labels – thus only enhancing the perceived connection between their specific race and gender group and the “bad” student identity performance

The expectation that black boys are “bad boys” or “bad” students relies on the assumption that there is something essential about *black boy*-ness, some collective way of being that can then be connected to school-appropriate behaviors and academic skills. Varenne and McDermott (1998) confront a similar assumption in exploring Maxine Hong Kingston’s stories about being a Chinese girl schooled in America. They refuse to accept Kingston’s girlhood voice that claims to know her silence in school “had to do with being a Chinese girl” (Kingston, 1975, quoted on pg. 7). Varenne and McDermott argue instead:

As far as we are concerned, Chinese girlishness is not a state of being. Not talking is not a trait, among others, that Chinese girls possess more than people born to parents to who came to the United States from other parts of the world. It is something that happens to some girls in American classrooms, something that is identified with China and then used as an explanation for the particular biographies of the people who have been so identified. It is an *American* cultural fact, one that is specific only in the peculiar house that dominates the human landscape in the United States. (p. 7)

We can easily substitute black boys for Chinese girls and badness for silence and we are left with the same conclusion: there is nothing inherently bad about black boys. In some American classrooms, black boys misbehave or perform poorly academically, and over time those markers have become identified with this group and used an explanation for the struggles of African American males as a whole. In this way, the expectation that black boys will usually be “bad” students becomes an “*American* cultural fact” which, when perceived as an *actual* fact, is tremendously destructive and harmful.

The Effects of the “Bad” Student Label

EFFECTS ON ACADEMICS

Students considered “bad” either within their specific school environments or in the society at large (i.e. students part of negatively stereotyped social groups) can also experience another psychological obstacle to challenging their label. Steele and his colleagues (Steele, 1999; Steele & Aronson, 1995) have done extensive research over the last two decades testing the theory of *stereotype threat*: “the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype” (Steele, 1999). According to this theory, students experiencing stereotype threat will perform less well on a high-stakes test, for example, due to the added anxiety and pressure. When the threat is removed, however, the performance of the previously stereotype-threatened group matches the performance of other groups confirming the hypothesis that the underachievement of historically-stereotyped groups in academics or other realms is due to *conditional* or *contingent* identities – identities that are made salient situationally.

Steele argues that in order to lessen the stress of stereotype threats, a student “may learn to care less about the situations and activities that bring it about—to realign his self-regard so that it no longer depends on how he does in the situation” (Steele, 1999). This “psychic adjustment,” termed *disidentification*, if continually demanded by stereotype-threatening conditions and consistently rewarded over time with a decrease in stress, can become a more permanent state for an individual and even “a group norm.” Steele proposes that this can happen just as readily to a white basketball player as to a black scholar – both individuals potentially vulnerable to constant stereotype threat in their domain of interest.

Students fully engaged in disidentification can appear to have rational justifications for their negative behaviors or their rejection of school culture and norms. For example, the

Burnouts in Eckert's (1989) study "claim that lockers are unsafe, that the locks never work, and that things get stolen from them. This claim, along with their claim that cafeteria food is bad for you, amounts to a denial of the adequacy of the school's parental ability" which they use to rationalize their rejection of the school's role in shaping their development (p. 59). The symbolic justifications may mask deeper insecurities about whether their true effort would simply confirm others' expectations of them. Low expectations of students, particularly when students feel like they are targeted specifically because of their race, class, gender, or other category, can contribute to a feeling of helplessness and lack of control. One African-Canadian student in Dei, et. al.'s (1997) study explained:

Sometimes too, because the school system has such low expectations of Black students, you say to yourself, 'Why bother?' (p. 72)

Students marked as "bad" by their institutions, over time, may *disidentify* from the whole schooling project. In this way, they gradually detach their overall self-esteem from their academic achievement so that they are able to maintain a sense of self-worth despite school failure (Osborne, 1995, 1997).

