Smuggling Authentic Learning into the School Context: Transitioning From an Innovative Elementary to a Conventional High School

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Context: *What Varenne and McDermott described as "conventional schooling" is characterized by underlying values of competition and credentialism implicit in an unconscious, cultural framework for U.S. institutional schooling. Schools that define themselves in opposition to this cultural heritage consider themselves innovative schools and tend to explicitly reject conventional practice in favor of a collaborative "free-choice learning environment."*
Focus of Study: *We analyze the institution of conventional U.S. schooling through the interpretive lens of students who were experiencing it for the first time in their first year of high school. We were interested in how students who had attended an innovative collaborative elementary school interpreted their former innovative and current conventional schools and how they used these interpretations to form coping strategies for success in the new environment.*
Setting: *The study was based at the Newark Center for Creative Learning (NCCL). Founded in 1971, the school terminates after the eighth grade.*
Participants: *We followed a cohort of 13 ninth-grade NCCL "graduates" through their first year of conventional high school. We also solicited views from their parents and former (NCCL) teachers.*

Research Design: *We employed a qualitative case study approach designed in collaboration with teachers.*

Data Collection and Analysis: *We conducted four focus-group interviews with NCCL alumni and analyzed their postings to a private asynchronous Web discussion set up exclusively for them to discuss their experiences. We also surveyed their parents, invited parents, staff, and students to a videotaped discussion of our emerging results, and invited personal e-mail feedback on our emerging interpretations.*

Findings: *The students in our study were generally academically successful in their new high schools yet clearly expressed a distinction between what they considered authentic learning and what they considered strategies for academic success in their new conventional schooling environments. Analysis of their discourse revealed distinct response patterns characterizing concurrent (sometimes complementary, sometimes contradictory) projects of self-actualization and institutional achievement.*

Recommendations: *Our analysis suggests that a certain critical ambivalence toward credentialism and competition can be part of a healthy strategy for school success and that efforts to improve minority school performance should be modified to take into account the effect of the institution of conventional schooling itself, an aspect that has, to date, been underanalyzed.*

In this article, we analyze the institution of schooling in the United States—what Varenne and McDermott (1998) call "the school America builds"—through the interpretive lens of students who are experiencing it for the first time in their first year of high school. We distinguish what Varenne and McDermott refer to as "conventional schooling" from a current schooling movement that designs learning environments specifically in opposition to what is perceived to be the competitive and credentialistic nature of conventional schooling. We refer to schools that have defined themselves in opposition to conventional schooling as innovative collaborative schools.

Innovative schools may be denoted by a variety of terms: alternative, nontraditional, new, free, and so on. They may designate the sort of institutional schooling that they reject in a variety of ways as well: traditional, normal, and so on. We have chosen conventional and innovative, respectively, to highlight a particular relationship: Conventional schools are based on a default, even unconscious, cultural framework for institutional schooling (Cuban, 1993; Stigler & Hiebert, 1998), and innovative schools consciously define themselves in opposition to this framework. We do not assume that conventional schools cannot be innovative in some ways or suggest that all innovative schools are completely divested of convention, nor do we deny the wide variety of approaches within both camps or suggest a false and easy dichotomy of good and bad practice. The distinction we make is between schooling (as we implicitly

understand it in the United States) and a sort of "unschooling" move-
ment that constructs itself philosophically in opposition to that vision
either in terms of rejecting entirely the notion of school (Llewellyn,
1993) or by completely reenvisioning alternative school practices
(Rogoff, Turkanis, & Bartlett, 2001).

  The present study focused on one such innovative collaborative school:
the Newark Center for Creative Learning (NCCL), located in the north-
eastern state of Delaware. The NCCL staff invited us as research consul-
tants to answer some of their concerns, and in dialogue with them, we
added some of our own research questions. In part, we were inspired to
undertake the research described in this article as a response to concerns
raised by some of our university students and colleagues about how stu-
dents from innovative schools that end with the eighth grade fared after
they were forced to go conventional high schools. Do they lose their
interest in academic learning? Do they fail to fulfill institutional require-
ments of conventional schools that are often nonnegotiable? Talking
with the NCCL teachers, we found that some NCCL parents had similar
concerns. As educators more broadly concerned with educational equity
for children from marginalized groups, we layered on an additional
research question: How can NCCL students' understandings of conven-
tional schools and the coping strategies they develop provide an alterna-
tive framework for minority student success?

THE NCCL STUDY: CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

THE NCCL

The Newark Center for Creative Learning is a small comprehensive,
innovative, collaborative private school run as a "community of learners"
(Rogoff et al., 2001). This is how the school defines itself on its Web site:

> Founded in 1971, Newark Center for Creative Learning is a
> small, parent-cooperative school with an enrollment of 90 chil-
> dren, ages 6 to 14, 1st through 8th grade age. With a student-
> teacher ratio of 11 to 1, NCCL offers a supportive, hands-on, stu-
> dent-centered education to all children. Our primary goal is to
> inspire and encourage students to take responsibility for them-
> selves and their own education. Our talented teachers create
> environments and relationships that capitalize on children's
> interest and curiosity. With guidance and direction, our students
> become fully immersed in their work, enjoying their pursuit of
> knowledge.[1]

Students are often provided with a "free-choice learning environment" (Falk & Dierking, 2002) and are expected to care about what they learn. Students' work is not graded. The learning environment involves multi-age classrooms, project- and problem-based cooperative learning, and guiding students to manage their own learning based on their emerging academic interests. The school emphasizes a community of learning as its model and in this regard is similar to some other innovative collaborative schools (Institute of Educational Sciences, n.d.). In contrast with conventional schools, there are no desk-based seating arrangements, grades, tests, or prescribed and preset academic curricula. The school puts special emphasis on discouraging competition among the students and promoting an egalitarian, collaborative, and respectful environment.

Probably because the school is private and requires an annual tuition of $7,569 per student, the school serves mainly middle-class professional families. At the onset of our research, the demographic profile of NCCL was 90% White, 7% Black, 2% Asian, and 1% Hispanic (U.S. Federal Government, 2006), closely reflecting the local racial composition of the city of Newark, which, according to the 2000 census, was 87% White, 6% Black, 3% Hispanic, and 4% Asian (U.S. Federal Government, 2006).

DEVELOPING A COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH RELATIONSHIP

Our methodology was community based. We tried to bridge the concerns of our preservice teachers about innovative education, and the concerns and interests of diverse members of the innovative school. Because our role was as collaborators, our methodology was purposely different from methodologies that we have heard described by community members as "drive-by research," in which researchers come to a community with their own research agenda, collect data, and move away. The school sponsored our regular focus-group interview meetings with the alumni, providing a venue and food, and we referred to these meetings as "reunions" to situate them as school-based events that belong to the alumni. As community-based researchers, we adopted an emic perspective (Headland, Pike, & Harris, 1990) and used an anthropological approach that attempted to understand culture from the members' points of view. Specifically, we wanted to understand the alumni's transition experiences as a cultural phenomenon framed by their particular understandings of schooling and learning.

On May 21, 2004, we met first with the NCCL teachers and then with 13 eighth-grade NCCL students who were just about to graduate from the school. All of them (and their parents) agreed to participate in the research about their transition to conventional high schools. That NCCL

teachers and parents had concerns and questions about the alumni's transition to conventional schools was evident from a page on the NCCL site devoted to "graduation anxiety,"[2] as well as a handout for parents summarizing some graduates' reflections on the transitions, entitled "What Happens after NCCL?" We thought it might be useful for NCCL parents, teachers, and students to systematically study this process. In our initial meeting with teachers, we told them that we wanted our research to answer their own questions about the graduation transition, and then we recorded the discussion. We then summarized teachers' concerns and interests for research and sent them a copy of the research questions generated at the meeting for their approval. Among the research questions generated in collaboration with teachers, three will be specifically addressed in the remainder of this paper: (1)What are short- and long-term problems that NCCL graduates face in a conventional high school? (2) What are strategies they use to cope with these problems? (3) What NCCL resources do they draw on (community support, concepts, and abilities learned during their NCCL education, and so on)?

