

The Trend Toward Unsustainable Education Practices

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As many U.S. public schools shift toward a standardized approach to education that values outcome over process, students are left to perform instead of prosper. Once a place for students to procure knowledge, cultivate passions, and explore interests, many schools are now fostering environments of competition, stress, and discontentment. The consequences are immense. The high-achieving students often display entitlement and view relationships transactionally. For those whom the system confines, achievement feels impossible and pointless. The current trend in education requires immediate reevaluation, but the remedy will be determined only after reflection. Denise Pope (2000) offers a study of public schooling in *Doing School*, detailing the experiences of two contrasting students, Eve and Berto; based on Pope's findings, I argue the primary purposes of schooling are higher-education and workforce preparation, assessment and appraisal, and categorization of student potential. Ultimately, the implications of these purposes are increased pressure on students, a growing achievement gap, and the reinforcement of inequality.

The growing tendency for public schools to prioritize college and careerism directly creates greater stress for students. At Faircrest, this manifests in the form of the "grade trap": success is so narrowly defined that satisfaction is often unattainable (Pope, 2000, p. 5). Students are convinced—likely due to the outside pressure from parents and teachers—that they will only be successful, wealthy professionals if they "earn credentials from prestigious universities" (p. 5). Considering the grim reality of acceptance rates at selective colleges, students like Eve feel that there is no alternative to complete academic perfection. When academic perfection becomes uncertain, students resort to traditional cheating or atypical methods of "gaming the system." For Eve, this is exemplified in her ability to convince administrators for favors that give her a

competitive advantage over her peers (p. 44). In a system that rewards high grades and tangible indications of success, students must either “do school” or suffer the consequences of non-conformity (p. 4). The pursuit of college dreams also exacerbates the mental health crisis in schools, as seen with Berto. When students have anxiety, learning disabilities, or difficult home lives, this form of competition drives unhappiness and rejection. The greater the emphasis on careerism, the less deep learning and engaging students do.

In terms of assessment, the subjectivity of expectations contributes to a widening achievement gap. Teachers typically rely on assignments that advantage one type of student while disadvantaging another. For example, Eve’s experiences at home and with countless activities prepared her to excel in public speaking during class presentations (p. 47). For Berto, his anxiety and lack of experience with public speaking made class presentations incredibly uncomfortable. Furthermore, since assessment style is catered toward middle-class students who have the time to focus on homework outside of school, teachers often assume that students like Berto are simply lazy or disinterested. However, Pope notes that Berto tried harder than nearly all of his peers; yet, Bero received comparably low grades because he was unwilling to “manipulate school processes” or cheat on assessments (p. 141). Through Pope’s explanation, it becomes apparent that if the purpose of school was more explicitly on the depth and retention of knowledge or the ability to effectively solve problems cooperatively with peers, Berto would be far more successful than Eve. Thus, the implication is that schools play a significant role in the societal understanding of achievement and value. Since schools assign more value to assignments that are often inherently easier for middle-class students, low-income students are at a disadvantage as soon as they enter the public school system.

Finally, public schools have essentially begun to categorize students based on their perceived potential. In essence, students are made to feel like they are placed into boxes from which they are unable to escape. For high-achieving students like Eve, the box is simultaneously positive and negative. On one hand, it means that they receive the most praise, support, and attention from the school. On the other hand, they see no room for failure. Since teachers and parents hold these students to such a high standard, they set their own standards just as high. They often lose sight of the meaning of their work: “[Eve] wants to believe that she has chosen this route to success freely, but she recognizes the outside pressures that have influenced her” (p. 49). On the other end of the spectrum, students from difficult backgrounds are often made to feel like their capacity for achievement is limited. These students receive less resources and personal attention, and teachers tend to be less trusting of them. In Berto’s case, that meant that he had to simply endure an accusation of cheating, while Eve’s connections to administrators likely would have prevented any repercussions even if she had been accused. The result of this cycle is a system that is built around high-achieving students and leaves everyone else behind. The only possible way to keep up is to “work ‘smarter’ in addition to harder,” which is out of the question for honest, well-intentioned students (p. 140). In the end, the lack of upward mobility in schooling reflects the broken promise of upward mobility in U.S. society.

The U.S. has created a public school system that prioritizes careerism, assessment, and categorization. As Pope reveals, these flawed values are devastating, leading to unnecessary stress, competition, performative schooling, and social inequality. Although Eve and Berto are case studies, their experiences are becoming increasingly universal across the U.S. To ensure that students live balanced lives and remain healthy and happy, schools must immediately reevaluate the path forward for education.

References

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