

Contextual Factors Surrounding Hispanic Dropouts

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The prevailing discourse poses dropping out as a failure of individuals. My purpose in this paper is to join colleagues--especially McDermott (1989), McDermott and Varenne (1995), and Fine (1991) (see also the papers collected in Swadener & Lubeck, 1995, and in Trueba, Spindler, & Spindler, 1989)--in trying to interrupt that discourse and to furnish a different "way of talking that can unpack, inform, critique but still imagine what could be" (Fine, 1991, p. xiii) in public urban high schools in the United States. In the prevailing discourse, dropping out is framed as a character flaw, a personal pathology, or an individual choice. By representing dropping out in terms of the characteristics of individual students, this framing participates in the larger psychomedical discourse about social life that pervades public policy debates. The *different way* my colleagues and I are proposing represents dropping out in social, not personal, terms, more specifically, as an institutional production that reproduces the structures of inequality in the educational, economic, and civic domains of everyday life.

The Dropout Discourse in Historical Context

The way we talk about students who have had difficulties in school and, hence, how we act toward them has changed significantly from the origins of our country to the present time. The shift has been from the *bad*, to the *backward*, to the *learning disabled*. That is, our society has increasingly medicalized a phenomenon that was first seen as moral and then social in nature.

Moral terms were used to disparage difficult-to-teach students in early colonial times. The Puritans' child-rearing literature assumed a basically evil child for whom adult discipline and Christian guidance were the optimal interventions.

A different way of talking about students' difficulties in schools developed concomitantly with the rise of industrialization in the United States (Bodine, 1905). Our society's sense of what causes students to have difficulty in school changed from moral lapse or willful recalcitrance to backwardness

caused by faulty socialization and societal disorganization. Social commentators of the time lamented the transformation of the United States from a rural to an urban, industrial society (see, for example, Park, 1952; Park, Burgess, & McKenzie, 1925). In presentations that are similar to those generated today about immigrants from Latin America and Asia, they argued that immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe brought religious beliefs, values, and language that threatened the integration of U.S. society. To make matters worse, urban society lacked the *sociability* and *sympathy* that in earlier, simpler days *naturally* led to social order. The disorganization of urban life created special problems for the immigrants from Mediterranean and Catholic countries because of their parents' poor socialization practices.

The shift from a *moral* to a *social* understanding of children's criminal actions and academic difficulties facilitated the extension of social control to educational and medical institutions. Child savers of the late nineteenth century saw educational difficulty as a vice of inferior cultures and classes that needed correction by elevation to an American standard. Progressive Era reformers believed that agencies of the state were obligated to take responsibility for children who were neglected or difficult to teach. This thinking led to the construction of child abuse and family violence as social problems, to the development of child protection agencies, and to the sense that public schools should instill self-control in children (Gordon, 1988).

More recently, a psychologically and medically based representation has overtaken social and moral modes of representing and, hence, assessing and treating underachieving students, dropouts, and deviants (Conrad & Schneider, 1992). The appropriation of a statistical definition of normality and the increased involvement of the medical community in the control of deviance helped pave the way for development of this psychomedical discourse. From 1850 until the invention of intelligence testing in the early 20th century, persons labeled as *disabled* had clearly recognizable biological anomalies. Those disabilities ordinarily involved behavioral aberrations and organic anomalies that were typically certified and treated by medical practitioners. When Binet (1916) developed a test for the French government that purported to measure *natural born* intelligence and yielded a mental age to identify "defective" children, he did more than create an intelligence test. By introducing a statistical sense of normality, he introduced a whole new way of seeing behavior and classifying individuals. Unlike a bipolar medical discourse that defined disabilities in terms of health or sickness, the statistical model defines abnormality in terms of a person's position on an assumed normal distribution relative to others in a population.

The amalgamation of the statistical sense of abnormality with the medical sense of organic causes led to increasingly wider definitions of disabilities. Children's *nervous organization, underdeveloped brains, sense defects, slow rate of development, congenital word blindness, cellular deficiency, and streposymbolia* were all proffered as possible *organic* causes of backwardness, despite the lack of any physical defect in children (Coles, 1987). Imported to the United States by L. M. Termin and John Goddard, IQ test scores were transformed into a pathological sign carrying all the implications of organic disability but without any evidence that test performance was a direct function of the biological characteristics of the test taker (Coles, 1987; Gould, 1981; Mercer, 1974). Thus, psychologists and educators from the early 1930s onward transformed the rather uncertain condition of *backwardness* into a full-fledged neurological impairment, *brain injury* .

It is significant that psychomedical discourses, like moral discourse, place the source of school difficulty within children--beneath their skins and between their ears. Although the locus of difficulty has shifted from soul, to heart, to brain, it has always remained inside children-- successfully, up until now at least--deflecting attempts to redefine disability as social or environmental in nature.

A new socially based construct, *at risk*, has recently emerged to challenge psychomedical representations of dropouts and other underachieving students. Policy studies written since the 1980s have described the changing conditions of American families. An alarming number of American children live in poverty and within single-parent families. Many poor families are recent immigrants and *limited English speakers*. These environmental conditions are thought to place children *at risk* for school failure, the contemporary argument goes. The *at-risk* construct, like *backwardness* and *cultural deprivation* before it, alleges that a child suffers from a socially induced deficiency. It will be interesting to see whether this new construct will successfully replace psychomedical representations, thereby redefining children who, in social terms, are difficult to teach.

Contradictions within the *at-risk* discourse make it vulnerable to defeat or absorption by the psychomedical discourse. Because the *at-risk* construct focuses on social, economic, and cultural conditions, it presumably stands in contrast to *disability*, which indicates a genetic or biological cause for children's deficiencies and failure in school. The *at-risk* discourse, however, continues to treat these conditions as characteristics of students. Thus, the *at-risk* discourse reduces to the same sense of pathology that has dominated the psychomedical discourse of disability. It deflects attention away from injustices perpetuated and institutionalized by the powerful and once again

blames oppressed students, families, and communities for lacking the cultural and moral resources for advancement (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995).