Oyserman and Destin's (2010) research on Identity-Based Motivation provides further evidence for a situational approach to students' school-based identities. Like Steele, they argue that although "identities feel stable [they] are instead malleable and dynamically created in context" (p. 1003). They go further to suggest that "self-concept is multifaceted, including many diverse and not well-integrated identity components" (p. 1002). In other words, depending on the context, different features of ourselves are emphasized and different identities made salient; these myriad identities can be unique and personal as well as rooted in various social group memberships, current as well as future-oriented. According to Oyserman and Destin, it is entirely possible – and indeed, probable – to simultaneously maintain identities that feel

incompatible or conflicting. However, they argue that “school success needs to feel identity congruent” (p. 1003) because the salience of a particular identity affects engagement, attitude, behavior, and outcomes in school. If a student has internalized the identity of “bad student,” it is unlikely he will feel that success – or even motivation in school – is congruent with his sense of self.

Take Frankie, a Hallway Hanger in MacLeod’s (2009) ethnographic study *Ain’t No Makin’ It*, as an example. His attitude, behaviors, style of dress, as well as his group of friends all mark him clearly as a student not invested in school. Like many of his friends, he anticipates his inevitable failures – not just in school, but in life. When asked what his life will be like in twenty years, he says, “I don’t fucking know. Twenty years. I may be fucking dead. I live a day at a time. I’ll probably be in the fucking pen” (p. 7). Certainly, logistically it is quite difficult to be a successful student if you live one day at a time, but it is nearly impossible to be motivated to achieve in school if you anticipate being dead or in jail not long after graduation. If *the* (or at least one) purpose of school is individual social mobility, then what is the point of it for a particular individual who does not anticipate being able to reap the benefits? In this way, we might understand a student’s anti-school choices as both a reaction to others’ expectations of him *and* a pre-emptive retort to perceived structural barriers.

There are other theories about the indirect relationship between identity and academic outcomes, notably the Expectancy-Value Framework. This theory proposes that “individuals’ choice, persistence, and performance can be explained by their beliefs about how well they will do on the activity and the extent to which they value the activity” (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000, p. 68). In other words, when students feel confident in their skills *and* believe that a particular academic domain is relevant and important to them, they will behave in a way that allows them

to achieve. If students, on the other hand, have been made to believe that they are “bad,” either in a general sense or relating to a specific academic subject, or that school is not going to pay off in the long run for them, then they may not be able to find the motivation to achieve. “Thus, an academic identity may shape an individual’s academic outcomes (e.g. academic choices) by shaping more specific academic values (e.g. perceptions of the utility of math)” (Bachman, 2005, p. 81). The “bad” student label can make it more difficult for students to capitalize on the optimistic premise that school is a place for constant growth, improvement, and even redemption.

CREATING A MONSTER: SECONDARY DEVIANCE

Although it would be easy to place all the blame for the self-fulfilling prophecy of student typologies on schooling institutions, it is not that one-sided or simple. Students, of course, have some role in the actions that precipitate their labeling: “people act with an eye to the responses of others involved in that action. They take into account the way their fellows will evaluate what they do, and how that evaluation will affect their prestige and rank” (Becker, 1973, p. 183) In this way, we can understand that young people are often juggling multiple, and perhaps conflicting, interests, for example an interest in their academic rank in their teachers’ eyes *and* their social prestige in their peers’ eyes. Gaining status in one domain may require behaviors which result in a loss of status in the other.

Whether students behave in ways they *know* will result in being marked “bad” or not, they also have some degree of control over what they do once so marked. Sometimes “labeling produces additional deviance by strengthening identification with and commitment to deviance” (Bowditch, 1993, p. 495). In the literature on labeling theory, this is known as secondary deviance – deviance that results from the experiences of being labeled a deviant. A secondary

deviant is one who, after being labeled such by society, “reorganizes his social-psychological characteristics around the deviant role” (Rist, 1997, p. 73).

Once labeled a deviant, individuals find themselves simultaneously more often surrounded by others similarly labeled and isolated from the group representing the normed behaviors. For a young person, this means that deviance can go from being a label to becoming a peer group. Sometimes, this can operate in a somewhat positive way as when “trouble” becomes “a powerful occasion for identification and recognition” (Ferguson, 2000, p. 2). Yet, the consequences of a deviant identification can often be increased and more subversive deviance. According to Becker (1973),

when one moves into a deviant group...he learns how to carry on his deviant activity with a minimum of trouble. All the problems he faces in evading enforcement of the rule he is breaking have been faced before by others. Solutions have been worked out. ...Thus, the deviant who enters an organized and institutionalized deviant group is more likely than ever before to continue in his ways. He has learned, on the one hand, how to avoid trouble and, on the other hand, a rationale for continuing. (p. 39)

While Becker is likely refer “institutions” where more serious deviants gather, like prison, detention periods or the waiting room of the discipline office can serve the same purpose in the context of a school.