PARTICIPANTS

The NCCL alumni studied consisted of 7 boys and 6 girls, who volunteered for the study while graduating from NCCL. All are White, except for Robert,[3] whose mother is a Black immigrant from the Caribbean (Robert was raised speaking French as his primary language). One student sampled has a significant learning disability. Participants had spent from 3 to a maximum of 8 years in NCCL before their graduation in May 2004.

During the year of the study, NCCL alumni attended a broad range of public and private high schools that we categorized broadly as "conventional": All schools sorted students based on their performance on graded assignments presented by teachers. As explained in the introduction, we defined *conventionality* by an institutional emphasis on competitiveness and credentialism. We based descriptions of degrees of conventionality of the high schools attended by the NCCL alumni on their comments about the schools during the reunions.

DATA COLLECTION

Data collection for the study included several sources: (1) four focus-group interviews (alumni reunions), (2) videotaped interview with two NCCL teachers, (3) interactive Web site postings of alumni, (4) mailed parent surveys, (5) personal e-mail communication about the study with

the NCCL alumni and teachers, and (6) a videotaped presentation and question and answer session of the results of our study to the teachers, parents and current students and alumni of NCCL.

During the 2004–2005 academic year, we had four 2-hour reunions every 2–3 months on NCCL school grounds. On average, about 10 NCCL alumni and 2 NCCL teachers attended each reunion. All alumni but Linda attended at least one of our four alumni meetings, Tina and Danielle attended only once, and most attended all the meetings.

Several NCCL teachers agreed to help in organizing and participating in the reunions. These reunions can best be characterized as semistructured focus-group interviews. The first reunion was guided by a rough protocol based on our research questions, whereas subsequent reunions were guided by a combination of emerging theoretical interpretations and comments that participants had made in previous face-to face and Web-based discussions. The final reunion protocol is provided as an example in Appendix A. During the reunions, the NCCL graduates had opportunities to share their experiences, thoughts, and observations in a free-talk format, reply to the teachers' questions, and reply to our pre-designed and emergent questions. These reunions were audiotaped and videotaped.

After the third alumni reunion, we also interviewed the teachers, Richard (math and science) and Carrie (English and history), who taught our alumni in their last year at NCCL. This was a very informal discussion. We began by asking teachers to discuss what about their backgrounds had led them to teach at the NCCL, but teachers' responses led to further discussions about the nature of learning and teaching and their interpretations of some of our emerging findings. This interview was videotaped and lasted about an hour.

We also designed a password-protected interactive Web site for the NCCL graduates where they could make announcements, set events, share interesting Internet links, and participate in an asynchronous discussion forum. Researcher participation in the Web site was minimal. Alumni used this site to share their experiences in their different schools, reminisce about NCCL, and plan our research reunions, along with other social events. Nevertheless, they were fully aware that their postings would also be used as data. The alumni took full ownership of the Web site and continued participating on it after the research was finished. In fact, the site had 1,564 hits, and their latest posting to date was on May 31, 2006, approximately a year after the study was completed.

In November 2005, we mailed a survey to the parents of the NCCL alumni, and 6 of the 13 sets of parents returned the survey. Questions focused on differences and similarities between their experiences with

NCCL and with their child's high school. The full text of this survey is available in Appendix B.

Parents, alumni, and staff were encouraged to communicate with us throughout the study with their views and feedback, which contributed to the collaborative process of data interpretation. After the study was complete, all NCCL participants and their parents were sent a draft report of the research and were invited to a formal presentation of our findings at the NCCL on February 7, 2006. E-mailed comments and aspects of the discussion at the final presentation were incorporated as data and also contributed to data analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DATA SYNTHESIS

The interviews were fully transcribed and thematically coded using N-Vivo software according to a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), in which thematic coding categories emerge from the data through the analysis process. Those coding categories analyzed in this article constitute the article headings, beginning with "recognizing the difference between school success and learning." The organization of these headings into subheadings reflects coding structure. The Web postings were then analyzed according to these same coding categories. Finally, the teacher interviews and parent feedback (from e-mails, the final meeting, and the parent surveys) were analyzed to check for ways in which their understandings compared with the understandings of the alumni.

We employed a dialogic (Matusov, 2004) methodology in which data collection, data synthesis, and data analysis followed a recursive processes of discussion and development. We invited students to discuss our own preliminary interpretations of previous interview and survey data as well as different perspectives on school success and failure based on our literature review. By sharing our findings with our research participants, we involved them in the research and thus bridged the academic and targeted communities (i.e., NCCL, academia, and our preservice teachers). After the written and oral presentation of results, we received several e-mails with comments from participants guiding us in subsequent revisions. These participant reflections can be seen throughout the current version of the article as "personal communications" from students, parents, and teachers.

These procedures demonstrate that our relationship with the NCCL staff was not "neutral," or static, but one that developed around shared attitudes about the nature of learning and teaching and through some shared practices over the years. As we trusted them to be honest with us,

they trusted us (we believe) to investigate their concerns from their point of view without imposing values that they associate with conventional schooling, values that might render their concerns irrelevant. Following Lincoln and Guba's (1985) principles of naturalistic inquiry, we chose to establish research relationships based on trust and to develop these relationships through ongoing dialogue throughout the study. In Mishler's (1990) words, we sought validation instead of validity by "focus[ing] on the range of ongoing activities through which claims are made and appraised rather than on the static properties of instruments and scores" (p. 419).

We had several reasons for this recursive and participatory research design. First, we already had a relationship with the school and wanted to involve them in a collaborative research design in which the participants were able to help design research questions and help in the interpretation of data. We wanted to go beyond member checks as a measure of trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to engage in dialogic interpretation with the participants throughout the research and drafting process, and so these "personal communications" with NCCL community members responding to our initial draft reports helped us to examine our own perspectives and biases in the light of other views. In contrast with positivistic approaches, which assume that bias can and should be eliminated (Robson, 2002), our approach assumes our own biases to be both subject to explicit scrutiny and a tool for dialogic engagement with participants. We have included some sense of this dialogue in extended quoted discussions to illustrate the multivoicedness of collaborative research that is not resolvable without simply subsuming all voices within the researcher perspective (Eisenhart, 1999).

MOVING FROM AN INNOVATIVE ELEMENTARY TO CONVENTIONAL HIGH SCHOOLS

According to NCCL parent surveys, parents are attracted to its innovative collaborative educational philosophy and/or to the fact that it has a more flexible and more individualized pedagogical approach than in conventional schools. In other words, some parents choose the school primarily because they like NCCL practices, whereas some parents choose it primarily because they think that their children will not do well in mainstream conventional schools, public or private. Some NCCL parents describe their choice of school for their children as a leap of faith; as one parent wrote; "For our family, enrollment of our child into a 'learning-loving' environment required a 'leap of faith,' accepting the concept that nonspecifically measured educational growth would reap benefits

for the child that continues for the rest of their formal education years, and then through life" (personal communication, February 2006). This is not unusual for many other innovative collaborative schools (Matusov, 1999; Rogoff et al., 2001).

We were interested in how the NCCL alumni interpreted their innovative and conventional schools and how they used these interpretations to form coping strategies for success in the new environment. Although students' perspectives are highly particular and situated (not necessarily consistent within the same school, or even within the same student), this is exactly the kind of understanding that we wanted in order to analyze participants' positionings with respect to what they interpret to be different institutional frameworks. We never attempted to capture the "true" nature of any of the conventional schools that the students attended by direct observation because we were interested in viewing the schools through the eyes of our participants, who defined themselves and their relationships to learning and school success in terms of their relationships with their (fundamentally different) elementary and secondary school experiences.