Dropping Out as a Personal Problem

The expression *dropouts* has only recently entered our vocabulary. Fifty years ago, most American children did not finish high school, but we did not say we had a dropout problem (McDermott, 1989). Until recently, we talked about high school completion, not dropping out. Cast in terms of high school completion, students' educational performance has been increasing steadily. In 1940, only 40% of students completed high school, whereas 78% completed high school in 1972, and 84% did so in 1980. The high school completion rate reached 87% in the early 1980s and has remained relatively stable over the past decade (Rumberger, 1987). Why, then, do we worry about dropouts now, but we did not do so before?

Some commentators cite economic reasons (Natriello, 1995; Rumberger, 1987). Economists and policymakers maintain that completion of high school is the absolute minimal educational level necessary to prepare youngsters for the vast majority of jobs in the modern economy. Most of the state reform efforts and the national reports on education generated in the 1980s and 1990s (for example, *A Nation at Risk*, SCANS) were predicated on the belief that the increased use of new technologies and structural changes in the composition of jobs in the economy would require more sophisticated educational skills than before. Although these visions of the future may be erroneous--in that the majority of new jobs will be in the service sector and not high-end technology areas (Drucker, 1993; Levin & Rumberger, 1987; Reich, 1992)--these visions do suggest that students who do not complete high school will be even more disadvantaged in the future job market than they have been in the past.

Unevenness in educational attainment across ethnic groups is another often cited reason for the current concern for dropouts. Although the overall high school completion rate has increased, it has not improved for African Americans and Latinos. Approximately 86% of all students completed high school in 1993: 89.8% of whites, 83.8% of African Americans, and 63% of Latinos (McMillen, Kaufman, & Whitener, 1994, p. 53). These ethnic group differences are especially troubling because the number of indigenous minority and new immigrant students is increasing in public schools, especially in urban areas.

The overrepresentation of students from some minority groups in the dropout population, then, has contributed to the growing concern that large segments of the U.S. population may be isolated from mainstream social, political, and economic life if they fail to attain the basic education represented by the high school diploma (Natriello, 1995). Students who drop

out of high school face a more difficult road to success than their peers who finish high school or college. The relative earnings of high school dropouts are lower than those for students who complete high school or college. These income disparities are even greater for Latino students. Similarly, high school dropouts experience more unemployment during their work careers. Young women who drop out of high school are more likely to become single parents at young ages. As a result of these factors, high school dropouts are more likely to wind up on welfare. And, unfortunately, many of our nation's prisons are heavily populated with high school dropouts (McMillen et al., 1994, p. 1).

We cannot overlook the political dimension of the dropout phenomenon. Public schools have been under intense public scrutiny in recent years. Commencing with *A Nation at Risk* and continuing through a decade of governmental and corporate reports, public schools have been blamed for the declines in U.S. competitiveness in the global market and for the perceived decline in *values* that the United States has experienced at home. The shift from discussions of high school completion to dropping out, it seems to me, has been influenced by a mentality that has blamed schools for shifts in the economy and society that have swirled around them, but that are out of their control.

Defining Dropouts

Computing the numbers and types of dropouts has been a central educational concern. That task requires defining dropouts, which it turns out, is not easy. The common sense conception is straightforward: A dropout is a student who leaves school before graduating. The social science conception of dropouts is more complicated, however, because it is influenced by differences in schools' calculation procedures. Schools may differ in what they count as *an absence*, the procedures they use for adding students to the rolls, the time frame during which a dropout is counted, the range of grade levels selected to represent a pool of possible dropouts, and the method of student accounting. Depending upon the time frame, the range of grade levels and the method for calculating the pool of students served, the dropout rate will vary from school to school, district to district, state to state (Natriello, 1995; Rumberger, 1987). This local variation in accounting procedures is a contemporary example of the problem that has long plagued social scientists who must rely on statistics produced by bureaucracies in order to conduct their analysis (Kitsuse & Cicourel, 1963).

The attempt to develop national goals for education, contained in President Bush's *America 2000* (1991) and President Clinton's Goals 2000: Educate America Act of 1994, has intensified the effort to standardize the collection of data pertaining to dropouts. The National Center for Education Statistics

(NCES) collects and publishes information on the condition of education in the United States. The Hawkins-Stafford Elementary and Secondary School Improvement Amendments of 1988 (PL 100-297) mandated specifically that NCES collect and publish data about school dropouts. NCES annually presents to Congress the report *Dropout Rates in the United States*. This series utilizes the Current Population Survey conducted by the Bureau of the Census and the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88) to develop 8th through 12th grade and 10th through 12th grade cohort dropout rates. The goal of establishing a uniform national data bank on dropouts has not been unanimously embraced, however. Some states have argued for an approach that more closely fits their individual needs than a single national network (Natriello, 1995; Pallas, 1992).

The move to standardization has yielded three distinct ways of defining and counting dropouts. *Event rates* provide a measure of the proportion of people who leave school in a single year without completing a certain level of education. *Status rates* provide a measure of the proportion of the population who have not completed high school and are not enrolled at a particular point in time; they measure the magnitude of the dropout problem in the population. Because status rates accumulate all those students who have quit school at any time, they are much higher than event dropout rates for any one year. *Cohort rates* measure what happens to a single group of students over a period of time. They tell how many students in a single age group drop out over time (e.g., from 8th to 12th grade).

Counting Dropouts

According to the sixth annual report on dropouts prepared by NCES for Congress (McMillen et al., 1994), in 1993 about 381,000 students dropped out of Grades 10 to 12, resulting in an *event dropout rate* of 4.5% of all students between the ages of 15 and 24. Comparison across NCES reports shows that the event dropout rate has fallen over the last 10 to 15 years. In the late 1970s, the annual event dropout rate was 6.5%. By 1993, the rate was 4.5%.

In 1993, about 3.4 million individuals between the ages of 16 and 24 had left high school before completing their programs of study. Thus, the nation's status dropout rate has dropped from the 14% rate that prevailed from 1973 to 1978 to the current rate of 11% (McMillen et al., 1994).