In addition to the social consequences of being labeled “bad” which can lead to secondary deviance, there are also certain logistical outcomes which can also be harmful. In the deviance of the real world, this is visible in the difficulty that convicted felons have finding a legitimate job once they have served their time in prison. The “circumstances which make it harder for [the ex-con] to continue the normal routines of everyday life [can] provoke him to ‘abnormal’ actions,” like participating in an illegal economy in order to earn a living (Becker, 1973, p. 179). We can imagine similar circumstances in schools as when a student is suspended for enough time that when he returns he has fallen far behind in his schoolwork. In order to

catch up and avoid further penalties, he may resort to copying homework or cheating on tests – which may ultimately result in increased punishment.

RESISTING AND REDEFINING THE TERMS

The response to being labeled “bad” or “deviant” is not always an acceptance or internalization of that identity. In several studies, researchers found powerful examples of students’ resistance to the institutional typologies and their effort to redefine the school’s identity terms. For example, certain school contexts offer unique opportunities for students to reconceive the notions of intelligence or “smartness.” Korp’s (2011) study of a Swedish vocational secondary school, as discussed previously, revealed the unique but limited way that “smartness” was institutionally defined and performed; however, she noticed that sometimes the institution’s ability to construct its own notion of smartness was a positive thing. In the vocational programs of Rockmeadows High, the school culture

generally conveyed and encouraged a conception of smartness as differing in crucial ways from traditional (academic) notions. This alternative conception was associated with notions such as power of action, independence and a certain linguistic habitus. ... Thus, the vocational courses would offer emotional consolidation and restoration of many students’ self image, that through previous schooling had come to include deeply felt notions of *not* being smart, and further more a positive identity involving being smart in an alternative way (to ‘book smarts’) and to have agency. (p. 34)

In other words, although the construction of “smartness” in this school created its own complications when some students wanted to perform a less masculine identity, for many students this school environment offered a space for academic success and intellectual confidence that they would never have found elsewhere.

In other school spaces, students found alternative ways to play with the traditional gendered notions of “good.” In the three Australian secondary schools Thompson (2010) studied, many male students redefined the definitions offered to them by defining “the good

student in terms of social popularity more than academic success” (p. 425). Other students, who Thompson describes as embodying “the conflictual good,” actively challenged the typical performances of the “good” student by enacting a critical consciousness, yet often received appreciation from their peers and were seen as leaders by some school adults (p. 425-426).

In Willis’ (1977) iconic account of the working class, anti-school Lads, we can see yet another way that groups of students resist their labels by attempting to redefine what is valued. In the world of the Lads, it is not academic skills that garner them prestige or increased opportunities. Rather, their sexual prowess and their ability to make others laugh (p. 15) are not only sources of pride, but valuable skills in their “real world” life where the fittest survive. Joey, for example, comparing the Lads to a member of the conformist group, the Ear’oles, says that “we’ve been through all of life’s pleasures and all its fucking displeasures...He’s not known so many of the emotions as we’ve had to experience” (p. 16). Joey’s implication is that the Lads have *experienced* the world – and survived in it – and the Ear’oles, who focus their attention on pleasing their teachers and the school institution, would not have the skills or experiences to get by out there. Within their circle of friends, the Lads have found explanations that allow them to feel good about themselves and their achievements despite school-based labels to the contrary.

Similarly, another study found that young men were able to redefine ideas of “success” in ways that were more compatible with the achievements they expected for themselves. Dimitriadis’ (2003) story of young black men coming of age in “Hub City” illustrates this point: for some boys, “success” could be claimed by mentoring a younger child or being a leader in a community setting outside of school; for others, “success” was achieved by making it to age twenty-one. Taking these alternative models into consideration, Dimitriadis argues that our

conceptions of what actions represent an accomplished life ought to be utterly “context-specific” (p. 9).

