CO-CONSTRUCTING LOW ACHIEVEMENT:
A STUDY OF A SENIOR ENGLISH CLASS IN AN URBAN HIGH SCHOOL

English 4/ Essay Writing: the first days

Homework assignment given the first day of school*:* Write me a letter telling me about yourself—your history as a student; your family life, social life, work life, extra-curricular activities, plans for the future. Then tell me what I need to know to be an effective teacher for you—what do I need to do to meet your needs as a student*?*

Since the last time I've been in your class [in ninth grade] I have had a lot of drama happen in my life starting with my mothers death. That was a hard time for me I often find myself thinking of her. Then it was my uncle. It just seem like I had to much happening to me. I was not sure that I would make it this year with these two big losses I had gone though in less then 3 months. (Guadalupe)[1]

By fourth grade things got worse and I committed an act of self mutilation for the first time. Taking a piece of broken glass, the words 'WHY ME' were carved into my left arm from elbow to wrist. For the next several years my life went up and down. I attempted suicide six or seven times and was taken by ambulance to a psychiatric hospital twice. I am currently struggling with my depression but with the help of much loved friends as well as a therapist, psychiatrist, and a bit of medication, I'll hopefully be well on my way to a less dramatic life. (Adam)

I am a rowdy and proud Latina. I dislike when people come up to me and ask "-Are you Mexican? Do you speak Mexican?" Yo soy Salvadorena y Peruana y yo hablo espaniol. (Maritza)

I have a flaw now ever since 9th grade and that is being able to trust people. That is a really big problem in my life right now. I wouldn't say I have friends, but I would say I have associates who if one day I trusted them would be considered a friend. But that comes back form having a good friend robbed me by gunpoint and pull the trigger but luckily the bullet was jammed. So that is why I have the trouble with looking into the eyes of people. (Dwayne)

I have to start out by saying I use to be very good student a couple of years ago. Right now I'm just the type that just gets the job done and thats fine with me. I don't like doing extra work unless I need too to pass a class. I use to get A's and B's all the time when I was a freshman and sophmore and the beginning of junior year. I don't really know what happened to me. I think it's because I got my car. . . . This is why I am going to night school. I've got to lazy and haven't doing what I've been suppose too. (Vhan)

I have applied to diverse colleges from Harvard—a definite long shot but worth a try—to Humboldt, a definite acceptance. (Theo)

My future is unknown. I hope it will hit me in the face. (Chrissy)

One-third of the students wrote that they had been programmed into the class by their counselors rather than elected it themselves. “I did not ask for this class but I will try to make the best of it” (Lateefah). Those who had chosen the class, gave a variety of specific reasons: (a) they had not wanted to do the summer work required for admission to AP English [2]; (b) they wanted to prepare for college writing tasks or wanted to improve their personal writing skills; (c) they were interested in reading and writing non-fiction.

It was clear from the letters that students had very different agendas for the class in terms of writing—from Charley’s concerns about being prepared for college writing to Chrissy’s desire to write personal stories because “writing is a good way of expressing feelings and thoughts.” It was clear that students came to the class with very different reading experiences: for some the topic of reading brought up preferences about non-fiction over fiction and lists of books they had read in and out of school, for others it brought up fears of being ridiculed and admissions of having read very little.

I would like you to know that I read books only when its concerning my grade and that I am a very slow reader. I would like you to know that I am shy to . . . read in front of people because I am afraid if they are going to laugh at me and hurts me deeply and makes my fear worse. (Nailah)

I have never really complited a hole book. I allway stop. I just hope to read and complete a interesting book in this class. The only one book I have read completely from front to back is ‘Romeo and Juliet.’ I love to read Shakespers. (Maritza)

It was also clear that students had come to the class with a wide range of writing competencies: from Phillip who wrote in well-crafted compound complex sentences to Ray who began his letter with “Dear ms, cone,” rarely capitalized the pronoun “I,” and showed little proficiency with sentence structure and paragraphing. Their advice was

clear as well. They wanted me to be patient with them and push them—a sentiment best summed up by Bakari: "Stay on my case but not all the time. Make sure I do my work and talk to me if I need it."