Data from the High School and Beyond study of the high school class of 1980 (analyzed by NCES) indicate that 17.3% of those students dropped out of high school by their senior year; by 1986, about 46% of the dropouts (that is 8% of the original cohort) had returned to school. Data from the NELS:1988 show that 6.8% of the eighth grade class of 1988 had dropped out between the 8th and 10th grades; another 7.6% dropped out between

the tenth and twelfth grades. Over the four-year period, some of those who dropped out had returned to school by 1992. As a result, by 1992, 11.6% of the students who were eighth graders in 1988 had left school without finishing (McMillen et al., 1994).

Analyzing Dropouts

The search for the causes of dropping out conducted by NCEES and those social scientists who use their data has proceeded in classical positivistic fashion. Antecedent conditions, most often the characteristics of the individual students who leave school, have been correlated with students' nonattendance. The individual student characteristics most often employed in correlational studies are racial and ethnic identity, gender, socioeconomic status, academic performance, self-concept (self-esteem), family organization, and English language fluency. These personal characteristics, when correlated with dropping out, are cast in terms of *disabling* conditions. Disabling conditions are those factors that place students at risk for dropping out and that contribute indirectly to lower achievement levels and an increased risk of failure in school. (For examples of this line of thinking, see Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989; Eckstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rack, 1989; Kaufman & Bradby, 1992; the six NCEES reports to Congress; Rumberger, 1987; Speece & Cooper, 1990). For illustrative purposes, I will focus my attention on the most recent NCEES report to Congress (McMillen et al., 1994). So, for example, family organization is treated as a disabling condition. Students who come from single-parent or step-families are at a greater risk of dropping out than students who come from *intact families*; 48% of the former but only 6.4% of the latter dropped out between 10th and 12th grades (McMillen et al., 1994, p. 43).

The socioeconomic characteristics of students are crucial. McMillen et al. (1994) pointed out that dropout rates decreased as family income levels increased. The event dropout rate was highest among 15- through 24-year olds living in families at the lowest income level (less than \$10,820 in 1993) and was lowest at high income levels (over \$50,650 in 1993). Students who come from families living below the poverty level were twice as likely to drop out as students who came from families who lived above the poverty level; 14.5% of the former and 7% of the latter dropped out between 10th and 12th grade.

Race and ethnicity have been accorded special attention as risk factors. McMillen et al. (1994) reported that 10% of white, 2% of Asian/Pacific Islander, 13.5% of African American and 19.2% of Hispanic students dropped out between 10th and 12th grade. Although the event dropout rate for Hispanics was also falling, it remained higher than for white and African

American students. The Hispanic dropout rate was approximately 11% in 1972, rose to 12% by 1986, and fell to 6.2% in 1993.

The percentage of African Americans who were status dropouts has decreased substantially from the early 1970s (from about 20% in the 1970s to 13.6% in 1991 and 1993). The status dropout rate for whites shows less of a decline (from about 12% in the 1970s to about 9% in 1990 and 1991 and then to 7.9% in 1993), thus narrowing the gap between black and white dropout rates. Although the year-to-year estimates fluctuate, the Hispanic status rate has been consistently higher than the status rate for whites and African Americans. The status rate for Hispanics was approximately 35% in 1972, 38% in 1987, and 29% in 1993.

The Hispanic dropout rate is higher than African American and white dropout rates, at least when the *status* and the *cohort* measures are employed. Black and Hispanic event rates are similar to white event rates whereas African American status rates were nearly 72% higher than white status rates and Hispanic status rates were 400% higher.

English language use has been treated as a *barrier*, especially for Hispanic youth. Frase (1992) pointed out that, in 1989, nearly one half of all Hispanics ages 16 through 24 had been born outside the 50 states and the District of Columbia. The status dropout rate of this group was over 3 times the overall rate for that year. In 1992, about three-quarters of all Hispanics ages 16-24 reported speaking Spanish at home. The status dropout rates for Spanish-speaking Hispanics was 3 times the overall status dropout rate. This rate was higher among Hispanics who reported limited ability to speak English than among Hispanics who reported a mastery of English.

The correlational approach to the dropout problem led McMillen et al. (1994) to provide summary statements such as these:

The data from the HS&B and NELS:88 show that the nation's sophomores in 1990 were more likely than their peers in 1980 to be from poor, minority, and non-intact families--those characteristics traditionally associated with higher dropout rates. (p. 40)

* * *

African American and Hispanic youth are disproportionately represented in the dropout population. Eighty percent of the Hispanic dropouts speak Spanish at home. For those who speak limited English or none at all, the outlook is especially bleak--with dropout rates over 60%. (McMillen et al., 1994, 48)

This mode of reasoning seems to place blame for dropping out on low-income students who are from ethnic minority backgrounds, single-parent families, or recent immigrant families who have not mastered English.

Natriello (1995) made the same point: "The overemphasis on the relationships between individual characteristics and dropping out in effect places blame for early school leaving on students who may be victims of educational systems that do not meet their needs" (p. 116-117; see also Rumberger, 1987, on this point).

Dropping Out as an Institutional Production

The limitations of correlational methodology, coupled with a *blame the victim* mentality, have had unfortunate consequences. Seldom have dropout studies examined in detail the social organization of schools, the meaning that school has for students, and the connection students perceive among schooling, employment, and other aspects of their everyday lives. Still fewer studies have placed dropping out in the wider political, economic, and social context in which both students and schools exist.

Certainly, a person's social class is important. No doubt, a person's race or ethnicity is vital. But, if we are to understand the reason why thousands of America's youth do not complete high school, we need to go beyond reducing social class, ethnicity, language, and all the rest to people's individual characteristics. Focusing on the dynamics of social life will help us learn how such *characteristics* of people are converted into social actions, enabling us to answer such questions as, How is social life organized such that low income parents' socioeconomic conditions become translated into a student's *choice* to drop out? How are students' ethnicities perceived by school personnel such that they are placed in one educational program rather than another, which, in turn, leads those students to find school meaningless?

