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## Getting in Trouble: The Meaning of School for "Problem" Students

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### Keywords

qualitative research

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# Getting in Trouble: The Meaning of School for "Problem" Students

by  
Darryl A. Pifer<sup>+</sup>

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## Abstract

Three students attending an alternative school were selected because they had been labeled by their previous school and teachers as "problem students." A series of interviews was completed with each individual with the purpose of exploring the meaning of school for each. Each participant indicated an acceptance of the notion that education is important, but each also felt negatively about school. Good and bad things about school were discussed as well as good and bad experiences. The participants also discussed how they perceived the actions and expectations of others. The unfairness they each experienced in school was discussed as well as how they have internalized the definitions others have applied to them. The relationship with teachers and the school in general were discussed with emphasis placed upon the importance of establishing and maintaining caring and concerned relations as well as the importance of making learning relevant.

## Introduction: The Construction Zone

Farmington Elementary School was a single story building that housed kindergarten through six grade. I spent seven years there, yet only two negative experiences stand out in my mind. The first was in fifth grade. I was sitting at my desk reading a book when Mrs. Martin passed out the language tests we had taken the previous week. "I want all of you to return these by Friday with a parent's signature at the top so I know they've seen the test," she explained as my eyes widened and my stomach tightened. I got a C on the test. How could that be? I had never gotten less than a B in my life. What were my parents going to do? I stuffed the test into my folder.

When I got home that afternoon, I hid the test under my mattress. My mom was not going to know about that C if I could help it. I prayed that Mrs. Martin would forget. She asked for it on Friday. "I forgot it at home," I mumbled. My prayers were answered: she never asked for it again. I threw that test away two months later.

The second negative experience occurred the following year in sixth grade. During the morning recess one day, Chris and I were playing music on our tape recorders. Usually, we shared the opening theme songs from favorite TV programs that we had recorded. "Listen to this," I said, as I slipped in a new tape and pressed play. It was a tape of the Charlie Daniels band, and the particular song I played was "Devil Went Down to Georgia." This copy was unedited though, so when the song reached a certain point, I cranked the volume knob and Charlie Daniels blared, "I

done told you once, you son of a bitch, I'm the best there's ever been." All eyes in the classroom looked in my direction.

"Darryl, come here!" demanded Mrs. Kern, my teacher, from across the room.

The color drained from my face as I pressed the stop button. My stomach tightened, my knees weakened, but I obediently walked across the silent room to Mrs. Kern's desk. Would I be sent to the principal's office? It was rumored that Mr. Dunlop had an electric paddle.

"That was not appropriate, Darryl. I am surprised and ashamed of you. Put away your tape recorder. You're done with it for today," she scolded me. I obediently slunk away.

These two experiences stand out for me, juxtaposed against a sea of positive experiences. I remember looks of admiration and appreciation from teachers as I correctly and willingly answered questions in class. I remember complimentary remarks on my report cards: "It is a pleasure to have Darryl in class," "Darryl has a lot of ability and aptitude," "Darryl is a good student." My grades reflected these sentiments.

This adulation and these positive experiences continued through junior high school and on in to high school. I can think of only one teacher during those years who I could not and would not get along with, Ms. Allen. She was the librarian during my junior year in high school, and I was not the only one who failed to get along with her. It seemed like she considered herself better than students. I got into an argument with her one morning over an overdue library book. She sarcastically commented on my intelligence, and I facetiously commented on her nice hair, all to the enjoyment of Mr. Johnson's English class. I remember her looking back over her shoulder as she walked away and saying, "You're a little jerk."

Howard Becker (1963) states that "social groups create deviance by making rules whose infraction constitutes deviance, and by applying those rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders" (p. 9). Conversely, it holds true that social groups create conformity, the absence of deviance, by establishing standards of normalcy whose adherence to constitutes conformity, and by applying those standards to particular people and labeling them as good. In school, I was constructed as a good student. Others in school were (and are) constructed as bad students, as problems. These are the students who do not fit the standards of normalcy imposed by the school, who are considered to be in violation of the rules.

When I think of school, I look at it through the lens of my experience which was predicated upon how I was socially constructed, labeled and treated as a good student. What kind of meanings and notions about schooling, the school, and education are constructed by students who are labeled and treated as problems? What does school mean to them? How are their experiences tied to those labels through their own and others' expectations? What can we learn by considering the perspectives of individuals who have been socially constructed as problems, as outsiders, within the context of school?

## **Understanding Meaning**

Questions of meaning are phenomenological in nature. One approach that helps us to construct an understanding of meaning is symbolic interactionism which, as stated by Norm Denzin (1994), rests on three basic assumptions:

first, that "human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the thing have for them (Blumer, 1969, p. 2); second, that the meanings of things arise out of the process of social interaction; and third, that meanings are modified through an interpretive process which involves self-reflective individuals symbolically interacting with one another. (p. xiv)

This means that people negotiate and construct experiences through an interpretive process guided by representations or meanings. To understand the meanings assigned to school, schooling, and education by "problem" students we must listen to their explanations of and their perspectives on the process of schooling and their experiences within that social setting.

This approach contributes to our understanding of schooling and its consequences by illuminating the basic process of education which is the construction of meaning. Schooling is concerned with education. Education involves the construction of knowledge as individuals interact with one another. Knowledge consists of meanings. Education, then, is fundamentally concerned with constructing and reinforcing meanings. Schools have explicit and implicit curricula (Apple, 1979) that provide the interactions by which knowledge is formed. The meanings that are constructed shape the nature of the situations in which the knowledge is transferred, and the meanings mediate the transfer within the situation.

When studying schooling and its consequences, it is valuable to consider the meanings that are being and have been constructed through the explicit and implicit curricula. Individuals hold certain expectations for schooling, certain educational objectives. Developing an understanding of what school means to those who are relegated to an essentially outsider status allows us to get at many important and insightful meanings which are associated with and have been constructed in school. This understanding then begins to help us determine evaluate the outcomes and impact of schooling. It is important to be aware if the interactions associated with schooling are contributing to the construction of meanings that are incongruent with the desired outcomes.

In regards to "problem" students, let us consider Adler and Adler (1994):

Social constructionism - the view that deviance is a product of groups of people forming normative definitions; organizations and their agents applying them; and the actions of individuals, alone or in groups - is particularly well suited to the study of deviance. (p. ix)

Echoing Becker's (1963) statement regarding deviance, social constructionism views deviance as a social product. "Problem" students, therefore, come to exist within the context of normative definitions and meanings individuals give to certain situations and students within the school. These are individuals relegated to the "fringe." Could not their perspectives upon the meaning and significance of school aid in our overall understanding of what it is we as educators are doing?