According to the NCCL alumni, their high schools were not homogenous with regard to conventionality: some teachers in some subjects were more conventional than others. The alumni judged some high schools to be highly conventional (like Danielle's first school, Andy's and Amy's schools), with their stress on tests, grades, and credential knowledge, whereas others were considered less conventional (like Cameron's school), with their inclusion of project- and problem-based learning along with grades, tests, and credential knowledge. Cameron e-mailed a response to our early draft of the article, in which some of his peers had critiqued homework in their schools as "meaningless":

> I, personally, do not feel that much of my homework is meaning-less (though, certainly, I feel that some of it is), I find my teachers to be extremely interesting and great at what they do (in fact, I find many of them to be quite similar to NCCL teachers and I believe I said something to that extent at one of the reunions), while many of my peers do not have an interest in learning, as the report states, most of my friends and many other students at my high school love to learn in certain subjects and place less emphasis on the meaninglessness of grades than other students. (January 2006)

Cameron's comment in this e-mail contrasts sharply with some of his comments in the reunions. Nevertheless, we feel that these apparent

contradictions and inconsistencies reflect the reality that any person's voice is socially situated, partial, and in progress (Ellsworth, 1992), and remind us to avoid essentializing participants and their views.

The NCCL alumni's decisions to attend particular high schools are guided by the decisions of previous years' alumni. Parents of NCCL students discuss among themselves which school is best for their children to attend. As Melinda, an NCCL teacher, mentioned,

> In the last four years . . . we have sent at least one girl a year to "Amy's" school. The first student to go there broke the ice and then other families started looking in to it. (By the way, that does happen at NCCL, parents communicate about the schools they visit and the schools their kids go to. There is a strong influence this way.) (personal communication, January 2006)

The all-girls school that Amy attends is described by NCCL teachers as one of the most academically rigorous of all the schools that NCCL students choose to attend. The girls who choose to attend this school are some of NCCL's "best students,"[4] and they are students who like to work hard.

NCCL prepares its graduates for the transition to conventional schools in a number of ways. Toward the end of eighth grade, NCCL organizes special activities and discussions to facilitate the graduates' transition. For example, eighth graders attend a "boot camp": an emulation of conventional school practices in which students have to address the teachers by their last names, experience lecturing and note taking, take tests, and do traditional school homework. In addition to this boot camp preparation, former NCCL graduates come to NCCL at the end of the school year to talk about their post-NCCL experiences and reply to questions of eighth graders who are about to transition to secondary school the following year. The parents of the NCCL alumni we surveyed insisted that their children were adequately prepared for high school by NCCL: "[My son] was totally ready for a rigorous HS curriculum…[He] was allowed to mature at his own pace, he was accepted for who he is, and his opinions were valued at NCCL."

RECOGNIZING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SCHOOL SUCCESS AND LEARNING

In our analyses of interview data, we examined patterns of similarities among participants and the differences they expressed, and these will be discussed further in the following sections. One overriding commonality

of all NCCL alumni, without exception, was the feeling that their transition from the innovative NCCL school to their more or less conventional high school was a negative experience imposed by the unavailability of an innovative high school. Even Cameron, who described his high school as the least conventional, shared this view, adding his own emphatic "I would!" to the chorus of affirmations when we asked the group whether they would have continued in NCCL had the school continued through high school (he had no problem disagreeing with his former classmates on other issues).

Over the course of the year, students did, to a greater or lesser extent, seem to adapt to their new school cultures and even found positive aspects (for example, many enjoyed the breadth of friendships and activities available in the larger high schools). Nevertheless, all remained critical of what they perceived as distracting and damaging academic practices of curriculum design (not relevant to student interests), teaching practice (focusing on learning isolated "facts" rather than coherent projects), and external grading criteria (which they considered to inhibit "real" learning). The NCCL focus on learning meant participating in a community of learners to engage in coherent "real-world" practices whose relevance and reward were in the practice itself. This approach to learning has been described as "authentic" learning (Rule, 2006). It is what the NCCL alumni seemed to understand as their own particular NCCL heritage that separated them culturally from their new conventional school peers and that was reflected in a tendency to use "us" and "them" terminology: "We want to learn, but they don't care, it's all about the test, the grade" (Cameron, RU1[5]). In the following sections, we will examine these understandings in more detail.

The NCCL alumni and their parents are aware of the essential differences in educational practices that they experienced in NCCL versus what they were experiencing in their conventional schools. NCCL teaching follows the successful guidance that people experience in their everyday practices with a focus on pragmatic achievement of a desired outcome (Lave, 1988). In this type of guidance, learning is peripheral and inherently connected to the students' interests at hand. The value of such learning is in the student's ability to achieve desired goals (Rogoff, Matusov, & White, 1996). In contrast, conventional teaching is about covering the mandatory curriculum; learning represented by the mandatory curriculum is viewed as central and not necessarily connected to the students' interests at hand. NCCL students believed that students from conventional school have difficulty understanding why they should learn something that is not officially credited by school:

For me, people didn't understand the theory of why you would learn if you didn't have to. That was hard for some people. Cause like, in my classes, if they don't have to do something, they won't do it. And the only thing that makes them do it is otherwise they'd fail. (Amy, RU4)

The value of such learning is accreditation and certification: Students are sorted according to their merits for future employment (Labaree, 1997).

Cameron: We all [NCCL alumni] know how to learn. We all know how to learn. . .

Robert (interjects): Everybody knows how to learn. . .

Cameron (continuing): I mean everybody, and then you go [to a conventional school]. . .

Robert (interjects): And *they suck life out of you.* . . [italics added]

Cameron (continuing): and they do the teaching a little differently, but you can still learn. And all the test is what you've "learned" from that [makes quotation mark symbols with his fingers as he says, "learned"]. And just cause the teaching is different, you can still get the information.

A2 [second author] interrupts: But you just say, "it's what you've 'learned'" with the quotation marks. And this is what my students will say, that you guys [aren't] good with that "learn" stuff because you really focus on learning and not [on] what . . . [school requires from you]. [kids laugh]

Cameron: It's not so much learning in the traditional sense because at NCCL you're more like engrossed in it and it's more interesting in the way that it's taught. Cause it's not as much like forced upon you, it's more like what your interests are. (RU2)

Sarah: I still like to learn, I like to learn as much as I do, I just don't like the way they try to make me learn.

Robert: *I want to learn, the question is whether I succeed or not.* [italics added]

> Amy: I think in some classes . . . I don't really care [about learn-
> ing]. (RU4)

These discussions about the difference between authentic learning and, as Cameron describes it, conventional school "learning," high-lighted a clear distinction made by these students between learning and school success. As Robert noted, NCCL students began to realize that success at what they considered to be learning would not necessarily be enough to succeed in school. The NCCL alumni notice that they still can learn in conventional schools, but this learning is harder, more stressful, and less enjoyable; learning is no longer self-motivated as it was in NCCL.

As mentioned earlier, it would be simplistic to imply that the NCCL students were unproblematically clear and confident in their positioning of "learning" in juxtaposition (and superiority) to "success." Amy, for example, in her criticism of a girl in her high school who "did just enough to pass, and no more," reflects the ambivalence of some NCCL alumni about the system of learning credits used in conventional school; "I'm so jealous because I don't get the grades she does, and I bet you I learned so much more than she did just in the past week, just because I bothered to pay attention" (RU1). In NCCL, learning was recognized but not cred-ited. In a conventional school, knowledge is credited from the beginning, even before actual student learning begins. If learning does not include the credited knowledge, it is considered a failure. If actual learning is out-side of the credited knowledge, it is not valued. Amy's jealousy suggests that she is struggling to reconcile these fundamentally different value systems.

The NCCL alumni's parents recognized that their children's participa-tion in NCCL provided them a love of learning—described by Amy's par-ent as a "quest for knowledge"—that has carried through to their present schools. The love of learning that the students experienced at NCCL is similarly seen by the parents as important to their children's lives, and this was reflected across all returned parent surveys and in their personal communications.

AMBIVALENCE TOWARD CONVENTIONAL MAINSTREAM SCHOOLING: CONFLICT BETWEEN BEING "A GOOD STUDENT" AND "A GOOD LEARNER"

NCCL alumni and their parents expressed ambivalence about their con-ventional school throughout the reunion interviews. On the one hand, they wanted to be good students to please their parents, their teachers, and themselves, to look "smart" for their classmates, and to promote their

own access to colleges in their future. On the other hand, being a good conventional student was, according to the NCCL philosophy of learning that these students embraced, often at odds with being a good learner, one who learns for his or her own interest and not for getting credits, good grades, or for pleasing the teacher.