In this section, I shift attention away from the characteristics of individual students and move in two different, albeit related, directions. First, I examine the social organization of schooling, especially school sorting practices such as ability grouping and tracking, to understand some of the institutional processes that socially organize dropping out. Second, I examine some recent ethnographies that examine closely the everyday and school life of students. Taken together, these studies suggest that we should adopt a *contextual* instead of an *individual* interpretation of students' withdrawal from school. From this point of view, students' withdrawal from school life is not a flaw or error in reasoning, not "a manifestation of linked social pathologies and inherited characteristics" (Finn, 1987, p. 21). Instead, it stems from students' fairly astute analysis of inequality-producing institutional practices and the socioeconomic circumstances surrounding schools.

The Contribution of School Sorting Practices to the Construction of Dropouts

In the prevailing way of talking, dropping out is treated as a totally independent action--a student's choice, albeit a misguided one. What I suggest in this section is that schools, in fact, arrange for these choices to be made. A wide range of research points to tracking, sorting, and labeling as significant means to this end (see, for example: Cicourel & Kitsuse, 1963; Erickson & Schultz, 1982; Mehan, Hertweck, & Meihls, 1986; Mercer, 1974; Oakes, 1985; Oakes, Gamoran, & Page, 1992; Page & Valli, 1990; Rist, 1970; Rosenbaum, 1976).

Some children who come to school are difficult to teach and troublesome to manage whereas others come eager to learn and easy to manage. Historically, educators in the United States have responded to this by separating students and altering the content of the curriculum to which they are exposed. This curriculum differentiation is a part of the institutional context that leads some students to drop out.

The precursors to tracking can be found in elementary school. Students who have similar skills are often placed in *ability groups* for instruction. Students who have less measured ability are placed in low-ability groups; students with greater amounts of measured ability into high-ability groups. The curriculum for low-ability groups is reduced in scope, content, and pace relative to curriculum for high-ability groups. Out of this informal arrangement in elementary school, tracking becomes institutionalized in middle schools and high schools. Students who have been assigned to the *college prep* track receive a distinct curriculum and are separated from students who have been assigned to the *vocational* track.

The problem with tracking is that it does not provide students with equal educational opportunities (Cicourel & Mehan, 1983; Oakes, 1985; Oakes et al., 1992). Students from low-income and Hispanic or African American backgrounds are disproportionately represented in low-track classes, and they seldom move up to high-track classes. Ethnic and linguistic minority students are consistently underrepresented in programs for the *gifted and talented*. Students placed in low-track classes seldom receive educational resources that are equivalent to resources provided to students in high-track classes. Furthermore, they often suffer the stigmatizing consequences of negative labeling (Mehan et al., 1986; Mercer, 1974;).

The relationship between students' background factors and track placement is exacerbated by organizational arrangements. Students tend to go to neighborhood schools. Even though high schools in the United States offer comprehensive programs, these schools differ in the curricular opportunities they offer students. Schools serving predominantly poor and minority students offer fewer advanced and more remedial courses in academic subjects than schools serving more affluent and majority students. Even in

comprehensive high schools designed to bring students from different backgrounds together under one roof, researchers have found a strong relationship among socioeconomic background, ethnicity, and educational opportunity. The relationships are both simple and direct. The greater the percentage of minorities, the larger the low-track program; the poorer the students, the higher the dropout rate (Oakes et al., 1992; Rumberger, 1995).

In addition to the problem of *differential distribution*, students receive *differential treatment* once they have been placed in different tracks. Within elementary school classrooms, ability groups are taught by the same teacher, but they do not receive the same instruction. Low-ability groups are taught less frequently and are subjected to more control by the teacher (Collins, 1986; McDermott, Godspodinoff, & Aron, 1978; Wilcox, 1982;). Students in low-ability reading groups spend more reading time on decoding activities, whereas students in high-ability groups spend more time on text comprehension and the derivation of the meaning of stories. High-group students do more silent reading and, when reading aloud, are less often interrupted (Allington, 1980; Eder, 1981). High-ability groups progress further in the curriculum over the course of a school year, and this advantage accumulates over the years. As a result, students with a sustained membership in high-ability groups are likely to have covered considerably more material by the end of elementary school.

In secondary schools, low-track classes consistently offer less academic exposure to less demanding topics, whereas high-track classes typically include more complex material. Lower-track students take fewer mathematics and science courses, and these courses are less demanding. Students in non-college-prep curricula take fewer honors or advanced courses. Students in the academic track take 3 to 5 times as many advanced courses in mathematics and science (Gamoran, 1987). Students in nonacademic tracks take more courses in the arts and vocational subjects because they have more room in their schedule for elective courses.

Teachers set different goals for students in different groups and tracks. High-group, high-track teachers more often state that they want their students to be competent and autonomous thinkers. In contrast, teachers of low-track classes more often emphasize basic literacy and computation skills and present topics commonly associated with everyday life and work (Gamoran, 1987).

In addition to gaining differential access to curriculum and instruction, students in different tracks receive different kinds of teachers. Some schools allow teachers to choose their teaching assignments based on seniority, whereas other schools rotate the teaching of low- and high-ability classes

among teachers. In either case, it is not uncommon for class assignments to be used as a reward for teachers judged to be more powerful or successful and as a sanction against teachers judged to be weaker or undeserving. Many teachers covet high-track classes because they find that students in these classes are more willing to participate in academic work and pose fewer disciplinary problems. Whether schools assign teachers or teachers choose their assignments, students in low-income and minority neighborhoods are more likely to get less experienced teachers than students in more affluent neighborhoods. For example, teachers of low-track classes at the secondary level in mathematics and science are consistently less experienced, are less likely to be certified in mathematics or science, hold fewer degrees in these subjects, have less training in the use of computers, and are less likely to think of themselves as master teachers (Oakes et al., 1992). A vicious cycle for low tracks is the result. Repeated assignment to the bottom of the school's status hierarchy may demoralize teachers, reducing their competency, which, in turn, may give students who have the greatest need for the best teachers, the least qualified teachers.