Context is also important to the ways that “bad” can become reconceptualized. In certain school spaces, students attempt to resist the system of binary labeling by redefining “bad” and, in some cases, by constructing a student culture in which “bad” behavior is the route to success. Hemmings (1996) explains that because students have an easier time in some school settings than others fitting the mold for the “model” student, in one of the schools where it was more difficult, students sought school success by “being bad.”¹⁰ Through a “collective effort,” the students cheated and made teachers dumb down lessons and give away answers (p. 40). In this way, they were able to get through high school without succumbing to the “model” student script. In this school, located in an inner city in the Midwest and serving mostly working-class students, the culture was such that “everyone, regardless of their race, had to ‘be bad’” (p. 42).

In other school settings, students may perceive that being “bad” is the only way to be heard. The story of Lenny (Davies & Hunt, 1994) offers a poignant example of the way a student may feel invisible or silenced by his school and find relief only in acting out:

If [the teacher] is going to ignore [Lenny] he can get away with anything and his imagination carries him to some quite dramatic lengths. He becomes central and visible in everyone’s eyes instead of invisible and while not a competent student or member of the class, he is decidedly recognizably someone. (p. 405)

In this example, when Lenny found no other way to get his teacher’s attention, he resorted to picking up chairs and desks, swearing, and ultimately climbing out of the classroom window and swinging from the beams outside (p. 403). In his head he may have reconstructed this “bad” behavior as a necessity in that situation. Often these alternative constructions serve as a

¹⁰ This is similar to the semantic inversion of the word “bad” in African American (Vernacular) English.

technique of self-protection when the hegemonic constructions would cast the student as a “loser” (Hatt, 2007).

Unfortunately, trying to flip the script and redefine or deconstruct the binary comes with non-trivial costs. Although it may offer additional identity opportunities in some contexts, the larger culture still rests on strict binary structures that will be much more difficult to break. For example, the students in the Swedish school Korp (2011) studied may have successfully redefined “smartness” within one context, but they did so

at a price, since this process involves a clear distancing to certain notions. In order to pass as smart in this local context, students must reject phenomena, behaviors, values, activities and so on that would be coded as academic (book-smart), feminine, non-heterosexual (and sometimes, as foreign). In figuring smartness as antithetical to these things, students also set limits on their own (and each other’s) possibilities in academic subjects and in alternate identity projects. (p. 35)

Reframing the traditional notions of the “good” student and the “bad” student in a single school setting can only go so far as long as the larger culture still accepts those categories as real (Ward, 2007).

The research reviewed in this chapter shows us how harmful the limited construction of the “bad” student can be for young people who get labeled as such. The label of “bad” student is applied when students behave in ways that threaten the teacher’s or institution’s authority. Unfortunately, these subjectively interpreted behaviors are weighted with cultural stereotypes making some “bad” behavior warranting of punishment and other misconduct simply a reflection of normal youth opposition. Like the “good” students, once “bad” students are so labeled, a number of formal and informal structures make it difficult for them to escape or remake their identity – often making the “bad” student a self-fulfilling prophecy. As students become more attuned to their social position within school, they “also tend to develop a ‘sense of their social

limits.”” When students internalize these limits, they begin to “self-censor and self-silence” and they lose some of the individuality (Levinson & Holland, 1996, p. 6). Although some students actively resist the “bad” student label or the false binary that pits them against their “good” student counterparts, their resistance is mostly a survival mechanism (Ward, 2007) and does little to change the persistence of student typologies.

Conclusion

“We’re not really bad kids,” said Leslee, a bright ninth grader who consumed a handful of her stepmother’s Xanax and took the rest to school, a tangled episode that landed her and five others at Carroll Academy. “We’re just good kids who made bad decisions.”

--John Branch for *The New York Times*¹¹

A series of articles came out recently in *The New York Times* describing the girls’ basketball team at Carroll Academy, a Tennessee high school operated by the Carroll County Juvenile Court for troubled youth trying to get back on track. The quote above illustrates the common understanding that we have within our schools and our culture at large about what it means to be a “good kid” or a “bad kid,” and the consequences of being each. In this essay, I’ve explored this binary in the school context specifically, paying particular attention to the way that the constructions of the “good” and “bad” *student* limit identity options for young people.