The NCCL definition of learning assumes a personal agenda of self-actualization, or achievement of one's personal potential (Maslow, 1943), which may not be consistent with the public, other-defined, performative aspects of being a good student. This conflict between wanting to be a good student and a good learner was new for all NCCL alumni we studied. At NCCL, being a good student was the same as being a good learner, because NCCL defined academic success as successful authentic learning, setting learning and love of learning as the goal itself rather than a means to a measurable outcome. In conventional schools, academic success is mediated by performing well on extrinsic outcome measures that require additional skills beyond the learning activity itself (e.g., skills involving interpreting multiple-choice questions, rote memorization techniques, and image management). In this sense, NCCL alumni in conventional high schools faced for the first time the situation in which one can be a good learner (as defined by NCCL) without the skills needed to be institutionally defined as a good student. Their comments also reveal that they consider it possible to be a good student without being a good learner (as they define it).

A recurring theme running throughout the reunion interviews was the perceived danger in succumbing completely to either one of these demands: (1) becoming a good conventional student at the expense of losing interest in authentic learning and betraying NCCL values, or (2) focusing only on authentic learning and ignoring and neglecting grades and credits at the expense of their own peace of mind, relationships with teachers, parents (at least for some of them), and even with classmates, and jeopardizing their own access to colleges in the future. This tension of incompatible goals of schooling and their personal self-actualization as good learners put many of them in a state of uncomfortable dissonance and ambivalence toward their conventional schools. As one parent wrote when asked to reflect on advantages and disadvantages of conventional high school, (survey Question 7, see Appendix B), "We hope the main goal of his [high school] career isn't going to be 'getting the grade'!" The NCCL alumni try to "shake off" the burden of credentialism that their conventional schools try to impose on them. Some used bravado by saying that they "do not care," but some others noticed a deep negative impact of credentialism on them and their self-actualization:

Eddie: Well, caring about grades, and uh, I don't necessarily care, well, I didn't have a great marking period, well, as great as I wish I had, but that's OK cause it really doesn't affect me. You know, but grades, I don't care about them that much, my parents care about them.

Robert: Your parents want you to do good.

Eddie: But they kind of affect, like you get upset if you get a bad grade, but it doesn't upset my whole day . . .

A2: So why are you not upset about grades, even when they are bad?

Eddie: Because . . . grades . . . don't affect how I live my life [laughter, notable interest from Amy, Robert, and Andy; Robert nods]. I don't live my life around a letter. . .

Robert: That's true!

Eddie: A, B, C . . . it doesn't really matter.

Robert: What can a letter say about one's life?

Eddie: Exactly! It doesn't really affect me as a person.

Andy: Poetry, sheer poetry! (RU2)

This quotation provides an example of "excessive internal dialogism" (Bakhtin & Emerson, 1999). Words like *well* and *but* mark Eddie's response to another voice who apparently would challenge his stated attitude toward grades. Bakhtin argued that excessive dialogism is a marker of social marginalization. We noticed that some of the NCCL alumni were uncomfortable with our use of the phrase *betrayal of NCCL values* during our interviews. Thus, Sarah, one of the alumni, wrote in her response to our draft of the article, "I think it could be better phrased 'neglecting values learned at NCCL.' I just don't think *betrayal* is the best-fitting verb, personally . . . .'Betrayal' just seemed too strong a word" (personal communication, January 2006). We think that this discomfort may be evidence of an ongoing struggle by some NCCL alumni between

socializing in their conventional high school and retaining NCCL practices and values. Sarah's paraphrase of the definition of the term *betrayal* seems to relieve NCCL alumni of their responsibility for their choices and decision making.

In contrast, Amy tended to express a profound ambiguity toward grades. This ambiguity is evident in the following quote, in which both perspectives are juxtaposed. On one hand, she fiercely defended her NCCL "methods" of learning, yet on the other hand, she was tempted to, as she put it, "conform to the system":

> I'm concerned a lot about my grades, and that's just me personally. I worry about what I'm doing and if I'm able to fit into the system, because I want to be able to conform to the system and work within it . . . [but] *to a certain extent* [italics added]. And still be able to use my own methods of learning, or use what I've learned before [in NCCL]. So I am concerned about grades, and I do think it will affect me a lot on a daily basis. (RU2)

Amy desired to fit into the system "to a certain extent" while at the same time finding her own way through it. This ambiguity may in part be related to Amy's hope to be successful both institutionally and personally to promote her own love of learning. Amy's mother stated that her daughter is learning what the institution regards as successful, that it may be "absurd and hypocritical" but that it is part of what is needed to "play the games necessary for advancement" (response to parent survey Question 7; see Appendix B).

Some of our research participants believed that in their conventional schools, credentialism interferes in student social relations and affects their own self-image. This concerned Amy's mother—she was concerned about the effect of school on Amy's "self-esteem"—as well as Cameron:

> I do care about my grades very much. As much as I wouldn't like them to matter, because then if you do get a bad one . . . it affects you in ways that you wouldn't like it to. But, I mean they do affect you, if people do ask what your grades are and if you tell them they're bad then they get a certain impression of you. . . . And they do affect college and other things . . . but if they weren't to count for things it might be better. But . . . they do, so you kind of have to work hard to get good ones.

NCCL ALUMNI'S STRUGGLE WITH CONVENTIONAL MAINSTREAM
SCHOOLING—GRADES, CREDITS, TESTS: "IT SUCKS THE LIFE OUT
OF YOU"

NCCL students viewed this credential-based system as detracting from
intrinsic motivation and weakening other students' (and, to some extent,
also their own) desire to learn. This weakened desire to learn renders
learning "less fun," which makes learning harder and results in lower
grades, replenishing a cycle of failure. NCCL students maintained that
their peers were completely and exclusively extrinsically motivated. For
example, they reported that even when students in conventional schools
do really exciting learning projects and activities, they do not do these in
depth, but only for extra credit, and probably would not do it without the
teacher giving them extra credit:

> A2: But would people be doing that [extra work] without extra
> credit? If [the teacher] just says, "You can do this. And it will be
> fun."
>
> Sarah: Right. If you weren't getting points, they wouldn't do it.
>
> Cameron: Right. It's all about the points.
>
> Sarah: It's just points, it's grade, it's A B C, that's it. There's no
> depth to it. (RU2)

NCCL alumni perceive avoiding bad grades to be the primary motiva-
tor for their peers' study efforts in conventional schools rather than the
genuine interest that motivates NCCL students:

> A lot of other kids, I've just asked my classmates, they don't want
> to try unless they're going to fail the class. If they could just take
> the tests and get it over with they would, as opposed to just
> [learning for the sake of interest as in it was in NCCL]. This girl
> in home room in front of me . . . doesn't want to work for it
> unless she has to. So, for me the NCCL system was just so much
> better, because that wasn't even a consideration. (Amy, RU2)

Our participants reported that many students in conventional schools
had lost their interest in academic learning. They contrasted their peers,
for whom academic learning has stopped being their intrinsic motivator
for studying, with themselves. The NCCL students tended to blame the

grading practice itself for reducing intrinsic motivation for genuine learning: "If you do have grades for a longer period of time I think that you're prone to get bad grades, because it's just something you're used to, it's not fun anymore" (Sarah, RU2).

The NCCL alumni noticed that in contrast to NCCL, conventional schools expect failure in students and use grades to inflict some emotional pain on them to make them put more effort into their studies—to "stimulate" them to work harder. The ancient Greek and then Latinized word *stimulus* referred to a sharp spear that was used to prick mules to speed them up and to make them work harder (Oxford University Press, 1989). It seems to these students that bad grades are used in conventional schools in a similar way. NCCL students tended to refer to grades as upsetting and painful rather than necessary and ultimately good for them:

> Eddie: I got really upset the other day because I was talking with one of my teachers about how grades were horrible.
>
> A3 (third author): What did you say?
>
> Eddie: To sum it up, it was just me ranting on about how I don't like grades, and if everybody got As, there'd be no point in using the grade system, but they instituted it so people feel bad when they get a bad grade. (RU2)

In the parent survey, Derek's mother expressed particular concern about her son's performance on exams. She stated that he has more problems with exams than other alumni but at the same time argued that Derek would have been likely to have problems with exams even if he had attended a conventional elementary school. NCCL had provided Derek with a "strong sense of self" and a love of learning. She felt, in contrast, that if Derek had attended a conventional elementary school, he may have only had a slight advantage on tests, but at the expense of having "been miserable" (parent survey, November 15, 2005).