Worst of all, tracking takes on a castelike character. Once students are placed into low-ability groups, they are seldom promoted to high groups. Ability group membership in elementary school carries into track membership in high school. Students placed in low-ability groups in elementary school are more likely to be placed in general and vocational tracks in high school, whereas students placed in high-ability groups in elementary school are more likely to be placed in college prep tracks in high school. Placement in vocational and nonacademic classes can trap Hispanic and other minority students, despite good achievement in school. In a word, then, tracking is undemocratic. When students are tracked on the basis of class, race, and ethnicity and not on the basis of individual effort and achievement, students in tracked schools are denied equal access to educational and occupational opportunity.

The Institutional Production of Dropouts

This research on the social organization of unequal educational resources helps us understand the contribution of schooling to dropping out. Tracking studies in particular show that the sorting practices of the school indirectly help arrange for students' choice to stay in school or drop out. Students are more likely to drop out of schools that have entrenched tracking programs, less rigorous curricula, and disengaged teachers (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Rumberger, 1995). To more fully understand the dropout phenomenon, however, we also need to better understand the social processes that produce students who drop out on a day-to-day basis.

Fine's (1991) description of Comprehensive High School (CHS) in New York City gives us the most detailed study of the institutional production of dropouts written to date. Fine placed CHS in the context of socioeconomic, legal, and fiscal constraints. CHS is in a gentrifying neighborhood, with an open-door admissions policy that takes in all students regardless of age, income, skills, credits, handicaps, or immigrant status. The student body is predominantly African American and Latino, largely lower income and working class. The average ninth grader enters reading and computing two years behind grade level. CHS is comprehensive, not because of an inclusive curriculum, but because of a nonselective admissions policy. Utilized by those who can afford no better (Fine, 1991, p. 194), it rests in the bottom of four tiers of public schools in New York City--academic, vocational, magnet, and comprehensive.

Fiscal and legal circumstances constrained educators' actions at CHS. In the 1980s, New York State funds were underallocated to New York City, and, within the city, funds were underallocated to comprehensive high schools. At the time of Fine's research, New York City enrolled 34% of the state student body but received only 30% of the state funds. Not only was this disproportionate in sheer numbers, but the students residing in the city were disproportionately those with academic and family difficulties. From 1973 to 1983, the ratio of students to teachers in New York City had increased in nonvocational high schools by 27%. At the same time, class size grew by 16.6%, and the mean funding per high school student fell by 5%. By 1986, a 48% funding disparity was calculated between the best-funded and the worst-funded schools.

A district funding formula was in effect at the time of Fine's study. Schools received funds based on the average number of academic classes passed by the number of students enrolled and weighted by the proportion of days in attendance (Fine, 1991, p. 15). The budget formula may have been written to reward schools that require academic coursework, encourage attendance, and keep students in school; however, in comprehensive high schools such as CHS, the allocation formula for New York City Schools actually facilitated the neglect, if not the purging, of most students, especially those with academic difficulties (Fine, 1991, p. 16).

That is, it was in the school's best financial interest to retain as large a student population register as possible and to attract as many good attenders and credit-accumulating students as possible. High enrollment generated some revenue, but it was far more profitable not to have poor attenders or students enrolled in remedial classes, which only counted for half credit. CHS enjoyed a long waiting list of over-the-counter students, primarily because it served a transient neighborhood and had many bilingual

and special education students. With a rapid and efficient discharge process, the register could remain stable, compensated by fresh, relatively enthusiastic high attenders.

Although this transfer of bodies sounds premeditated, deceptive, and malicious, actually it wasn't. The nature of overcrowding in city schools and the fiscal, legal, and educational disincentives of teaching students who are not attending or who are having a tough time compelled schools to move bodies in and out.

Once inside comprehensive high schools, students were processed, not educated. Counselors were not observed telling discharged students, who left with confident plans to complete a GED, that the pass rate for that test in New York is less than 50%. Counselors were not observed asking students what they would do after they left school. Instead the standard response was, "How old are you?" followed by, "You have to fill out these papers and get your parents to sign."

The production of dropouts continues in the classroom. Teachers routinely *silence* students' voices through curriculum and pedagogy that (in ways reminiscent of Freire's, 1973, *banking education*) tells students right answers, by purging from lessons any topics from students' lived experiences, and by treating sociopolitical issues as straightforward yes/no dichotomies. One teacher divided discussants of Bernard Goetz, New York City's *subway vigilante*, into pro-Goetz and anti-Goetz sides (Fine, 1991, p. 42), even though, as one bright senior explained, choosing sides isn't easy when one "doesn't like Goetz shootin' up people who look like my brother," but also "doesn't like feelin' unsafe in the projects or in my neighborhood either" (Fine, 1991, p. 43). Instead, teachers bracket relevant topics and deem them "personal" (Fine, 1991, p. 44) or tell students to seek individual counseling. Consistent with a personological discourse, they relegate urban students' public problems to the private sphere (Fine, 1991, p. 183).

Disciplinary rules and regulations also silence critique and legitimate inequality. Once students are 17, school board policy in New York designates them as over age; if they are also not attending school regularly, then they are eligible for discharge. Because CHS implements policy precisely, the institution discharged 1000 students during 1984-85, over half of whom were 17 or older. Furthermore, the chances of being over age at CHS are high, because many students are held back a grade at least once before entering and many are retained as ninth graders.

This rationalized production of dropouts didn't happen at CHS in legally sanctioned ways, but was the consequence of bureaucratic practices. At CHS, exclusion happens when "my Momma comes [to school] and they show her no respect"; when a guidance counselor says, "act like that and you'll

end up on welfare," while the student's family struggles to stay alive on the meager offerings of AFDC; when a student is held back a grade because she missed three months of classes while (unbeknownst to the school) she nursed her grandmother back to health after coronary surgery; when students are told that a diploma will bring success, but they know that their mother, uncle, and brothers, who are all high school graduates, can't find work; when a student is recruited out of public high school by a proprietary cosmetology school and is excited that she'll get paid to go to school and then get a job--but she gets neither (Fine, 1991, pp. 24-25).