The class, one of several new senior electives, was the result of the most recent step in our English department's detracking reform efforts. Those efforts had begun more than a decade before with our programming of all ninth graders into carefully-balanced, detracked, college prep English 1 classes (Weinstein, et al, 1992) and our opening up AP English classes to all seniors willing to do summer reading and writing assignments (Cone, 1992). Over the next few years we initiated a self-selection model of detracking that asked tenth, eleventh, and twelfth graders to choose their English class—college prep or honors—based on the amount of work they wanted to do. As our reform evolved, we constantly examined our detracking model to look for flaws and ways to change it to better serve our students. Once we saw, for example, that after ninth grade, students retracked themselves into the tracks they had been in in middle school, we eliminated the self-selection option for tenth graders and moved to detracked, carefully-balanced sophomore English classes modeled after our ninth grade classes. As we worked on that change, we also discussed the possibility of eliminating the honors English 3 class. When that seemed unfeasible—given a growing opposition to detracking by "elite" parents (see Wells & Serna, 1996) and the reality that university admissions boards place a premium on honors English classes—we actively sought ways to recruit students (especially African American and Latinos) for English 3 honors classes, ways to support their success in the class, and ways to bring the English 3 college prep curriculum into alignment with the English 3 honors curriculum. And we detracked teachers: all

teachers who teach AP and English 3 Honors classes now also English 3 non-honors and/or English 1 and 2 classes. Most recently, we voted to eliminate the generic college prep English 4 and offer in its place five college prep English 4 electives with specific foci: Contemporary American Lit, Essay Writing, Journalism, Shakespeare, and Women's Lit.[3] In making our choice of course offerings, we purposely chose not to offer courses exclusively focusing on literature by African American, Latino, and Asian American writers because of our long-held commitment to teaching multicultural literature in all English classes at all grade levels. As a leader of the detracking reform and as the teacher who had volunteered to teach the Essay Writing class, I had spent time planning curriculum and looking for ways to incorporate into it many of the texts and activities I use in AP English Language and Composition—just as years before I had incorporated into the curriculum for my detracked ninth English class curricula that had previously been offered only to ninth grade honors students.

As excited as I was the first week of school about my students and the class, in the next weeks I grew increasingly less enthusiastic. After the fourth week, I saw the class as "difficult"—made up of students who (with very few exceptions) came with an intention to do the least amount of work for the highest possible grade (even when that grade was a D), who resisted new or unfamiliar tasks, who did little or no homework, who ignored due-dates and deadlines, who cut class when they wanted, who assumed they could argue or negotiate almost all grades, assignments, and attendance policies, and who resisted efforts to break down racial, social class, and achievement level divisions.

It is my purpose in this study to draw as vivid a portrait as I can of that first English 4/ Essay Writing class so that teachers of similar classes and urban school

reformers in other schools will see as I have come to see that that "difficult" class—brought almost to a standstill by low-achievers and reluctant workers—did not come about by accident. It was constructed over time by the school as an institution, their teachers, and the students themselves. That is, the school by its placement of ninth and tenth graders into low-level classes, the teachers by their low curricular and behavioral expectations for students, and the students by their poor work ethic all collaborate in the co-construction of low achievement. Admittedly the construction does not begin when the students enter ninth grade: many of them come to high school with well-developed identities as low and non-achievers. Once they are at our school, however, most programming and curricular decisions are based on that negative identity and almost everything works to reinforce that identity. The way co-construction played out in the school lives of a majority of the students in English 4/ Essay Writing came to be (a) the impetus to examine my own teaching of the class and (b) a determination to both draw attention to the process of co-construction of low achievement in my department and at the school at large and to call for an examination of how to end that process.

Review of the Literature on the Construction of Low Achievement

Although it is not always framed as such, there is a good deal of research on the construction of low achievement in schools and the roles teachers, schools as institutions, and students play in that construction.

In his seminal study on the effects of teacher expectation and school success, Rist (1970) focuses on a kindergarten classroom in which the teacher, after only a few days' observing students' "behavior, degree and type of verbalization, dress, mannerisms, physical appearance, and performance on the early tasks assigned during class" assessed

the likelihood of her students' academic potential and divided them into two groups—"fast learners" and "slow learners" (p. 419). Once the initial placement was made, the teacher provided differentiated instruction and curriculum "with the group designated 'fast learners' receiving the majority of the teaching time, reward-directed behavior, and attention" (p. 413). The academic gap between the two groups widened as the school year progressed and widened even more the next two years as the students' first and second grade teachers—relying not on their subjective judgment about the students' potential but on "a variety of informational sources related to past performance as the basis for classroom grouping" (p. 414)—assigned them to groups similar to ones they had been in in kindergarten.