NCCL alumni described the conflict between being a good student in a conventional school and keeping their commitment to authentic learning and self-actualization as their NCCL legacy. They expressed a spectrum of attitudes and approaches toward this conflict. Some, like Eddie, choose to reject the notion of "a good student" altogether and said they did not care about credentialism practices imposed by their conventional schools (at least at the moment of the interview). Meanwhile, others, like Amy, tried carefully to balance the conflicting demands of being faithful

to NCCL values of self-actualization and genuine learning on the one hand, and playing the credentialism system on the other. It seems clear from the mentioned quotes that while balancing these two conflicting demands, these NCCL alumni strongly prioritized the NCCL educational values. Finally, there were former NCCL students, like Cameron, who probably have not yet found any satisfying solution for the conflict. Cameron and others like him struggled to reconcile their deep-seated beliefs about and attitudes toward what they considered to be genuine learning with their desire to succeed in their new test- and grade-driven school economy. Over the course of the year, as the initial shock and dismay wore off, students began to share their various coping strategies.

RESOLVING THE STUDENT-LEARNER DILEMMA: STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH THE ADVERSE SCHOOL TRANSITION

One of our main findings is that approximately 3–7 months after their transition to conventional high schools, all NCCL alumni had learned to prioritize their goals of coping with the conventional schools to solve the dilemma of choosing between being a good student and a good learner. The NCCL alumni's solution to this dilemma appeared to be a hybrid of their concerns about being good learners and good students. However, we found that these concerns were prioritized. Based on statements made during the reunions, we organized NCCL alumni's prioritization of coping goals according to the following pattern: The primary coping goal of the NCCL students was promoting genuine learning and self-actualization in themselves while participating in their conventional schools. Within this, there appeared two secondary coping goals, or "strategies of institutional survival" (Mac an Ghaill, 1988, p. 11): (1) protecting themselves from credentialism and meritocracy, and (2) establishing and maintaining relatively good institutional standing. Our patterning is based on the students' strong and unanimous nostalgic theme toward NCCL and similarly strong critique of their conventional schools. Although we extracted three distinct goals about coping with conventional schools, these goals are intertwined and often support each other in the NCCL alumni's strategies.

PRIMARY GOAL: PROMOTING GENUINE LEARNING AND SELF-ACTUALIZATION

The NCCL former students realized that they could not take for granted that their conventional schools would promote or even support their

authentic learning and self-actualization as described by Rogers and Freiberg (1994). In response to this problem, they tried to find strategies that could help them fully manage their own learning and that would help to promote genuine learning and self-actualization in the subjects taught in school. In a way, they felt forced to take full responsibility for their own education. So far, we have identified the three following strategies that NCCL students used.

Finding interest in the subject

Some NCCL alumni said that they learned and performed better in their conventional schools when they found interest in what they were being taught:

> Eddie: Anything memorable? Well, I do better in the classes that I like . . . I think you do a lot better in the classes that you like. . . . Like surprisingly, math is my second best subject. Which is really weird [laughter]. Because . . . it's not something I plan to follow in my career choices. (RU2)

Eddie's comment suggests that he found that having an intrinsic interest in the class itself, even when the class was not related to extrinsic goals (such as a career), helped him achieve school success.

NCCL former students noticed a synergy coming from their interest in a taught subject and the teacher's instruction even if this instruction was not terribly sensitive or aimed at promoting authentic learning and self-actualization. Motivation researchers have long emphasized the importance role that interest plays in the onset and persistence of goal striving (Schiefele, 1991). Beyond simply having interest, however, NCCL alumni also noticed that the synergetic process of having interest in the taught subject and instruction can promote and expand their own area of interests and thus help to expand their self-actualization even further:

> Cameron: It is easier to get better grades if you like what you're doing [a few kids agree] . . . if you really like it, then you find yourself doing stuff with it in other places, and you get kind of engrossed in it and you enjoy it more. And when you're learning about it, like when the teacher's talking about something and you're taking notes or you're doing a project or whatever, you're not just doing it to get the grade, you're doing it because it's fun. You get a better grade then because of that, and you're learning more in the process, and you do better on the test in the future

because you know the information better because you enjoyed learning it, because you like it. (RU2)

Noticing the role of interest in promoting genuine learning and self-actualization, some NCCL alumni actively sought to promote such interest in themselves even when they did not have interest in a subject area to begin with. For example, when A2 related his own (university) students' concerns that NCCL students would quickly lose interest in learning when placed in a conventional school, Eddie explained, "No. I think, no, I'm always interested in learning. I mean, learning is fun when you have fun [laughter] and if I don't have fun I make my own fun [in the subject]" (RU2).

Asking for more difficult, but more meaningful, work

This strategy seems paradoxical at first glance because NCCL former students often complained about an overwhelming amount of schoolwork. However, the additional schoolwork requested by NCCL alumni was different from conventional schoolwork, which was often aimed at "covering" credentialized curricula. The trick, they said, was to convert schoolwork into authentic learning. NCCL alumni requested more schoolwork, but this is schoolwork that they consider to be aimed at genuine learning and their self-actualization. Derek said, "Well, I have a teacher, my history teacher. . . . She doesn't teach us, like anything. . . . Now that I realize that I wish. . . I would have switched into Honors History, because I'd be doing good in that. I think I'm doing fine in that class, but. . . " Here Sarah cuts in to warn Derek that Honors History requires a lot of work, but Derek persists: "I don't know, she doesn't teach us anything. And even if I get as much homework, or maybe more homework, I'd be fine as long as I got taught something. Because it's unsatisfying that I don't get taught anything really." (RU1)

It appears that NCCL alumni tried to put effort into schoolwork conditionally, based on the nature of that work. To the extent that they felt the work promoted genuine learning and self-actualization, they were more inclined to put in extra effort. In contrast, when they saw schoolwork as busywork, they were much less cooperative. Some said they even switched to a minimum effort strategy, as we will see later.

Keeping double books

Another strategy aimed at promoting genuine learning and self-actualization involved separation of studies done for school from studies

done for authentic learning and self-actualization. NCCL alumni some-times voluntarily supplemented the studies required for credentialism with studies they pursued out of personal interest:

> Amy: NCCL kind of teaches you to be able to think outside the box. . . . I can think of things that other people aren't thinking of. And sometimes it's kind of off on a tangent, or it just got me thinking of something else. And I want to be able to use that but use it so that it shows on my test. I want it to show on my tests that I am learning things, even though maybe I'm not just following the textbook. And I want to show that I can answer the questions you want me to answer, but I can also answer the ones that maybe I was just curious about.
>
> A2: So you're sort of doing double-booking, right? You're doing something for yourself as well as doing something for the system.
>
> Amy: Yeah. And it takes a lot longer that way. But it's more fun.
>
> A2: Yeah, so why are you doing that? [kids laugh]
>
> Amy: It's more interesting for me. I'm really liking my World Civilizations class . . . because [the teacher] does kind of let you go off and explore what you want to learn about. But then he does test you on what you also need to know. . . . And that's why I like that class, because I'm able to go with what I'm curious about . . . while still being able to take a test on something that he feels I need to know. (RU2)

Amy's description of her own learning as "a tangent" indicates that she has already begun to recognize the primacy of the official curriculum, a construct that had been absent from her NCCL schooling. Her rather wistful wish that her own authentic learning might count as a credential and her admission that this double-booking takes longer suggest that she recognizes this to be a less than ideal situation, yet she seems resigned: Notice that her favorite class is one in which she is allowed to pursue her own learning while still being tested according to institutional standards.