In short, Fine (1991) concludes that students don't drop out of school, they are forced out:

Exclusion operates powerfully and institutionally inside city schools. Although educational laws, policies, and practices have been dramatically transformed over this century, the exiling of those least privileged nevertheless persists. . . . Exiling so thoroughly saturates public schooling, at least in low-income urban areas, that it requires no malevolence, no *bad guys*, no conspiracy. Teachers, administrators, . . . need only operate as dictated by the state, by history, by tradition, and by the demands for *efficiency*. As long as they do, often with good intentions and with what they presume to be the best interests of students, we will continue to witness unequal educational outcomes that correspond, by no means arbitrarily, to the contours of social class, race/ethnicity, gender, and disability.(pp. 25-26)

The general point to be derived from Fine's work is that a number of forces impinge upon the school and thereby influence the production of dropouts. Some of these constraints are the direct result of changing socioeconomic conditions. Others are the consequence of the way in which a particular school chooses to implement district policies in the light of fiscal constraints. I have called such constraints *practical circumstances* (Mehan, 1992; Mehan et al., 1986) because they make their appearance day in and day out, they seem to be an inevitable part of the everyday routine of education in a bureaucratic institution, and they do not seem to be the result of malevolence, conspiracy, or bad faith.

The courses of action that educators take in response to practical circumstances often have significant consequences. They construct different educational career paths, most importantly for our purposes here, the path to dropping out. This is not to say that educators self-consciously plan to make educational services available to students differentially. For the most part, educators seem to be genuinely concerned for the welfare of the students in their charge. Seldom do they overtly try to discriminate against any children. Nevertheless, education services are made available differentially to students, which leads me to conclude that differential

educational opportunity is institutionally mediated; it is an unintended consequence of bureaucratic organization rather than a direct result of either personal choice or structural forces. The influence of organizational arrangements and the practical circumstances they generate, then, suggests that the place to look for reasons for dropouts is in the institutional arrangements of the school in relationship to the socioeconomic conditions of society and not in the characteristics of individual students.

The Contribution of Students' Actions to the Construction of Dropouts

The focus on individual students instead of the institutional social, economic, and political context surrounding students as I described above is also evident in the analysis of students' reasons for leaving school. These are cast as a *student decision* (McMillen et al., 1994, p. 24).

The categories used for dropping out in the NELS:88 second follow-up study were *school-related*, *job-related*, and *family-related*. Forty-three percent of the students who left school between the 10th and 12th grades reported dropping out because they "did not like school," and 39% said they did so because they were "failing in school" (McMillen et al., 1994, pp. 37-38). Job-related reasons--"I could not work and go to school at the same time"--or family related reasons--"I had to support my family," or "wanted to have a family," "got married," or "got pregnant"--were less frequently cited. Drug use was reported by only 4% of the students. NELS:88 expresses these reasons as students' bad personal choices. They treat the students as if they have made a mistake or an error in judgment when they drop out. Students' reasoning is portrayed as flawed or deficient because they do not see the value of education.

The reasons that students drop out are more complex than the vocabulary that has been used to describe them (McDermott, 1989; Gilmore, 1989). The research instruments used to study dropouts employ a simple language: Either students are in school or they are out of school. Students leave school because they have either school problems, or family problems, or job problems. We need a richer vocabulary to describe students in order to understand what dropping out means in the lives of individuals who leave school.

A series of articulate ethnographies has explored the social world of disaffected youth from low-income, Latino, African American, and immigrant groups who experience school difficulties. Because these detailed studies make an explicit connection among social actions, mediating cultural processes, and more general social forces, we obtain a deeper sense of urban students' life. The general conclusion that we can infer from listening to the voices of dropouts is that students who are in trouble in school do not see a connection between studying, the world of work, or the rest of their

lives. As a result of this perceived disconnection, students develop an ideology that critiques the system and rationalizes their own lack of academic success.

Dropouts in England (Willis, 1977), Boston (MacLeod, 1987), and "Lumberville" (Solomon, 1992), the *vatos* in south Texas (Foley, 1990, 1991), and Watsonville (Matuti-Bianchi, 1986; Ogbu & Matuti-Bianchi, 1986) realize that, no matter how hard they work, they will still be relegated to low-paying jobs or, worse, no jobs at all. These beliefs are translated into actions. Disaffected students withdraw from academic pursuits, act up in class, ignore assignments and homework, cut classes, and eventually drop out. Their critique is somewhat shortsighted, because their ideology leads to actions that contribute to their stagnant position in the educational hierarchy and the occupational structure.

Willis's (1977) study of disaffected white working-class males in a British secondary school in a decaying industrial city is the hallmark study in this tradition. He described the everyday world of the *lads*, a group of high school dropouts who rejected achievement ideology, subverted teacher and administrator authority, and disrupted classes. Willis said that the *lads* rejected schooling because they had developed deep insights into the economic condition of their social class under capitalism. Few of their fathers, brothers, or friends had jobs at all; still fewer had jobs that required advanced education. Based on their observations, the *lads* invested their energies in manual labor and disparaged work that required advanced education.

The students' cultural outlook limited their options tragically, however. Equating manual labor with success and mental labor with failure prevented them from seeing how their anti-intellectual, oppositional actions led to dead-end, lower-paying jobs. Blind to the connection between schooling and mobility, they *chose* to join their brothers and fathers on the shop floor, a choice apparently made happily and free from coercion. Thus, what began as a potential insight into the social relations of production in capitalist societies was transformed into a surprisingly uncritical affirmation of class domination. This identification of manual labor with masculinity ensured the *lads'* acceptance of their subordinate economic fate and the successful reproduction of the class structure.

A group of dropouts that MacLeod (1987) studied in a Boston housing development, the Hallway Hangers, reacted in ways reminiscent of the *lads* in Willis's account. They cut classes or acted out in the few they attended. They smoked, drank, used drugs, committed crimes. In short, they took every opportunity to oppose the regimen of the school and resist its achievement ideology. By contrast, the Brothers, a group of mostly African

American youths, tried to fulfill societally approved roles: they attended classes, conformed to rules, studied hard, rejected drugs, played basketball, cultivated girlfriends.

