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## *Real School: a universal drama amid disparate experience*

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Variations on the phrase 'The American High School' adorn the titles of popular recent reports on reform (Boyer 1983, Cusick 1983, Powell *et al.* 1985, Sedlak *et al.* 1986, Sizer 1984), expressing a common belief that they address a single institution. American high schools are indeed alike, strikingly so in many important respects. But they are also very different in other important respects. Reformers have paid little attention to their differences; some ignore them, while others mention them almost reluctantly, hurrying on to describe what is common among schools. Still, the differences among schools are crucial to their daily practice and to their effects upon students, and so to reform. This paper addresses the interplay of similarity and difference in American high schools, regarding their similarity, rather than their difference, as problematic and in need of explanation.

### **The data**

The chapter arises out of a study of teachers' working lives undertaken at the National Center of Effective Secondary Schools. In that study we took a close look at a set of teachers in 'ordinary' or typical high schools spread across the social class spectrum. We chose eight schools in midwestern metropolitan areas. Six were public schools and two were Catholic. Of the six public schools, two were in high, two in middle, and two in low SES areas. One of the Catholic schools served a predominantly middle class clientele and the other a predominantly working class one. We chose schools varying in social class as sites to study teachers' work because previous research in sociology and anthropology suggests that differences in the social class of communities and student bodies have serious implications for the life of schools (e.g., Anyon 1981, Bowles and Gintis 1976, Connell 1982, Heath 1983, Lubeck, 1985, Weis 1985, Wilcox 1982, Willis 1977).

We visited each school in teams, spending more than two weeks, and a total of twenty or more person days in each school.<sup>1</sup> At each school, we followed diverse students through a school day, spent a whole school day with each of eight teachers, and interviewed those eight teachers in depth, as well as ten others more briefly. We also perused and collected a number of documents and statistics about each school. While our fieldwork in each school was too brief to be genuinely ethnographic, the strength of the design lay in its comparative potential. We attended classes and interviewed teachers in situations that were formally parallel across the eight diverse schools. We could see their differences in clear relief.

### **The common script**

We chose the sample of schools we did because we expected to find some important

differences among them. Our visits to the first schools quickly gave us dramatic evidence that our expectations were correct; participation in the varied schools provided us radically different experiences. The buildings varied from resembling a college campus, at suburban Maple Heights, to resembling a fortress, at low income, urban Charles Drew. The use of time varied from intent and taut to relatively relaxed. Maple Heights allowed students to go home for lunch or to roam its spacious lawns in small groups after eating, while the two low income urban schools, Grant and Drew, kept all but the main door locked and security guards at Drew checked students' picture identifications both at the door to the school and at the entrance to the lunch room. More important, the content and tone of classroom discourse varied widely, as did the style of interactions between students and teachers.

While this variation riveted our attention as we moved from school to school, the discourse of the reform movement – which the Center hoped to address – assumes commonality, even sameness, among schools. As we puzzled over the discrepancy between our diverse experiences and the reformers' assumption that schools are standard, we came to see that we were looking at different aspects of schools' lives. The reform movement emphasizes formal structure and technical procedures in schools. In these respects, the schools we saw were indeed very alike. The meaning of that structure and technology, the cultural assumptions of participants about their activities, and the place of the school in relation to the society and to children's life trajectories differed significantly among the schools we saw.

As we watched the schools in daily action, and talked with the actors who gave them life, it seemed that the schools were following a common script. The stages were roughly similar, though the scenery varied significantly. The roles were similarly defined and the outline of the plot was supposed to be the same. But the actors took great liberties with the play. They interpreted the motivations and purposes of the characters whose roles they took with striking variation. They changed their entrances and exits. Sometimes, they left before the last act. The outlines of the plot took on changing significance with the actors' varied interpretation of their roles. Directors had limited control over their actors; only a few were able to get the the actors to perform as an ensemble that would enact the director's conception of the play. Directors often had to make the best of the qualities the actors brought to their roles and to interpret the play consistently with the players' abilities and intentions.

Just the same the script was there, and the play was in some sense recognizable as the same play in all the schools. More important, the script was extremely important to some of the actors and some of the audiences. In fact, it was where the production was hardest to coordinate and perhaps least easily recognizable as the same play that was being produced at schools where action meshed more smoothly, that the school staffs were the most insistent that their production followed the script for 'The American High School', varying from others only in details.

We found similarities in our schools that paralleled those recently noted by several writers (e.g., Goodlad 1984, Sizer 1984). There was little variation in school schedule and all schools had long hallways with nearly identical classrooms lined up along them. Class size and teachers' normal assignment to meet five groups of students for instruction five times a week varied little. The scope and sequence of the curriculum differed only in detail from school to school, though the number of sections available in subjects like advanced foreign language or vocational education varied significantly. Students were expected to attend all their classes promptly every day. There were extracurricular activities after school, or occasionally during the last hour of the day.

Textbooks were ubiquitous. We saw the same textbooks in use where students' scores