The social constructivist approach recognizes the emergent nature of school problems based upon the meanings that teachers, administrators, and students apply to various individuals. Spector and Kitsuse ([1977/1987](#)) labeled this as a micro-level approach to the study of social problems based upon symbolic interactionist theory about the construction of meanings. Kitsuse and Spector define social problems as "the activities of groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions" (Kitsuse & Spector, [1973](#), p. 415). Social problems, of which school deviance is one, emerge from the meanings and normative definitions that are attached to certain behaviors. Individuals who are "problems" are socially constructed in that role. What sorts of meanings and understandings are developed as a result of this social construction?

Schools define the characteristics of good and bad students in implicit as well as explicit ways, and individuals conceptualize what it means to be a good or bad student. The school administration publishes guidelines and rules to be adhered to by students. The normative judgements based upon these concepts and official statements create distinctions by which students are evaluated and categorized. Based upon the explicit and implicit categories into which students are placed and according to which they are treated, students construct meanings and understandings. For those students who are categorized as "problems," there are certain sets of experiences that are different from the sets of experiences for students categorized as "good," leading, we could expect, to different sets of meanings.

School discipline is the system, formal or informal, within the school which doles out punishments and rewards. Socially constructed "problem" students are those who most often encounter the system of punishments in the school. Simply encountering this system further serves to categorize these students as problems, increasing their chances for future encounters (Bowditch, [1993](#)). These students experience specific interactional situations that serve to structure the meanings they develop and use to structure other situations. All others who observe this process are influenced by them as they also construct meanings and understandings. In this sense, the definition of "problem student" takes on a life of its own, structuring and creating situations in which the opportunity for and definitions of problems exist and are expected by others and even by the individuals.

It should be kept in mind that individuals negotiate their lives within a complex web of structural, political, and historical influences (Marx, [1852/1983](#); Giroux, [1983](#); Trinh, [1989](#)). Within the context of school, these influences bear directly upon students in racial, gender, social class, and other forms. Social power is inequitably distributed along each of these lines creating a dynamic situation in which meaning is constructed, reconstructed, and reinforced.

### **Perspectives in the Literature**

Not much research has been conducted that looks at the perspectives "problem" students have toward school. Several studies concerned with how adolescents respond to school policies and procedures have gathered information through questionnaires and/or secondary data sets (Calabrese, [1988](#); Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, [1986](#); Fetler, [1989](#); Natriello, Pallas, & Alexander, [1989](#); Rumberger, [1987](#)). A few studies have used interview methods to learn more about the perspectives held by students in particular groups (Farrell, [1990](#); Farrell, Peguero,

Lindsey, & White, [1988](#)) and students in some alternative programs (Fine, [1986](#); Miller, Leinhardt, & Zigmond, [1988](#); Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, [1989](#)). Damico and Roth ([1993](#)) interviewed general track students from several high schools in Florida in order to understand their perspectives. Paul Willis' ([1977](#)) study of a group of working class boys in England is a pivotal study that considers the construction of meaning and negotiation of life within school.

Willis ([1977](#)) spent several months with a group of working class boys in England endeavoring to explain how society reproduces itself, especially in regards to social class structure. He used participant observation and interviews to understand the Lads, as this group of boys called themselves. Some of the things that the Lads had learned about school was the apparent irrelevance of the subject matter being taught to their future employment. This was so partially because they generally did not aspire to transcend the limitations of lower, working class occupations; they expected to be employed in the same sorts of jobs in which their fathers and those around them were employed. The Lads were skeptical of what the qualifications held out by the school would actually translate into after school, and they doubted that it would be worthwhile to make the necessary sacrifices to acquire those qualifications. For them, having fun and being independent were more important. The understandings they held made sense considering the context in which they were formed and provide insights into how various situations are reproduced in society.

For students who have been constructed as outsiders, how much of it is a result of reaching the same conclusions that the Lads reached? If school is irrelevant or if the qualifications do not really guarantee much, what is the use of putting forth the effort required to attain? The information Damico and Roth ([1993](#)) gathered from the 178 adolescents they talked with about various aspects of their schools and classrooms, when considered along with the understanding the Lads had constructed, paints a picture of possibilities within schools which encourage students to pursue deviant status or at least provides an explanatory framework justifying "problem" behavior.

Damico and Roth ([1993](#)) explain that they found schools which had the highest graduation rates expected students to behave in a responsible manner, employed the use of incentives more than punishment, and endeavored to treat all students equally. They found that the schools in which the lowest graduation rates were experienced had a higher level of control and surveillance of the students, and, according to them, this sort of treatment encouraged students to leave and/or skip school. They also found that all the students they talked to thought school was "dull and boring." Many of them identified poor teachers as ones who were tied to the textbooks, did not spend much time teaching but relied on simple explanations and in-class work time, became impatient when students did not understand, expecting them to know without instruction, and failed to convey care and concern for the students.

It seems to me that students who hold beliefs such as those identified by the Lads and by Damico and Roth ([1993](#)) would be much more likely to disassociate themselves with school. Several studies have been conducted which look at the ways in which and reasons why students become alienated from school (Bryk & Thum, [1989](#); Elliot & Voss, [1974](#); Firestone, Rosenblum, & Webb, [1987](#)). Finn ([1989](#)) says, "Research confirms that dropping out, absenteeism and truancy,

disruptive behavior in class, and delinquency . . . may all be seen as outcomes of earlier patterns of withdrawal from the daily classroom and school routine" (p. 119). Furthermore, many authors suggest that schools actually play a major role in student feelings of alienation (Calabrese, [1987](#); Firestone et al., [1987](#); Hendrix, Sederberg, & Miller, [1990](#); Newmann, [1981](#); Seldin, [1989](#); Weitzman, Klerman, Lamb, Kane, Geromini, Kayne, Rose, & Alpert, [1985](#)).

Another contribution to this literature comes from Marsh, Rosser, and Harre ([1978](#)) who interviewed "football hooligans" and disruptive students. They explain that these students are not just engaging in random violence and anarchic events. Rather, they are responding to inequities and offenses they have identified within school and on the part of teachers and have "an explanatory rhetoric at their command" (p. 6) which justifies their actions. Similarly, Werthman's ([1963](#)) studies with a gang at school indicate that these "problem" students also made judgements about their teachers and responded to them. He describes how these students stopped supporting the offending teachers and challenged their authority.

All of these studies contribute to understanding why students are constructed as problems and how the meanings they have constructed contribute to the maintenance of that label. Certain students violate the norms that the school attempts to impose upon all students, placing them outside the standards of normalcy, constructing them as problems. The labeling process does not appear to be influenced by the reasons behind these students' actions, and as such, the inequities and/or frustrations they experience are not confronted and dealt with by the school. As these types of situations occur, students' level of alienation from school increases, making it increasingly difficult for them to be "redeemed" from their outsider status. It seems to me that with this in mind, it would be very beneficial to examine the meaning of school for "problem" students, the ways in which they understand school and its place in their lives.