MacLeod (1987) said that cultural factors shaped the differential responses of the two groups of students. The Brothers thought that racial inequality had been curbed and that educational opportunity had been improved in the previous 20 years because of the Civil Rights movement. Therefore, studying would produce success. Family life also mediated. The parents of the Brothers wanted their children to have professional careers. Toward that goal, they exercised control over their sons, setting a relatively early curfew, and expecting them to perform to a certain level at school; violations of academic expectations were punished by restrictions, and the punishments stuck. The parents of the Hallway Hangers did not act in this manner. They gave their sons free rein and did not monitor schoolwork. Thus, the cultural processes associated with ethnicity, beliefs, and family life mediated the relationship between structural constraints and educational attainment.

Ogbu's (1978, 1987a, 1987b) research into the belief systems of *nonimmigrant minorities* and *immigrant minorities* sharpens our understanding of the oppositional ideology of disaffected youth and the relationship that an oppositional belief system has to students' school and occupational success or difficulty. Immigrant minorities (such as Japanese, Koreans, and Chinese) accept school norms, work hard, and alternate their academic identity at school with a nonacademic identity with friends, Ogbu said. Nonimmigrant minorities (African Americans, Native Americans, and Latinos) have a different folk model of schooling that encourages different patterns of behavior. They tend to equate schooling with assimilation into the dominant group, a course of action that they actively resist. As a result, they do not try to achieve academically; instead, they engage in collective actions of resistance against school and societal norms, the most extreme of which is dropping out.

Ogbu implied that the ideology that African Americans, Latinos, and other encapsulated minority groups have developed contributes to their relatively poor academic and economic success. Because it is collectivist and oppositional, the ideology of involuntary or encapsulated minorities has led them to adopt strategies that scorn the idea of individual achievement, which is so important in American society, in favor of collective strategies that blame failure on racial discrimination and other structural forces.

Labov (1982) reported that low-income African American students formed group identity based on in-group linguistic codes. Although these communication patterns help maintain group cohesion, they also have alienating effects. The African American vernacular (like rap and reggae),

distinctive dress, and demeanor are a source of distinction and pride from the low-income African American student's point of view, but they are signs of opposition and irritation from the white teacher's point of view. The folk model within the black peer culture required speech markedly different from the *good English* expected in school. Students who spoke *school English* and did well in school marked themselves as different and risked rejection by their peers. Because they valued peer validation, these students opted out of academic pursuits and into oppositional pursuits, which meant they spent more time resisting authority and being confrontational and put much less time and effort in their school work.

Fordham and Ogbu (1986) and Ogbu and Matuti-Bianchi (1986) expanded on Labov's argument. Because involuntary immigrant groups still experience prejudice, they have come to believe that social and economic success can only be achieved by adopting the cultural and linguistic patterns of the majority culture. This puts high-achieving Latinos and blacks in a bind, because they must choose between maintaining their ethnic identity and striving for high achievement, which their ethnic peers regard as acting superior, or *acting white*. To resolve this dilemma, many Latinos and blacks reject academic life in favor of an oppositional life-style:

To be a Chicano means to hang out by the science wing; it means *not* eating lunch in the quad where all the gringos, *white folks* and school boys eat; it means cutting classes by faking a call slip so you can be with your friends by the 7-11; it means sitting in the back of a class of *gabachos* and *not* participating; it means *not* carrying books to class or doing your homework; it means doing the minimum to get by. In short, it means not participating in school in ways that promote academic success and achievement. (Matuti-Bianchi, 1986, p. 253)

Foley (1991) reported a similar pattern among Latino youth in a south Texas city. Those students came to school with beliefs and actions that worked against their academic success. These attitudes led them to respond to their treatment by the school in a manner that compounded their problem: They formed separatist groups; they did not follow school rules; and they ditched school rather than do school work. Foley, like Willis and MacLeod before him, said that student subcultures had some political savvy: They opposed school culture and achievement ideology because of the school's hidden curriculum and because they saw limited economic opportunities ahead of them. The net result was that Chicano students failed, in spite of their expressed desire to succeed in school.

When Latino and black high school students rebuke their peers for *acting white*, they are actively resisting white structure and domination (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Matuti-Bianchi, 1986; Ogbu & Matuti-Bianchi, 1986). Likewise,

when black college students go through the routine of schooling but exert little effort in their studies, they are resisting an education that they see as *only second best* to that available to whites (Weis, 1990). So too, when *vatos* form separatist groups, refuse to follow school rules, and play sports to the exclusion of their school work, they are creating a *lived culture* that paradoxically and tragically contributes to their own school difficulties (Foley, 1990, 1991).

In short, many poor black and Latino students have developed an ideology and a course of action that directly challenges conventional American wisdom about the relationship between academic performance and occupational success. The ideology and practice of resistance contributes to the lowly position of blacks and Latinos in the occupational arena because they refuse to develop the skills, attitudes, manners, and speech necessary for achieving success in capitalist societies.

At first glance, the rebellious behavior, the low academic achievement, and high dropout rate of poor Latino and black students seem to stem from students' lack of self-discipline, dullness, laziness, inability to project themselves into the future. However, these studies of students' belief systems unequivocally say the actual causes of their academic difficulties are quite different. Students' unwillingness to participate comes from their assessment of the costs and benefits of playing the game. It is not that schooling will not propel them up the ladder of success; it is that the chances are too slim to warrant the attempt. Given this logic, the oppositional behavior of the Hallway Hangers, the *vatos*, the lads, and the other dropouts is a form of resistance to an institution that cannot deliver on its promise of upward mobility for all students.

Placing students' reasoning for dropping out in the context of the social organization of urban schools and rapidly shifting socioeconomic circumstances gives us a way to understand the dropout phenomenon better. We should not get caught in a debate about whether dropping out is a bad personal choice or the consequence of bad schools excluding poor kids. Instead, we should use contextual analysis constitutively, that is, as a way to better understand the relationship among students' reasoning, educators' decision making, cultural processes, and general societal constraints.