Chapter 1, *The “Student,”* laid out the general script that schooling institutions construct for their students. I used the literature to argue that this script is heavily influenced by our larger cultural understandings of race, gender, and age in particular. The influence of these larger cultural categories on the student script means that the script is embedded with prejudice and inequality, but also that this prejudice and inequality is able to remain relatively hidden. I then proposed that, given our cultural fascination with binaries, student typologies are centered around the basic inter-dependent dichotomy of the “good” student and the “bad” student, creating for young people the challenging task of negotiating their identities within and between these limited categories.

¹¹ Branch, 2012.

The second chapter, which centered on *The “Good” Student*, proposed that the institutionally-defined “good” student can be identified based on behavior, attitude, and willingness to comply with school norms, rather than by academic engagement or success. The far-reaching definition of “good” student depends on a number of other socially-constructed concepts, such as “knowledge,” “smartness,” and “success.” Schools have a variety of formal and informal structures in place to ensure that the students who display the characteristics which mark them as “good” continue to be seen as “good,” thus confirming the myth of meritocracy. I used evidence to show the ways in which this is problematic because it not only sets up certain groups (such as Asian Americans) as *always* “good,” further limiting those students’ options for self-definition and learning, but it also incentivizes students to *play the game* of school and sacrifice authentic learning for the pursuit of institutional rewards.

Finally, in the third chapter, *The “Bad” Student*, I explore the literature which lays out the reverse situation. In direct and self-aware contrast to the “good” student, schooling institutions have constructed a typology for the “bad” student. Like its opposite, the “bad” student is defined and marked primarily based on behavior and superficial symbols, and a single disruptive moment can become the marker for an entire identity. Multiple research studies suggest that once students are labeled “bad,” they are systematically restricted from participation in certain social and academic opportunities which makes it even more difficult for them to remake their image and identity. What is worse, certain groups of students (particularly black boys) are often pre-labeled as “bad” before they have had the chance to disprove the stereotypes. In response to the self-fulfilling prophecy of the “bad” student typology, some students become disidentified with school, others become intentionally deviant, and still others engage in strategies of resistance to the limited binary of “good” and “bad” students.

I began this essay by asking an important and complex question of the literature: How are schools dependent on dichotomous and hierarchical notions of “good” and “bad” and how do these categorizations get reproduced and legitimated with each successive generation of students? By organizing the research in this way – with a careful and distinct exploration of student typologies in general *and* each of the two extreme identity categories – we can see that there is something about the institutional character of schools that creates “good” and “bad” students and perpetuates the distinction to the detriment of all students. Through formal and informal structures and cultural biases, being marked as a “good” student or a “bad” student can often become a self-fulfilling prophecy, with social and academic consequences for the young people in both groups. Interestingly, this research also revealed the fact that these typologies are relatively consistent across time and across cultures.

Young people are taking and learning from the social practices they witness and participate in at school. This means that even if and when students are not learning academic content in the classroom, there are still many things they *are* learning about power, their self-worth, their future, and their place in society. As Lave and Wenger (1991) explain, “learning is not merely a condition for membership [in a social community], but is itself an evolving form of membership” (p. 53). Students come to believe that being described as “good” or a “bad” truly reflects who they are. Depending on which of the student types is fit on them, students may be learning how to be marginalized or how to game the system to receive rewards (Eckert, 1989). Neither of these lessons is particularly conducive to authentic engagement and academic learning. And neither limited typology of “good” or “bad” allows students to enjoy the original

pedagogical premise that the school is a space for growth and advancement and a chance to leave behind your social position from today and step into a new one tomorrow.

Our schools and our culture “anxiously repeat” the typologies of the “good” and “bad” student to the point that they appear real and legitimate, making it nearly impossible for students – and all of us – *not* to buy into the dichotomy (Bhabha, 1983, p. 18). Even when typologies or stereotypes happen to be accurate in describing particular individuals, they are *never* correct as generalizations. Given all of this evidence, it seems like the fair next question is whether and how we can shape the structures and cultures of schools so that students are not forced to be *true to the norm*, but rather free to be true to themselves.

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