## **Methodology**

Qualitative research can be generically defined as being "multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter." (Denzin & Lincoln, [1994](#), p. 2) Within the context of the social construction of meaning, the goal of this research is "understanding the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it." (Schwandt, [1994](#), p. 118) For the current project, I wanted to gain an understanding of what school means to three individuals who have been constructed through school experiences as problems. In order to attempt to accomplish this goal, I had to elicit the voices of these individuals; I had to listen to what they said and how they defined their lives. I, therefore, relied upon direct interviews with each individual.

Initially, I contacted the vice principal at Jackson Alternative Learning Center (JALC)\*, the only alternative high school in the city of Jackson, in order to obtain permission to interview four students. I chose to select participants for this project from an alternative school because most of the students there have been expelled and are considered by the teachers in their regular public schools to be "problems." Approaching participant selection in this manner simplified the process and made it more convenient for me than going into a school to identify students as problems. JALC's vice principal and teachers welcomed my research after I explained the project to them. I was introduced to the students at a regular morning assembly. Afterwards, I talked



informally with students, and identified four individuals who were willing to help with the project. I began interviewing the first of the students who volunteered the following week. The interviews were conducted in a small office near the school gym.

One of the four students withdrew from the study after one interview. I continued the project with the remaining three individuals, each of whom was a white male. I did not specify racial or ethnic diversity as a criteria for participant selection when I began the study, not because they are unimportant factors, but, rather, I left it open in order to accommodate those students who were willing to participate in the interviews. Each of the individuals described himself and his family as poor. The first student I interviewed is named Turner. He is 16 years old, a junior, and lives with his mom, dad and his older brother. The second individual with whom I interviewed is Justin. He is a 15 year old sophomore, and he lives with his mom and grandmother who he does not like. Jerome, the third participant, is a 17 year old senior. He lives with his sister and her boyfriend because his mom kicked him out of her home after he had an altercation with his step-father.

I conducted at least four one-hour, open-ended interviews with each participant during a two month period at the end of 1996. Every interview was recorded and subsequently transcribed. I asked each participant questions about typical days at school, best and worst experiences at school, best and worst teachers, other students, etc. After completing the interviews, I employed a constant-comparative method of analysis, going through each transcript in order to identify and categorize themes and patterns. After organizing the information, I compiled the students' comments on the topics that emerged: education's importance, good things about school, bad things about school, teachers, other students, school fairness, and themselves. Within these sections, I have included some of my own thoughts and recollections from when I was in junior high and high school.

I did not attempt to validate the information the students shared with me in the interviews. My objective was to gain an understanding of what school means to them; it was an exploration of their perceptions. I asked similar questions at different times throughout the interviews in order to compare the answers given from one time to another. I also probed the participants' answers, asking them to clarify and explain more fully what they meant. Based upon the level of rapport and trust that I discerned during the interviews, I do not doubt the information they each provided is representative of their perceptions of schooling and education.

### **The Importance of Education -- The Irrelevance of School**

"I was raised, taught that, uh, education was, like, the most important thing that you could ever get when you're a kid," Turner explained. He described the love and respect he has for his parents and his desire to make his mom proud, how she never graduated from high school and regrets it every day. He wants to please her, to bring a smile to her face by graduating from high school himself. Reiterating the message he's gotten from his parents, Turner believes, "People need their education."

Jerome also values education. He told me that his mom "always thought school was a big issue." So, I asked him why he thinks graduating from high school is important. He said, "Cause, you

ain't gonna get shit in today's world with a G.E.D. You can't even get a job at McDonald's, man. You can't get a job at McDonald's if you ain't got a diploma." The employment opportunities made possible by an education are important to Jerome. He explained that he wants to go to college to become a psychologist and make "sixty bones an hour" sitting behind a desk and helping messed up kids. "'Well, I'd have to say that, uh, settin' your cat on fire is very bad,'" he laughed, "'Here take two of these and call me in the morning.' And pow, I've got sixty bones just like that."

Talking about school in particular, Turner said, "I feel people should enjoy going to school, not be, like you know, 'I can't stand it' and hate every day they wake up and go." Saying this, he is articulating a contradiction that exists for each of these students. On one hand, they believe education is important, but, on the other hand, they think of school in very negative terms. For them school often is an unpleasant experience, but they do not believe that getting an education should be so unpleasant. The reality of school these students know is incongruent with the value they have learned to place on education.

"They ain't gonna ask you the square root to fit no job," Jerome said, articulating the irrelevance of the education received from school. "Ain't gonna be flippin' burgers," he continued, "they gonna be like, 'What's the capital of Florida? Oh, really? You're fired!' You know, that shit ain't gonna be comin' into play." For him, there is no direct connection between the things the school is trying to teach him and the things he needs to know to fill a simple, entry-level job. He understands, of course, that the diploma he is earning will provide opportunities, but he does not see the relevance of what the school is teaching.

So, I asked Jerome why he went to school every day. He explained that the only reason is to graduate. I asked Turner the same question. He still goes because he knows it would disappoint his mother if he did not finish school. He went on to explain the irrelevance of school as he sees it:

I figure I've got as much education as I possibly could get, from here anyway, or Johnson [High School]. They ain't teaching me nothin' I don't know or I'll need in life later. I don't need a damn foreign language. I don't plan on goin' to a foreign country. Uh, I don't plan on being no architect. So, I don't need no damn graphic bullshit. It's just basically all that. I figure for what I'm gonna be doing, I don't need anything more than basic education, basic math and readin' and all that crap.

Later, he told me he had gotten all the education he needed by the fifth grade. Since then, school has been "a waste of time."

Justin figures that he skipped almost a full quarter of the school year before he was expelled and sent to an alternative school. For him, school is "really boring," and having fun outside of school is "a lot better than being bored." He describes the school's failure to connect with him in a meaningful way, but he still attends, trying to become a "good student." I asked him what a "good student" is. He answered, "Someone who turns in his work, all of his work, on time, um, who's in class and in his seat when the bell rings, doesn't interrupt anybody in class, and answers

when the teacher asks him a question," illustrating that he has ingrained at least one message communicated by schools.

"School sucked, man," Jerome exclaimed. "Come to school and you got some teacher bitchin' all day. You don't even get nothin' out of it." Later, he said, "I don't learn shit here." He goes to school in order to get a high school diploma so that he can go to college to get "a job sittin' on my ass makin' money." School is the means to the financial rewards he desires, but, in his own words, "school weren't worth a damn shit." In light of that, I asked him how he felt about going to college. He told me, "It's gonna suck, but, shit, you gotta do what you gotta do."