SECONDARY GOAL A: PROTECTING THEMSELVES FROM CREDENTIALISM AND MERITOCRACY

In a (perceived) meritocracy, a social system that unequally distributes

resources based on individual worth (McNamee & Miller, 2004), a competitive and credentials-based school system provides a measure for worth. Unaccustomed to this kind of schooling, the NCCL alumni expressed concern that the emphasis on seeking extrinsic credentials in a conventional school might inhibit their desire for academic learning and self-actualization. They felt overwhelmed with schoolwork that they often didn't find meaningful. Because they considered the school's systems of rewards and punishments to affect their social network, they felt considerable pressure and temptation to conform to it. Given these concerns, NCCL alumni rather quickly developed strategies to protect themselves from the potential of credentialism and meritocracy to distract them completely from their personal goals of genuine learning and self-actualization.

Resistance to school practices and values

Some NCCL alumni refused to take very seriously the grading practice promoted by conventional schools because they felt that this practice distracted them from learning; instead of studying for the sake of learning, the practice forced the students to study for grades.

> Eddie: You know I [get Bs] and Cs and everything, and I get Fs sometimes, but I just don't really care that much. As long as I have a good grade average, that's fine with me.

> Derek: I think personally that . . . if I'm going to learn then I'm going to learn. I don't really care, if I know that I'm trying . . . I don't really care what the grade is.

> Eddie: I look at my grade, I see what it is, I put it in my folder and I shut the folder. (RU1)

The former NCCL students tried to keep their attention on genuine learning and not be distracted by those activities and practices that they considered to have little to do with authentic learning.

> Eddie: I really don't care about homework very much. I mean I do it. . . . But I talk on the phone with Amy sometimes, no offense, and she's . . . freaking out about losing her biology books and religion book and whatever, and I'd just [say] "I lost my book." . . . . Technically my parents ask me to care more about

my high school grade, but . . . an 87.5, which is a B-, . . . is
perfectly fine with me. (RU1)

As we have seen earlier, this apparent resistance only went up to a cer-
tain point. NCCL alumni did care about their institutional standing in
their conventional schools and are rather skillful at maintaining it.

Relaxing

Many NCCL alumni remarked that conventional school is stressful; "I
treat myself like [I'm] in a contest every day to survive, and if I can sur-
vive a day, then I know I can survive the next day, and so on, and I can
survive the week" (Andy, RU4). As Amy described, this stressful pace can
interfere with learning:

> Amy: I get so much homework in one night that I don't have
> enough time to do all of it very thoroughly, I have to kind of cut
> back on the time I allow myself to get it done, or it won't get
> done! And that can't happen. . . . Whereas at NCCL, they made
> sure it was spread out so you could dedicate enough time to it so
> you could get it done to the best of your ability. (RU4)

When asked to discuss their own coping strategies and provide advice
for future NCCL graduates, the alumni suggested including relaxing in
planning school activities such as homework:

> Andy: I would actually say, you know, keep calm. Mak*e sure you
> keep a calm state of mind.*

> Sarah: I suggest they take one night a week off at least in which
> they don't . . . do anything whatsoever. Because you need one
> night of calmness when you don't do anything.

> Tina: Sleep is invaluable. Get sleep!

Making friends for coping with school hardships

Given their experience with the NCCL learning community approach, it
came as no surprise that NCCL alumni were aware that their classmates
can provide support in terms of points of reference for judging their own
difficulties, emotional support, and guidance. This was reflected in

Eddie's advice to upcoming NCCL graduates: "Get involved in stuff, you've got to have friends. Because if you don't have any friends, then you're in trouble [various comments of assent]" (RU1). Later, Cameron explained the value of peer support in more detail, and his peers agreed:

> I think making friends helps you a lot because if they're in your classes, then you can say "Oh yeah, that test was hard, this class is hard," and you can relate with somebody. And you aren't feeling, like, "Oh, I'm the only person who feels this way, everyone else is smarter than me 'cause they know it." And you realize that everyone else is struggling or they're doing well, too, and it's, you got people to talk to about it, you know. And you've got people to sit with at lunch, and you're not like alone. It's nice to know people and be friends with people like just in a mental sense to kind of keep you focused. (RU2)

Their version of supportive peer relationships implies emotional connections and cooperation rather than competition. In describing the advantages that NCCL alumni have over other high school students, Derek's mother noted, "It already shows, he's already helping his friends get through high school, already giving them advice he learned at NCCL."

SECONDARY GOAL B: ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING RELATIVELY GOOD INSTITUTIONAL STANDING

As described earlier, many NCCL alumni expressed a certain disdain for the institutional practices that they considered to be at odds with their own innovative sense of authentic learning. Yet even when they claimed that they "don't care" about grades, tests, and homework, each of them seemed to establish individually the limits of not caring. In NCCL, being a good learner automatically means being a good student because authentic learning and self-actualization are the primary focus of institutional recognition. Students do not have to make additional efforts and develop special strategies to be good students at NCCL beyond simply being good learners. In contrast, in conventional schools, NCCL alumni perceived a gap between being a good learner and a good student. As some of their earlier quotes demonstrate, many NCCL alumni were aware that authentic learning and self-actualization do not necessarily bring institutional recognition in their new schools, and they have also noticed that many of their high-achieving classmates do not care much about their own self-actualization through learning, at least not in school.

One of the questions we explored in the reunion interviews was why NCCL alumni were concerned at all about their institutional standing in conventional schools, given their very different values and beliefs about learning. Our interviews revealed their concerns about parents' insistence on having good standing in their schools, their future access to colleges and to desired professions (and probably desired lifestyles), pressures from their own social peer networks, and their past experience of being good students in NCCL. NCCL alumni articulated several strategies of how they establish and maintain their relatively good standing in their schools.

Pleasing the teachers: Getting "their" requirements right

In the famous Soviet movie *We'll Live Till Monday* (1968), directed by Stanislav Rostotsky,[6] about a conventional high school, one high school student articulates well the main strategy of how to become a good student in a conventional school. He calls this strategy "guess and please," meaning that to become recognized as "a good student" in a conventional school, students have to guess what the teacher wants from them and please the teacher by doing it. These kinds of strategies have been described in U.S. schools (Jackson, 1968). Some NCCL alumni articulate a similar strategy:

> Andy [in advice to future NCCL alumni]: Make sure that you know all of your teachers and try as hard as you possibly can to find out how they are on certain days, what they're expecting, what their mood is, and use that to your advantage against them [other alumni laugh, agreeing]. (RU4)

> Amy: Well, you need to know the requirements with the teacher . . . find out if they're testing you on the first half of the chapter or the whole chapter, whatever. And then from there, I usually read my textbooks over, even though they give us notes. . . . So I do . . . get points taken off because the teachers . . . don't think it's right. . . . Sometimes I have to [say], "I got this right out of the book. I need my points, you know?" . . . I like to put it in my words, and I understand it better if I can see it the way I see it. (RU2)

Some parents felt that learning to guess and please (even "bad" teachers) would provide a useful life skill: "It's good to experience bad teachers so he can learn how to deal with the situation and still succeed"

(Derek's mother, parent survey, November 15, 2005). Others expressed concern about this kind of manipulation. Allen's parents, for example, wrote "[Our son] is very grade conscious now and more willing to feed teachers what he thinks they *want* to hear" (parent survey, December 5, 2005). However, alumni discussion suggested that they were not likely to become shallow manipulators, what Jackson (1968) referred to as cynically "school-wise" (p. 35). They seemed to be trying to find a balance between sincerity (i.e., genuine learning and self-actualization) and pragmatic institutional and social survival (i.e., having relatively good institutional standing in their new school).