How students are placed in boring classes with dull materials and unmotivated teachers, or how they look at the possibility of work after schooling, provides us lenses through which to look at the feelings students express about schooling in surveys such as NELS:88. The students who left school because they "did not like it" and because they were "failing in school" (McMillen et al., 1994, pp. 37-38) may have been presenting

accurate perceptions about poorly staffed and poorly stocked schools and limited job opportunities. Fetterman (1989, p. 45) related a story in which a dropout from Brooklyn told him he could make as much in a week selling drugs as the average New York City lawyer makes in one year. For this individual, and other youth trapped in inner cities, there is no contest between the immediate financial rewards of the drug culture and what appears to be a largely irrelevant and distant promise made by the pursuit of an academic life.

Instead of interpreting *family problems* as an unfortunate state of affairs in impoverished communities and as a condition over which schools have little influence, a contextual analysis invites an alternative interpretation. *Family problems* may exist precisely because the high school experience has been discouraging, unengaging, and uninviting and because schools have been structured in such a way that they do not accommodate students experiencing *family problems* (Fine, 1991).

Conclusions

In this paper, I have attempted to relocate the causes, the meanings, and the problematics of dropping out by placing the dropout phenomenon in the broader context within which it occurs. One significant part of that context is the social organization of schooling with its unequal distribution of resources, including teachers, curriculum, and instruction (Mehan, 1992; Oakes et al., 1992). Another significant part includes the social organization of society with its hierarchy of work that produces conditions of structural unemployment, marginal employment, and underemployment that are disproportionately endured by minorities, women, and low-income individuals (Fine, 1991; McDermott, 1989). Contextualizing the dropout phenomenon in this way is helpful because it shifts attention away from the presumed deficiencies of individual students and shows that students' reasoning is not faulty but indeed reflects a thoughtful analysis of existing institutional and socioeconomic circumstances.

We must be careful, however, to recognize the complex and ambiguous position schooling occupies in our society. Public schools are caught in the middle of competing agendas. On the one hand, educators are entreated to educate all students to the best of their abilities. On the other hand, educators are entreated to provide an equitable education for all students.

These competing agendas highlight the interplay between the general or structural forces of society and individualism that defines America (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985). This *interplay* accounts better for educational inequality in general, and the dropout phenomenon in particular, than either a structural critique or traditional individualism alone. Although the focus on individuals reveals the role of personal choice and social

agency, personological accounts have minimized the role of institutions and the socioeconomic circumstances that constrain individual choice and agency. Although the focus on social forces highlights economic, political, and practical constraints, structural accounts can wind up shifting the blame to beleaguered teachers and principals.

Dropping out is neither a problem of individual students who drop out, nor a problem of schooling. Dropping out must be understood (a) in the relationship between students' academic career paths and life contexts and (b) in the overt political and economic strategies that organize schools and exert pressure on them to produce a certain amount of success and a certain amount of failure.

Recognizing the interplay between structural forces and individual action and the push and pull of competing agendas invites us to recast our representation of schooling. Schools are not innocent sites of cultural transmission, or places where consensual values are inculcated, or meritocratic springboards for mobility. Nor are they automatic reproduction machines, exacerbating or perpetuating social inequalities in mechanical ways.

Although the purpose of this paper is not to discuss educational programs, it is important to identify approaches that have the potential for educational improvement. I highlight these approaches against the backdrop of this conviction: Educational reform cannot be viewed as a substitute for more fundamental political, economic, and social change in the attempt to solve the problem of the transmission of inequality from generation to generation. Educational reform, in and of itself, is incapable of effecting change in the structure of inequality in the United States.

The real problem is in the organization of work and our cultural beliefs about schooling in society. One deep-seated cultural belief in the United States--shared by educators, parents, social scientists, and policy analysts--is that education is a competition, a race. When the education-as-competition metaphor is invoked, the values of hard work, individual (or even team) effort, and, of course, winning are glorified. As with all metaphors, something is left out when it is applied. Most notably in this case, it is the losers, rather the need for losers, that is overlooked.

We have indeed organized education in the United States as a competition for precious resources: gifted programs in elementary school that lead to seminar and honors programs in high school and reserved seats in elite colleges and universities. This competitive system, with fewer and fewer slots at higher levels, requires a certain amount of failure. Thousands and thousands of students every day are ensured success because other students drop out from the competitive race. In that sense, dropouts are

doing successful students a favor; they are getting out of the way, because the successful students need the dropouts to improve their chance of success (McDermott, 1989). Achieving educational equity, then, will require changing the cultural belief that a good education is a scarce commodity, available only to the few people who win the contest for educational credentials.

There are, fortunately, a number of promising proposals before us that have the potential to improve the educational achievement of Latinos and other underserved students. *Untracking*, the educational practice of providing increasing amounts of social supports for previously low-achieving students while maintaining a rigorous educational curriculum, is one such promising proposal (Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, & Lintz, 1996). *Cooperative learning*, the classroom practice of grouping students heterogeneously for the purpose of accomplishing tasks collaboratively, is another promising proposal (Slavin, this volume). Importantly, both practices seem to help low-achieving students improve their academic performance without diminishing that of high-achieving students. Furthermore, they seem to work as well for students from linguistic and ethnic minority backgrounds as they do for *majority* students (Mehan et al., 1996; Slavin, this volume). The proposals to build instruction on students' knowledge and expertise (Au & Jordan, 1981; Gonzalez et al, 1993; Roseberry, Warren, Conant, & Conant, 1992; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988) and to have them solve authentic problems in natural science, mathematics, and social science; read genuine texts; and write for meaningful purpose which contained in the current round of the California frameworks for instruction, also offer provocative possibilities. Until there is a major overhaul in cultural beliefs and the economic system, we need to cultivate these and other programs that improve the educational opportunities of Latinos and other students not served well by schools.

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