As I reflected upon what these individuals told me, I realized that my parents taught me that education is important. At a young age, I learned that businesses require their employees to have certain educational credentials. The message that I received from my family and society is that everyone needs an education; education is important. That is a message that is transmitted to individuals everyday. Television commercials and politicians plead with young people to stay on the right track, to stay in school. The American dream of financial success and social mobility seems attainable if a person possesses the proper degree or certification from school.

The students in this study have learned that education is a valuable commodity, that they can go farther with an education than they can without one. Through their comments to me, it is apparent that an education for them is symbolized by a diploma or a degree received from school. They know that people become educated in many ways outside of school, but the education that is important in society, the one they have been taught to value, is distributed by school.

### **The Little Things**

"You see, at high school, man, it's, like, the littlest thing makes such a big difference."

-Jerome

"What's the best thing that ever happened to you in school?" I asked.

"I can't think of anything," Turner replied. He sat silently for a few minutes, pondering the question. "Okay, uh, the coolest thing," he began again, "I was in third grade and we were sittin' in the lunch room, and I threw up on the table and everybody else down the table started throwin' up. [He laughs] It was cool."

Justin had no difficulty thinking of the best thing that happened to him in school. He immediately told me that it was going "to Six Flags on a school trip. . . cause I had the most fun." "What was the next best thing?" I asked. "I guess, getting suspended," he replied, "Cause I got off free, and yet it was a vacation." Justin's suspensions from school resulted from "having fire crackers, getting into a fight, and having a knife."

Jerome's best thing was the time he "found a ounce laying in the hallway, an ounce of pot." That occurred while he was a student in a Chicago-area school. As for the best thing that ever

happened in school in Jackson, he replied, "Shit, gettin' out at three p.m. That's the best thing. Jackson schools suck so much."

I also asked each of them to tell me about other good things in school. For Turner a good thing was being transferred out of special education classes back into regular classes: "Uh, I told 'em that I wasn't learning anything, and they stuck me back in regular classes but kept me in touch with the special ed. teacher." In his special education classes, Turner "was in a class with people who were basically stupid. We're talkin' way low intelligence. I'm not that dumb. I never learned anything in special ed. classes." So, for him, being transferred back to regular classes was a good thing.

Turner identified another good thing about school: sticking pencils into the ceiling. He described:

One of my favorite past times is stickin' pencils in the ceiling. Always had a big ring of pencils around my desk . . . the teacher always had, like, a box of pencils. I'd grab a handful as I walked in the classroom. Just 'pffffttt!' Sometimes I'd flip 'em off the desk and they'd stick in the ceiling. It was pretty cool.

He engaged in this activity rather than sitting quietly bored in a classroom that he described as "basically mayhem."

Jerome found it difficult to identify good things about his regular school, but he thought his alternative school:

used to be cool as hell, man. Teachers let you do whatever you want, but now they gettin' more in line. . . Like the first year this school opened up, you could do whatever the hell you wanted to. Like, pool all day long. Go out and smoke cigarettes whenever you wanted, you know.

After he said this, he thought of a good thing about the Chicago-area public school he attended before moving to Jackson:

J: Saw lots of fights up in school. Saw girls fightin'. That was crazy.

D: That would be weird.

J: Yeah, they used to go at it every day in Chicago. There was always a fight in school. . . My school was cool as hell in Chicago.

Another good thing from his Chicago school was the "time the teacher, the home ec. teacher, set herself on fire one day. That was pretty cool. In Chicago, I mean. It was funny as hell."

Justin identified two good things about school. The first was getting a "free lunch." The second good thing he identified was, "Um, I get to know more kids, I guess."

I find it interesting that these students named apparently trivial things when asked about the positive aspects of school. Jerome said the little things are what make a difference for kids in school, and the answers these individuals gave me fit that assessment. Whether it was initiating a puke-fest in the cafeteria, finding an ounce of marijuana in the school hallway, or getting a free

trip home through suspension, the best things about school are those that brought some relief from the mundane toleration that they normally engaged in while at school. The little things that school has to offer, fights, sticking pencils into the ceiling, and free lunch make a difference.

The positive things about school identified by these students were avenues of escape from the school, in minor or major ways. Although Turner's transfer out of special education classes back into regular education classes appears to have positive, pedagogic value, it can also be viewed as a means through which he was able to return to the jurisdiction of a teacher who did not pay special attention to him, allowing him to escape by sticking pencils into the ceiling. For Jerome, watching fights in school provided a recreational escape from the school and its structure until teachers intervened. Going to Six Flags for a school trip was another avenue of escape, allowing Justin to have fun rather than boredom at a school-related function. Even suspension was a good thing for him since it provided a legitimate excuse for skipping school.

### **Assessing School**

"It basically sucks pretty much."

- Turner

"School is really boring," said Justin. "So, that's why I wasn't going there . . . I had more fun outside . . . If they would, like, teach it to where it's, like, fun, then I would go." Jerome commented that "school sucked, man. Come to school and you got some teacher bitchin' all day. You don't even get nothin' out of it." Later he reiterated his early statement, saying, "It sucks. I'll tell you that. Just a bunch of punk students there and punk teachers." In Jerome's assessment, the school was antagonistic toward students because it was in cahoots with the city to make money. According to him, "Jackson schools suck dick, man. They really do. I'm talking, you get into a fight in a Jackson school, not only do you get suspended, but you get arrested and shit, locked in jail and shit." Turner does not hold school in high esteem either. When I asked him how he felt about school, he said, "I think it basically sucks pretty much."

Having been labeled and treated as problems in their regular schools, these individuals evaluated the school and its representatives from a subjugated position. The disciplinary system within the school is one area that they each encountered many times and about which they can knowledgeably speak. Justin told me that he thinks detentions are "stupid . . . cause you just sit in the class for twenty-five, fifty minutes doing nothing . . . and you can't put your head down to sleep or anything. You just have to sit there." The Suspension and Detention (SAD) room at one of his schools was the worst thing about school for him because:

that was just the most boring room . . . you sat at a desk, and the desk was really uncomfortable. Then, you had the black wall ahead of you, in front of you, and these black things on the side, and you just sat there and you couldn't write on the walls because it wouldn't show up.

The In School Suspension (ISS) room at another school he attended was similar to the SAD room. "It's just a classroom that's really quiet, and nobody's supposed to talk," he said. "You're not supposed to sleep. You're just supposed to sit there and work."

Some people might consider the punishment given to Justin at school appropriate since it was unpleasant, believing that punishment should not be enjoyable. However, I wonder whether the unpleasantness that Justin experienced while serving detentions or suspensions produced a desirable outcome. As he told me, "That's another reason why I was skipping, cause I knew if I went there, I'd get in trouble." Justin skipped school almost as much as he attended classes. The unpleasantness of the school's discipline system did not encourage him to behave in the ways the school desired; it motivated him to stay out of school. In fact, Justin considered suspension as an official pass from the school authorizing him to skip school.