Becoming likable to the teachers

Some NCCL alumni seemed to be keen observers of social relations. They learned that teachers' "niceness" does not necessarily translate into quality teaching:

> Derek: At the beginning of the year . . . the people that I thought I would like, they ended up being really bad teachers. [One] was . . . really friendly and nice. But it doesn't matter if you're a nice person if you're a horrible teacher. He wouldn't teach. He would just like sit in the class and tell us about his life and then give us really hard tests. (RU4)

In NCCL, being a good learner, helping others, being recognized by the school, having good relationships with adults and children, and having solidarity and community are closely intertwined. In conventional schools, with their focus on credentialism and meritocracy, all these things are not only fragmented but also compete with and corrupt each other. The existence of social manipulation strategies as cultural practices in conventional schools is supported by the observation, as early as the 1930s, that they were an integral part of the "sociology of schooling":

> "Handshaking" is the milder of these, and it consists merely of trying to establish a personal relationship with the instructor, with a view, perhaps, to influencing his grading. "Chiselling" is similar, but more extreme, and more definitely unfair. It comprises all kinds of bluffing, flattery, and sycophancy, and any sort of device which will make the student stand out in the instructor's eyes. . . . One student who had always made high grades without really acquiring a corresponding amount of knowledge

was asked how he did it. He replied, "Well, I'd sit in the class every hour and take in everything that was said, and then, just before the hour broke up, I'd ask the instructor a thumping good question." He chose his time well, and his instructors were undoubtedly grateful for the last-minute fillip that he gave to the waning discussion. (Waller, 1932, p. 363)

Establishing good relations with the teachers may help to promote the student's good institutional standing even despite the student's violation of the teacher's requirements (i.e., merits and credits). Some NCCL alumni reported using this strategy, whereas others recognized it:

Eddie: The one thing about high school that I do know is that if the teacher likes you, you do a lot better. Like my English teacher likes me because I got a zero one time and I didn't do my homework twice. [Laughter] . . . But I told her I'd write her a story, along with my journal entries, and then . . . do a good presentation, too. She likes me, and a lot of my other teachers like me.

The NCCL alumni's ability to work well with authority figures was cited by parents as an important part of what they learned from NCCL. Amy's mother noted that her daughter has an "ability to analyze and think about [the] educational environment, [a] willingness to establish positive relationships with authority figures" and a strong self-image, self-confidence to see teachers as "educational partners," which furthers her "self-confidence and positive world view" (parent survey, November 18, 2005). All parents mentioned interpersonal skills among the advantages offered by their NCCL experience.

Getting into sports and clubs for socialization

In her famous ethnographic research, Eckert (1989) showed that many middle-class children use school academic, sport, and nonacademic clubs and programs to establish special social networks that promote credentialism and meritocracy in ways recognized and supported by conventional schools (see also Lareau, 2003). Many NCCL alumni participated in school governance. Participation in these clubs and programs promotes a credentialized reputation in conventional school that provides access to important practices and institutions (e.g., college). These are also an enjoyable and rewarding part of going to a large school, a fact that NCCL teachers, alumni, and parents recognized (if only because

students get to know a wider range of people). The alumni included participation in official school activities in the advice they offered to future NCCL graduates:

> Eddie: I'd say get involved in an after-school club or a sports program, because I was involved in the soccer program, and I had been doing that for a few weeks, so I knew the people who were on there. And I'd sit at the table with them at lunch . . . so it wasn't like I got to school and was completely uncomfortable because I didn't know anybody.

> Melinda (NCCL teacher): Preseason helped you.

> Eddie: Oh, yeah! Also, if you . . . start getting involved in a club then you start knowing people. Because, I don't know, if I didn't do that then I probably would have just known Paul [another NCCL graduate]. And I don't see Paul very often because he's basically in a lot of different classes than I am. I don't know, so it's like from the soccer friends I was comfortable, then I got more friends and more friends and now I have tons of friends. (RU2)

HOW CAN THE NCCL ALUMNI EXPERIENCES HELP US UNDERSTAND BOTH INNOVATIVE AND CONVENTIONAL SCHOOLING?

Closely following 13 NCCL alumni as they experienced that critical first year of transition from an innovative elementary school to a conventional high school has provided insights that we feel are valuable both for the immediate NCCL community (and similar innovative learning communities) and for those involved in conventional school settings. Let us reconsider in turn the concerns that inspired this research:

1. Is conventional schooling the only (or even best) preparation for conventional schooling?

Recall that our research was in part inspired by the concerns of some of our education undergraduate students and colleagues, who wondered if NCCL alumni would be ill prepared for the unfamiliar system of non-negotiable credentialism and competition endemic to conventional schools. Our students sometimes proposed that children might be better prepared for conventional high school, conventional university, and even

conventional employment (which they characterized as sharing the same system of competition and credentials as school) by being immersed in this kind of school culture at an earlier age. These comments were often made by those students who appreciated, enjoyed, and supported the NCCL innovative system (some of them had conducted their teaching practicum at NCCL) but were concerned about the fact that children would not be prepared for the "real world."

We were not too surprised to find that all our participants saw this transition as a negative and dreaded event, but we were pleased to see that all our participants did ultimately adjust, more or less happily, to their new school environments within their first year of the new conventional schools. This supports teachers' reports of earlier NCCL internal follow-up studies on their graduates, as well as informal word-of-mouth social communication, that NCCL graduates are generally quite successful in their further education.

Furthermore, this study highlights the active and collaborative nature of this adaptation. It suggests a critique of the common-sense assumption that the best way to prepare for something is to experience it. NCCL alumni seemed to enjoy a special kind of double vision, an insider-outsider perspective that allowed them to achieve a critical distance from conventional school culture. This critical distance, we argue, allowed them to make considered choices about which aspects of credentialism and competitiveness to take seriously, in which context(s), and to what extent. Although our data suggest that this is hardly a clear and unambiguous process, these students do seem to run less risk of defining themselves and each other by institutional failure because they do not see this failure as inextricable from their self-concepts as learners.

2. What strategies can be suggested to prepare NCCL alumni for conventional high schools?

NCCL teachers, parents, and students were less concerned about the ultimate success of graduates than some of our undergraduate students and colleagues because they had access to the NCCL internal follow-up studies on graduate progress. However, they did see this transition as a potentially hazardous and painful experience and wanted to know how it can be facilitated for future NCCL alumni.

Our study provides both insights into particular strategies and a model for future implementation. Students often described their strategies in terms of specific advice for future alumni (for example, taking honors courses, taking regular time off from studying, joining clubs). These, along with our participants' initial and later impressions, provide some

guidance for future alumni, who might otherwise focus exclusively on the more obvious adaptation strategies (such as how to take notes and how to take and "beat" multiple-choice tests) addressed in the NCCL boot camp. This advice from those who have gone before is more personal, comprehensive, and socially oriented, including personal stories of success and failure and strategies that go beyond the academic (e.g., how to make friends, how to become popular with teachers).

Part of the immediate NCCL community at the time of the research had direct access to the advice and strategies of this cohort of participants because they attended discussion meetings and read and commented on drafts of the research report. Furthermore, we plan to make the published version available to the school. Perhaps more useful, though, was the initiation of the new cultural practice of regular alumni meetings at the school. The NCCL now has the option of continuing, in some form or other, the tradition of the new graduates returning periodically to eat, drink, laugh, meet with younger children, and discuss their experiences in their high schools and their strategies for adapting.

These same practices and insights should be more broadly applicable to any innovative school concerned with transitioning graduates to more conventional practices, whether secondary/tertiary education or the work force.

3. What insights can this research provide for the understanding and improvement of conventional schooling?

As educational researchers, we have a particular interest in equity in schooling, particularly regarding the systematic underachievement of minority children in conventional U.S. schools. We wondered what insights we might derive from the outsider perspectives of mostly White middle-class children who had been educated in a very different cultural framework from that shared by U.S. schools. Are there ways in which minority students who are at risk of being failed by conventional U.S. schooling can learn from our students? Are there lessons for these schooling institutions themselves in our study?