Jerome also indicated flaws in the school's disciplinary system. Whenever he got in trouble in a classroom, the teacher would send him to the office. As he described it, "It's like, 'Get the fuck out of here! Go to the office!' Then, you know, you just go home. Fuck the office, man. You get in trouble." The punishment the school doled out, which he defined as getting in trouble, did not deter Jerome from behaving in ways his teachers found undesirable in class. The threat of punishment encouraged him to physically leave the school; it provided a good excuse.

During one year, Jerome had a particular math teacher who he considers to be his "worst teacher ever." According to him, she gave him detention every day, and one day he accrued five hours worth of detention which she forced him to serve. When I asked him about that detention, Jerome said, "It sure wasn't effective, buddy. She made me hate her worse." As he saw it, the outcome of the punishment that the teacher administered did not have the effect of encouraging the type of behavior she wanted from Jerome; it further deepened the antagonism that existed between them.

Turner explained that he had about 40,000 minutes of detention to serve before he transferred from Howard High School to an alternative school. It was either "serve the detention time or go to the alternative school." So, he decided to go to the alternative school. When I asked him about how the dean handled things at Howard, he told me:

Um, she, she pretty much didn't follow up on stuff. She, I don't know if she had a lot of stuff to do, or what, but every time I got in trouble and, like, didn't serve my detention, she, she never figured it out. She never called me up to her office or nothin'. Every once in a while, she would and tell me I had detention time to serve, and I'd be, like, 'Okay.' Never served it.

He knew that the assignment of detention as a punishment was not going to be enforced. There was no need to serve any of the time teachers or administrators assigned to him.

When he was describing how things were handled at Howard High School during a difficult time, I asked Turner what he would have liked somebody to have done. He said:

T: See what, why I'm doing it [having trouble]. Nobody ever asked.

D: Nobody asked?

T: Never asked.

D: Would it have made a difference?

T: Maybe. Maybe they could've changed some stuff, got me in different classes with, like, teachers who actually taught.

D: So, nobody ever asked, checked out what was going on?

T: Nope.

D: The dean didn't do that? What did she do?

T: She basically handled me when I got in trouble and assigned me detention time. That's all she really ever did.

Turner described a situation in which no one ever tried to determine why he was having problems in school. No personal connection was made by or with teachers or administrators. He was not learning the subject matter in his classes, and, as a result, he told me, he was failing all of them. School was "a waste of time." The assignment of detention time did not address the difficulties he was having. Yet, from his perspective, that is the most anyone did to help him or find out what was going on. He was handled when he got in trouble, not when he was having trouble.

### **Talking about Teachers**

"What do teachers think of you?" I asked Justin.

"I hope they think I'm a halfway decent student," he replied. At other times during the interviews, Justin explained that teachers expected him to be like his brother "which is not a good thing." Apparently, his brother got into a lot of trouble at school during the years he was there before Justin arrived. Justin was aware of the expectations teachers had for him.

When I asked Jerome the same question, he told me that his teachers were probably surprised to see him walk into the classroom, thinking, "'Oh, I see Jerome's finally decided to come here today' or some shit like that. Or they might think I'm high or some shit."

"Do you expect them to think that way about you?" I asked.

"No. They don't think that way about other kids."

"So, why about you?"

"I don't know. Cause I used to have long hair and shit. Used to be real crazy." he replied.

D: Okay. Explain what you mean by "acting superior."

T: Hm, don't show us any respect. I like to be respected. I show everybody else respect. I don't see why people shouldn't show me respect.

D: And then, then, simply just, just showing you respect is just treating you . . .

T: Yeah, decent. Like, like a human being instead of like a dog.

D: Okay, don't treat you like you're inferior?

T: Yeah. Like I'm stupid, like I don't know anything.

D: Was that common?

T: Yeah. They always talk low to me, like I was a peon.

He complained that this sort of treatment "gets annoying" and that he did not understand why they treated him and others that way.

Jerome provided an assessment which explains his observations about why teachers act the way they do:

Cause they're dickheads. That's what they're supposed to do. Supposed to be, they're supposed to do that. They're teachers. Just like cops. They're paid to give you a hard time. To show you the right way. . . . Teachers just plain out suck, alright. (Laugh). They're teenagers' worse nightmares. They're just like cops, man. You know how cops have certain attitudes, you know, that no one has. That's just like teachers too. It's like the arch rivals of teenage individuals. . . . [It's] kind of like a punk-rock-fuck-you-all attitude, you know. . . . they're just there to make your life a living hell for four years, and then you get some new ones if you go to college.

Jerome's understanding of the role of teachers differs from the understanding I had while in high school; I thought teachers were there to help, and I got along well with them. Certainly, feeling this way must structure how he relates to teachers, schooling, and education just as my notions structured my relations, although in seemingly opposite ways. His assessment also describes his awareness of how actively the school tries to control the students, something he actively resists.

Turner perceived that teachers "basically pushed me aside, told me I was dumb, wouldn't help me with anything, wouldn't, didn't really care." He went on, saying, "Most of the teachers that I've ever had are a bunch of crap; they don't care. They give you work you don't understand. 'Oh well, it's your fault.'" Turner feels that he and his teachers never really connected, never developed a relationship conducive to learning. He described teachers as "snotty, figured that I should know stuff, and, if I didn't, oh well. They weren't going to teach me."

Analyzing his assessment of teachers and teaching, Turner told me, "I felt that people should be teachin' students instead of just givin' 'em assignments to do. That's not teaching. You don't learn that way." This statement reminded me of Paulo Freire's (1970) words, "Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education" (p. 81). The superior attitude identified by Turner and indicated by Jerome's statements place a hierarchical delineation between teachers and students, effectively squelching the educational process. The ways in which power relations in class were played out as well as questionable pedagogy structured Turner's assessment of teachers.

Justin's major charge against teachers was that they make school boring. When I asked him how they did that, he said, "They just stand up and talk for about forty-five minutes and then give you five minutes to do your home work."

"How do you feel about that?" I asked.

"Uh, I just get tired of hearing their voices," he replied, "Because they don't, like, use any tone or anything. They just talk with the same voice for a long time, and it's, it puts me to sleep."

Here too, Justin perceives no real connection between he and his teachers; they are boring and put him to sleep. He also told me about his fifth grade teacher giving the class homework on the first day of school, telling them "it was to prepare us for middle school." He did not complete the homework because "it made me mad." He explained why it made him mad: "Because I didn't



think it was right. I mean, she just, like, handed out worksheets and said okay, come, come here tomorrow with these done. She didn't explain how to do any of the problems or anything." As he understood it, she did not take the time to instruct and teach him in this situation. In most situations, according to his assessment, he did not listen or learn from his teachers because they were boring. Based on his comments, it seems that his teachers did not listen to him either.

When I read the statements about teachers and the stories these students told me about how they related to teachers, I am not surprised that the basic sentiment each has toward school is that "it basically sucks." I felt I connected with my teachers in school and that they connected with me. However, my teachers did not expect me to cause problems or to steal calculators; if that happened, I wasn't the first suspect. A lot of the classes I was in were boring, though, but I approached schooling and teachers thinking I was supposed to pay attention and learn anyway. These three individuals do not seem able to do that. Their experiences with teachers and the process of education within the school have contributed to meanings about schooling and education; school means something to them that it did not mean to me. These are the meanings that basically tell them school is irrelevant, teachers do not teach, and people in school expect them to cause and get into trouble.

It would be incorrect to assume that these individuals did not have good experiences with some teachers, just as it would be incorrect to assume that I did not have bad experiences with some of my teachers. For them, the bad things stand out because they were predominant. However, I asked each of them to tell me about their good teachers, hoping that their answers would say something about what good teachers were like for these individuals.

Turner told me about a good teacher. She was one who "talked to me like I was a person." She did not have the superior attitude he saw in other teachers. He went on to describe his best teacher:

Uh, the best teacher there was . . . like, my science teacher. He was cool. He was always, like, talkin' and jokin' around with me. It was pretty cool. . . . He'd come back there and sit back in the back of the class with me, uh, while I was doing my work and just talk to me. It was pretty cool.

It strikes me as significant that the distinguishing characteristic displayed by this individual and by the other good teacher he identified is their personable nature, their ability to connect with and relate to him. I was able to do that with nearly all my teachers. The few I did not connect with and have some sort of congenial relationship with were the ones I would be most critical of today and would most likely classify as my worst teachers. A difference I notice between Turner and myself in this regard is that there were more good teachers for me than bad, but there were more bad than good for him.

Turner also explained to me that the relationship with his science teacher, the fact that he actually spent time with and showed concern for Turner, made a difference as far as completing assignments and paying attention in class were concerned. When I asked him how the teacher's actions made a difference, he said, "I actually did some of the work instead of just sittin' there."

Jerome told me that his best teacher was his social studies teacher when he was in sixth grade:

J: She, like, cracked jokes and stuff about how, she'd talk about the Vikings or some shit and make a joke out of it, you know. She was just funny. So, it made you pay attention to all that she was saying.

D: Why would being funny make you pay attention better?

J: Because, when a teacher's just sittin' there, "Blah, blah, blah, 1874 some guy did this . . ." you know, you don't listen. But if you're sittin' there laughin', you know, you're waitin' for the next punch line to hit, you know, it's got your ears."

Jerome told me more about how this teacher did her job at school. He said, "She talked with everyone outside of class. . . . She was just funny, just talkin' about life in general . . . tried to help everyone." The description he provided was one of a teacher who demonstrated care and concern for students, a teacher who did not make him feel like a problem, a teacher who actively engaged her students in the learning process. This one teacher stood out clearly in Jerome's memory. "She, like, made you learn subliminally," he said, referring to how she could involve the students in the lessons being taught.

When I asked Justin about good teachers that he had in school, he told me, "Um, well, my grade school, in the third and fourth grade I went to Carver Elementary, and my teachers there were really nice." Again, a reference to interpersonal characteristics. He further explained that:

they didn't have desks for you to sit on. They had, like, those big bean pillows that you could sit in and you could go around and do any subject you wanted just as long as you got your work done. And they even let you sleep.

Apparently, Justin appreciated a learning situation in which he was allowed freedom in deciding what he was going to do. Based upon his statements about school being boring and teachers being boring, it seems that he responded more favorably to a situation in which his actions were not as explicitly supervised and controlled as in a regular classroom.

I think Turner said a lot when he described the ideal teacher to me:

Someone who explains somethin' to you if you need it. That's, like, not always bad-mouthin' people and you if you can't get a problem right or somethin'. It's just somebody who gives a shit, to put it bluntly.

### **Preps, Wiggers, and "Leave-It-To-Beaver"-Ass Students**

"Tell me about the students in your school," I requested, thinking that the perceptions of what others do and how they perceive what we do impacts behavior.

"If we're not talkin' about my friends," Justin answered, "they're the people I don't like."

"What kind of people were they?" I queried, noticing how he had described them in an antagonistic manner.

"Well," he replied, "I don't like the Preps and the Wiggers."

"Why not?"

"Because they're not for real. They're wanna-bes."

"Okay, so why does that bother you?"

"I just think it's strange that they're trying to be something that they're not," Justin explained.

In order to understand what he meant, I later asked Justin, "What is a Wigger?" He replied, "They're the white people who try to act black."

"Try to act black?" I queried.

"Yeah. You know, like all in to rap and they're like talking about 'my skin may be white but my soul is black.'" he explained.

I also inquired about what a Prep is. He said:

Uh, they're the ones, they're really rich and they're stuck up snobs. They walk around with their noses in the air, and you say hi to them and they just ignore you. It's like you don't exist because you don't have as much money as they do.

"Why are they stuck up?" I asked.

"I don't know," he shrugged. "I think the money just went to their head, their parents told 'em, you know, that 'poor people, they're the people that are running around killing people.' And they can't stand to have you around." He considered himself to be poor, but told me that money was not the most important thing for him, even though it is for Preps.

I asked Justin how the treatment he receives from the Preps makes him feel, remembering that I felt upset and put down when others made fun of me or called me a "brown noser." He explained that "they think they're better than me, and it just, like, makes me wanna smack 'em to show 'em they're just the same."

"How would that show them?" I asked.

"Cause if I smacked them, they'd smack me back, and I could say, ha, you're just the same as me."

From Justin's perspective, the Preps did not only stick their noses in the air and walk with a superior air about them, they also tried to take advantage of and use others, including him:

When they want something from me, then they, like, notice me. Like, when they want a cigarette, they'll, like, they'll come up to me and they'll notice me. The next day I say, "What's up?" and they ignore me. . . . I try to say something to them and everything. I try to talk to them, but they ignore me unless they want something.

Jerome defined other students in his school similar to how Justin defined the Preps. He said, "All these little "Leave-It-To-Beaver"-ass students being good and makin' straight A's and shit. And they look down on other people, you know." Although he went to a different school, he noticed

the same sort of thing that Justin described. Jerome described these individuals as being most of the white people in the school. He continued:

J: Yeah, man, they think they are the shit or somethin'.

D: Give me some examples.

J: Like, uh, say you're gettin' like a F in every class. They just look at you like, you know, like they are your mother or father or some shit, man. It's like, "Shut the fuck up, you little punk! I'm gonna hear it when I get home. I don't need it from you."