In some ways, our NCCL alumni express some of the same attitudes toward school that have been highlighted by some scholars as characteristic of unsuccessful minority students (Ogbu, 2003)[7]: They are openly critical of, and in some ways resistant to, institutional authority, they define themselves in opposition to school norms, and they tend to minimize effort put into school assignments. As successful students, they do not, in fact, fit the relatively simplistic model of school success that we have taken for granted as long as institutional schooling has been

around. Over 85 years ago, the "serious student" was characterized in these terms:

> They do not look at school as a place of joy or pleasure. There is no exuberant enthusiasm displayed. There is no zestful approach to the school situation. The children attend school with consciousness that it will help them out in later life. School is not pleasurable for itself. It is important for its future promise. (Tenenbaum, 1940, p. 676)

As recently as 2003, Ogbu recommended that students, particularly African American students, adopt a similar, purely instrumentalist view of education by rejecting assumptions that learning should be relevant and teachers should be caring in favor of "the conventional classroom instructional requirements for paying attention, doing classroom and homework, studying and working hard [that are] desirable and necessary for making good grades" (p. 279). This approach provides minority students with limited options for success: Either unconditionally accept school as it is, or fail. Our study suggests that this uncritical and purely instrumental attitude toward conventional schooling might not be the only path to success and invites a reconsideration not only of the assumptions underpinning conventional schooling but also those underpinning our strategies for successfully managing it. It also implies a critique of the tendency for innovative schooling to be available only to those who possess the financial means to attend private schools, whereas interventions for low-achieving minority and working-class children tend to be more, rather than less, conventional. We have discussed in more detail elsewhere the particular implications that research into innovative schooling might have for minority student success initiatives (Smith, Hayes, & Matusov, 2005). In particular, we suggest that efforts to improve minority school performance should be modified to take into account the effect of the institution of conventional schooling itself—its competitive, credentialistic, and meritocratic nature—an aspect that has, to date, been underanalyzed (for similar critiques, see Ferguson, 2000; Flores-Gonzalez, 2005; Foster, 2005).

Our analysis of NCCL alumni adaptation suggests that a certain critical ambivalence toward credentialism and competition can be part of a healthy strategy for school success. This may be an important lesson, especially in the current era of increasingly high-stakes standardized testing. Although as educators we might not be able to make decisions about how competitive and credentials driven our curriculum is, we might be able to find ways to help students adopt the kind of critical double vision

developed by the NCCL alumni to manage both authentic learning and successful credentialism.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Newark Center for Creative Learning Web site: http://www.ncclschool.com.
2. http://www.ncclschool.com/program/graduation.htm.
3. All students' and teachers' names are pseudonyms.
4. Please notice this competitive, meritocratic term used by the NCCL teacher. We also find apparently similar competitive, meritocratic sentiments in some of the parents' statements, like this response to an earlier draft: "Also, X [the private co-ed Catholic high school of the parent's child] is arguably more academically rigorous than Y [another private all-girls Catholic high school attended by some NCCL alumni] (not, as stated in the paper, that it may be as rigorous. . .), if you feel it is necessary to make that distinction" (personal communication, February 2006).
5. RU1 means transcription from ReUnion number 1 with NCCL alumni and teachers.
6. As far as we know, this film is not currently available in English. This is our translation of the original Russian title.
7. This study specifically targets middle-class African American youth, thus eliminating the conflation between "race" and social class endemic to these kinds of studies.

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APPENDIX A: FINAL (4TH) REUNION INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Questions for NCCL Alumni Meeting #4: June 15, 2005
Transition to current school

1. Do you think the transition from NCCL to your current high school is over or not?

2. How many of you went to the NCCL graduation? What did you talk to the graduates about then? Did the graduates themselves ask you any questions? What were they?

3. Those of you who did not go to the graduation, raise your hand. What advice would you have given the graduates? What questions do you think the graduates would have asked you?

4. How did your impressions, opinions, and experiences of school change over time?

5. Did you have any early impressions that you think turned out to be wrong?

6. Did you notice any changes in yourself and in relationships with other people (classmates, friends, parents, teachers) that happened this year?

7. How did the strategies you used to deal with your current school change over time?

8. What were some early strategies that you had to deal with in your current school that didn't work, and how did you change them? Are they working now?

9. Are you more or less interested in learning than a year before (in school)? Why?

10. Was there anything easy/interesting/fun in the beginning, but then later you found hard/uninteresting/boring? (or vice versa).

11. What summer plans do you have now? What summer plans did you have last year? How did your summer plans change?

Feelings/thoughts/impressions about current school and NCCL

12. How do you feel being in high school now that your first year in high school is over? Would you say you enjoyed school, so-so, hated it this year?

13. Is there something you're now missing now that you're not in school? What is it? Is there something you're not missing? How does that feeling compare to when you left NCCL last year?

14. If Martians contacted you and asked you to describe your school, how would you describe your current school and NCCL? What would the similarities and differences be?

15. What were the "shortcuts" you made when dealing with NCCL and your current school?

Learning and motivation

16. In the last meeting, Amy called traditional school "something you have to do, not something you want to do." On a scale of 1–10, how well do you think this matches your feelings of your current school, 1 being not at all, 10 being absolutely? [on blackboard]. On a scale of 1–10, how well do you think this matches NCCL?

17. What subjects were you motivated and interested to learn at NCCL? And now in high school?

18. What subjects were you not motivated and interested to learn about at NCCL? And now in high school?

Relations with other students, teachers, parents: Current school and NCCL

19. What are the similarities and differences between the relations between kids at NCCL and your current school?

20. What are the similarities and differences between the relations between students and teachers at NCCL and your current school?

21. What are the similarities and differences between the relations between yourself and your parents at NCCL and your current school?

22. What differences and similarities did you notice between NCCL and current teachers?

Ambitions (college, future life directions)

23. Would you like college to be more like your current school or NCCL? Why?

24. What would you like to learn in college? Do you think your current school is preparing you well for this? Do you think NCCL prepared you well for this?

25. What do you want to do with your life? Do you think your current

school is preparing you well for this? Do you think NCCL prepared you well for this?

Identity and role models

26. Amy suggested in the last meeting that you have to fit some image to get through the day, while in NCCL you can be yourself. How many of you feel like you have to do this in your current school? What kind of images do you have to enact? How successful or not are you in an effort to make yourself fit these images? How comfortable are you with this? Why do you need to do that? Do you think it's forced on you or voluntary?

27. Who is your role model in life and why? What is it that you emulate in that person?

28. Do you think that you will be a role model for your own future kids? If so, why? If not, why not?

29. What questions did we forget to ask you that you would like to share with all of us?

APPENDIX B: PARENT SURVEY

Dear parent:

As you know, we have been regularly meeting with your daughters and sons to learn about their experiences transitioning from NCCL to a more conventional high school. We have learned a lot from them, and now we would like to learn from your experiences as parents. Please answer the following questions with as much detail as possible. Your responses are anonymous, but as a whole, what we learn from this study will be made available to NCCL parents and teachers as part of our collaborative project to help students transition to high school.

Your name:

Child's name:

High school attended:

1. What do you do to support your child in high school?

2. What did you do to support you child at NCCL?

3. In what way(s) is your relationship with your child's high school similar to your relationship with NCCL?

4. In what way(s) is your relationship with your child's high school different from your relationship with NCCL? If you said that there are differences, why do you think these differences exist?

5. In what ways do you think NCCL students are similar to other high school students? In what ways do you think they are different?

6. What benefits do you see in your child's NCCL experience for your child's life later on (going to college, career choices, etc.)? What disadvantages do you see?

7. What benefits do you see in your child's high school experience for your child's life later on (going to college, career choices, etc.)? What disadvantages do you see?

8. Do you think your child has advantages over children who did not attend NCCL, and why do you think this way?

9. Do you think your child has disadvantages over children who did not attend NCCL, and why do you think this way?

10. If NCCL had a high school, would you send your child there? Why / why not?

11. If you could start all over again, would you send your child to NCCL? Why / why not?

12. In what ways do you think NCCL students are similar to other high school students? In what ways do you think they are different?

13. In what ways do you think NCCL has shaped your child?

14. What benefits do you see in your child's NCCL experience for your child's life later on (going to college, career choices, etc.)? What disadvantages do you see?

15. In what ways do you think your child has changed through his/her experience in a traditional high school?

16. What benefits do you see in your child's high school experience for your child's life later on (going to college, career choices, etc.)? What disadvantages do you see?

17. If you can tell us anything you think is important to our study but that we may have forgotten to ask you, please write that here.

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