I asked Jerome what these students thought of him. He explained, "They didn't like me too much. I whooped their ass and took all their money. They just gave it to you if you asked 'em. "Bitch, give me my money, mother fucker!" Describing them further, he explained:

First thing is they talk shit, right, but they're these little, little faggots, and, uh, silver spoon faggots that never even lit a match before talkin' shit like they're the baddest mother fucker in the world, and then they wonder why they get their ass beat all the time and their shoes stolen off their own feet. Cause they talk shit and they can't back it up. If they woulda just said nothin' at all, I would've got fine, I would've got along fine with 'em.

According to Jerome, there is little interaction between groups at school because "it's, like, everyone's got their own individual, little crew and no one wants to hang out with anyone else, you know."

In describing the other students at his school, Turner explained that "I don't like dealing with people" and that the people were the "worst part about school." He described students at Johnson High School as a "bunch of loud-mouthed people." Being at school was difficult for him:

They just, they get all loud, and I get annoyed easily. Like, if people are yellin' and talkin' about senseless stuff that just is unimportant to me, and I can hear, like, every conversation that is going on around me, and it starts to piss me off.

He did not like the other students at school and had very little to do with them. He told me early in our interviews that he hangs around with only a few people, friends and his brother, and does not care for others.

Turner did identify students at a Catholic school he went to for a few months as "rich, preppy little bastards." He told me that they made fun of him "because I'm poor." I asked him, "What did they do?" and he told me:

Basically, I had this kind of stuff on (referring to the clothes he was wearing during the interview): old, inside-out sweatshirt, black jeans, and my boots (holds up foot with boot). And they always were makin' fun of me because they said I was poor and couldn't afford nothin'. I was like, "Oh well, fuck it."

A few times he responded to these situations by getting into fights, but he stopped doing that because "my mom gets mad when I get suspended from school."

Each of these individuals I interviewed had difficulties relating with people who thought of as different from them. They did not feel a connection with other students. Justin and Jerome described individuals who were pretending to be something, and they both saw through the acts. Turner did not even care to relate with the other students, and he told me that he always "felt different" from the others. Each identified others as having more money than he did and also as displaying certain attitudes and behaviors as a result of having that money.

### **"The Deans and Teachers Won't Listen"**

I asked each of the individuals participating in this study about various experiences they had in school. Some of what they related to me were instances in which they felt they and their friends were treated unfairly by administrators and/or teachers.

While describing the deans at his school, Turner told me about one particular dean who he felt was unfair:

T: Mr. Edwards, he was a dick. I hated him. He wasn't even my dean. He suspended me a couple times for no apparent reason.

D: Like, what happened?

T: Well, uh, he said I was smoking on school property, which I wasn't. He suspended me for that. Uh, I was walking to the bathroom from class. He suspended me for that because I didn't have a pass. . . . He's just, he thinks he's a cop. That's pretty much it. He's always out harassing somebody. Always.

Turner's statement reminds me of Jerome's statement about teachers having attitudes like cops, responding to the ways in which school tries to exercise excessive control over students.

"He's always got, like, this attitude that, uh, he's untouchable," he continued, telling me that Mr. Edwards usually looks for people causing trouble around "me and my friends and people who always stand out and around and smoke. Pretty much all the people who he's harassed is us and the black people."

"So, he'd be watching you and your friends . . ." I queried.

"Every move." Turner explained. "If we did something wrong, he always knew. He watched us quite heavily. Every time I saw him, he had his eyes on us."

"How'd that make you feel?"

"I was like, 'What the hell?' Uh, kind of pissed me off."

Jerome, in his descriptive manner, told me how the city of Jackson and the schools work together to earn extra money:

Check it out. All I do is get in a fight, right. In a fight, and I was on probation for 18 months, had three court dates, had to pay all kinds of fines and shit, had to pay court costs, probation costs,

just for gettin' in a fight. And the reason they kept me on probation so long is so they can make money. They give you a drug test so they can send you to rehab so you can be on probation longer, therefore, they get more money.

For him, the system is not fair. They're "fuckin' busters," he said.

He also told me that situations occurred in which he and others were treated by teachers in different ways than other kids were treated:

J: You know, they [teachers] think you're some kind of asshole just cause you don't do the homework. They're like, "Is this something I'm gonna expect from you, Jerome?" "Fuck you! Get outa my way!" you know. They just be busters like that.

D: Why would they do that?

J: Cause they assholes! That's their origin, man. (Laugh)

D: Did they do that to everybody?

J: No. They just did it to me and a couple other dudes.

D: Why you and a couple other guys?

J: Cause we didn't do the homework, you know. We were clownin' all day.

Justin also told me how teachers showed preferential treatment to certain students, the rich, preppy kids:

J: Um, like, since the Preps would suck up a lot and everything, they [the teachers] would give them more leeway than they would give me and other kids. Like, you know, if the Prep kids, like, said something in class that would get me in trouble, they would tell them not to say it again and let it go, but by then, they would, um, give me a detention or something.

D: So, like, if the little preppy kid said, "Damn". . .

J: . . . if a Prep said, "Damn," then the teacher would tell him not to do it again. But if you'd hear somebody else say it, not a Prep, then, um, they would, like, get a fifteen minute detention or a 25 minute detention.

Justin also described how the deans at his school began to wrongly blame the group with which he smoked outside of school during breaks for leaving a mess on the sidewalk:

Because there would be this, like, group of people every once in a while, but we'd all stand on the sidewalk and if somebody came down the sidewalk, we'd get out of their way, and we tried to be quiet and everything, and we didn't throw down our trash that much. And then, other kids would come by after we were gone and stand there, and then they would litter and everything and they'd be really noisy and rude to other people. And so they [the deans] just got tired of it and started blaming us.

Justin skipped school some times because of the unfairness he experienced in this situation. He said he did not want to go to school because he might get mad when they started blaming him and his group for causing the problems. He said he would get mad because:

it wasn't us doing it. None of these other people, how my group put it, as Wiggers and everything, they'd stand around for a long time. They would stand there, and they would smoke weed and everything else and they would cause trouble there.

Apparently because this situation was important to Justin, he described it at some length. He told me that the problem got worse because the deans "would always come out while we were smoking our cigarettes, and we were just standing there smoking, then they would get us in trouble." The situation escalated to the point where people started calling the police who would then come by and "people were getting, like, a hundred dollar tickets for just standing there smoking a cigarette." Needless to say, this experience did not foster an affinity with the school for Justin.

He told me that he did not really blame the school, but "I think they could, like, listen to us and hear what we're saying when we're saying it's not only us cause they think it is." He explained how this experience made him feel:

that just, like, made me mad at some of the students that were there cause they were gettin' us, me, in trouble, and it kinda said that the deans won't listen. The deans and teachers won't listen. They just, like, make accusations all the time.

### **"Describe Me?"**

One of the things that seems unavoidable is that the experiences these individuals have had in school, with teachers, deans, and other students, have shaped how they view and think of themselves. My school experiences certainly contributed to how I view myself. I knew I could succeed academically; that's probably one of the reasons I was able to continue in school and earn a Ph.D. I also viewed myself as different from other students because my academic abilities separated me from many of my peers. Since the students I interviewed also experienced, although for different reasons, the normative judgements made by teachers as well as separation from their peers, it seems plausible that how they define themselves was effected.

I have selected several comments from the interviews which I think reveal some definitions of self. Consider the following statements:

Justin:

"He [a specific teacher] always gave me a detention, but I think that was my fault. I was always a smart ass."

Turner:

"Academically, I mean, it's straight. I can do most of the work, as long as I'm taught."

"Uh, academics is pretty straight. I can get those pretty good. Uh, sometimes I forget stuff. I get good grades."

"I've never liked principals or teachers too much. They always were, like, stoppin' me from doing what I wanted to do, and that's basically why I have a problem with authority."

"I think I'm pretty good. . . . Yeah. I'm all right. I don't hurt nobody."

"Yeah, it'd be good to go, I mean, if I could just get a teacher by myself and just, it'd be cool, but it's just all the people in the class. I don't like it. I don't like people. I'm not a people person."

Jerome:

"Cause I don't want to work for all that shit. (Laugh) I just want to get it. Therefore, I don't want to do the homework or go to work or do this, that, study."

"I'm one of those people that's gotta do it on my own, you know. . . . I'll ask for help, but I like to do it on my own."

"Uh, I'm a fuck up tryin' to rehabilitate myself. You hear what I'm sayin'?"

"Describe me? All I want to do is party and have a good time and just laugh the rest of my life."

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Turner, Justin, and Jerome have each given me cause to stop and think, to reevaluate positions I thought I had already confirmed. Many of the things they shared with me stand out in my mind. They told me that the little things are important when you are in a situation that is frustrating, maddening, and debilitating. The little things for them provided them with ways in to escape from the drudgery of school. It is amazing how sticking pencils in the ceiling, getting a free lunch, even if the food is not very good, seeing fights in the hallway, causing everyone at your lunch table to puke can stand out over the years as the bright spots in a career of schooling. I guess I look at it with amazement not because I did not also find relief in the little things, but because I did not see the same need to escape from school that these individuals do.

Even before these individuals told me they knew teachers expected them to get in trouble, to cause trouble, or to score poorly on assignments and tests, I believed that would be the case. Often, it seems that the individual holding the expectations for someone else is less able to recognize it than the one for whom he/she is holding it. These individuals are intelligent, they see what goes on. They have been in a position to experience school in ways that I never was. They have seen things about school that were not readily apparent to me, at least not with the clarity with which they observe them. They have learned and continue to learn first hand about social inequities. It is amazing that they have not completely given up on the process of schooling. Having glimpsed in a small way how they view and understand the world around them, I can only begin to comprehend the rationality of their position.

There is great benefit in listening to the voices of disenfranchised students. Their perspectives shape their experiences, express their realities. For educational practitioners, it is important to consider what school means to our students, to listen to them explain and describe their experiences and thoughts on the process in which we and they are engaged. Only they can tell us about their experiences and perspectives. Only they can shed light upon the reality of schooling and education in their lives. Gaining an understanding of what school means for "problem students" provides opportunities to reevaluate and reflect upon our preconceptions and the expectations we hold for them. Are there things we need to do in order to affect students' perceptions of school and education in different ways?

These three students' commented on the discipline system in the school, giving opportunity to look critically at the systems of punishment in schools. My experience has been that many



people do not question the efficacy of the punishments that are socially common. Justin clearly connected his truancy with the punishments he received when he was at school. Jerome explained how he would go home rather than go to the dean's office when a teacher sent him out of the classroom. Why go to the dean's office, he asked, you only get in trouble. They all learned that the justice system in the school is not applied fairly, that they and their friends receive closer scrutiny, quicker accusation, swifter retribution, and more severe penalties. Inequities slap them in the face everyday. Even if someone would argue that these inequities exist mainly in their imaginations, is it not true that even if they are imagined inequities that the results are real?

I learned a lot from these three individuals. They shared a lot of things, and for that I am grateful. The value that society places on education is not lost on them. They also see that education is valued, but for them, it is valued in the form of a diploma. The item that has the most utility in their lives is the piece of paper they get when they graduate, not what they learn from their classes. That's a point I did not grasp until I after I graduated from high school.

Their experiences in school and with teachers have taught them that others expect them to act and be certain ways. They have also learned that they are "problems" because they do those things. To a certain degree, it seems they enjoy the recognition they receive from being outsiders. However, they have also internalized the normative labels that others have applied to them. They tend to think of themselves in the terms others use to describe them: fuck up, deviant, problem, slow, etc. It only seems normal that individuals would identify with the characteristics others repeatedly use to define them. I know I did.

School for Turner, Jerome, and Justin is not the same thing it was for me when I was a teenager. My experiences were far different from theirs. For them, school and teachers usually work against them; it is an antagonistic relationship. For me, school and teachers were there to help me and to make sure I learned what I needed to prepare for the future. For them, school and teachers make life difficult and boring. For me, school and teachers provided challenges, and, sometimes, they were boring. Overall, though, school was a positive place for me. My assessments and experiences stand in stark contrast to those of these individuals.

The good things about school, the positive moments, seemed to occur when individuals showed some concern for these students. When a teacher took the time to just talk, to relate on a personal level, it made a difference. When the teacher exercised authority and failed to make a personal connection with the student, it seems that each of them shut down and wanted nothing to do with him/her. Who can blame them? Perhaps, there is something that can be learned in this about what it takes to make a difference in the lives of many young people: personal, caring, concerned involvement. If teachers and schools were more able to convey care and concern and if they were able to make learning more fun and exciting, would school still "basically suck pretty much"?

This study only looks at the perceptions of three students in order to assess what school means for them. It would be beneficial to have other studies that present the voices of students explicating their perceptions of students, and specifically the voices of students constructed in "outsider" roles. They have much to contribute to our understanding. Studies of this sort contribute to the existing literature by deepening and expanding the conversation and our understandings of what goes on at school and how students and others' lives are shaped by their

experiences. Perhaps, this study and others like it will reveal ways in which not only policies can be changed or constructed but also ways in which individuals involved in the process of education interact with and influence the lives of their students.

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### **Endnote**

\*The names of places and people in this report have been fictionalized in order to protect the participants' identities.

### **Author Note**

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