Other researchers' studies of elementary classes—especially reading groups in those classes—corroborate Rist's findings on the deterministic nature of grouping decisions (Weinstein, 1984; Hansen & Farrell, 1995), the differentiated curriculum provided to students in low and high groups and the effects of that differentiation (Allington, 1983; Fisher & Hiebert, 1990; McQuillan, 1998), the hierarchical interactional patterns among students in different groups (Hiebert, 1983; Weinstein, 1984; Schofield, 1989), and the effect of group placement on students' perceptions of intellectual ability in general and their own academic potential (Weinstein and Middlestadt, 1979; Vasquez, 1988; Ogbu, 1994). Most researchers who study reading group placement emphasize that besides the fact that they receive qualitatively inferior instruction in subject matter that is key to school success, students in low reading groups suffer from their placement because of the way they use that placement to construct a sense of themselves as learners. Rosenholtz and Simpson (1984) contend that students

make sense of their daily classroom experiences—the feedback they receive from their teacher and classmates, the tasks they are assigned, the ways they are evaluated—and use those experiences to construct a sense of their ability.

The kind of differentiated curriculum and treatment put into place in elementary school via reading groups continues in secondary schools via tracking mechanisms, mechanisms that according to Oakes (1987) are "nearly universal practice in secondary schools" (p.130). Like the researchers who point out the negative academic, social, and psychological effects of inflexible reading groups, tracking researchers maintain that students in low tracks receive qualitatively inferior educations compared to students in high tracks in terms of the quality of their instruction and instructors, class atmosphere, resources, and teacher expectations. And, as is true in reading group assignment, track placement is caste-like in character. "Once placed, [low track] students do not learn as much as comparably skilled students in heterogeneous classes; and they have less access than other students to knowledge, powerful learning environments, and resources" (Oakes, Wells, Yonezawa, & Ray, 1997, p. 44).

Besides the academic inequities, Oakes and other researchers (McLaren, 1994; Serna & Wells, 1996; Oakes, Wells, & Jones, 1997), point out the connections between track placement and race and socioeconomic status. In schools with racially diverse populations, "[s]chool tracking practices create racially separate programs that provide minority children with restricted educational opportunities and outcomes" (Oakes et al, 1997, p. 44). "On the academic side of the curriculum, low-income and non-Asian minority students disproportionately take low-level and remedial courses, while whites

and Asians tend to dominate enrollments in advanced and honors classes" (Oakes & Guiton, 1995, p. 4).

Construction of low achievement is not limited to individual teachers, groups of teachers, or specific policies in individual schools. Research indicates that there are whole schools that construct low achievement for the majority of their students and, most typically, those schools are in urban or inner city areas. Maeroff (1988) describes urban schools across the country as places where student attendance rates are "atrocious"(p. 32), where "what passes as work in many courses is embarrassingly simple, and the level of the discussion and the papers written by students (mostly in class, because few do any homework) are not truly on a high school level" (p. 33), and where students are so isolated from school cultures where high achievement is the norm that they "cannot appraise clearly the work they are doing and do not realize that it is not on the high school level" (pp. 35-36). In decrying the academic and fiscal poverty of urban schools, some researchers (Wilson, 1987; Oakes & Lipton, 1992; MacLeod, 1995) contend that there is little hope for city schools until the U.S. attends to the problems of poverty and unemployment in cities. Other researchers (Apple, 1982; Kozol, 1990; Giroux, 1992; Anyon, 1997) suggest that the differences that exist between schools in urban areas and schools in suburban or rural areas are purposeful and that schools "reproduce the unequal social relations found in society-at-large so that children are prepared differently based on the perceived workplace roles of their present class position" (Kretovics & Nussell, 1994, p. 251).

Most often students are positioned in the research literature as recipients of others' construction of low achievement. Perhaps out of a fear of blaming the victim, for

the most part researchers are reluctant to frame students as active participants in constructing their low achievement, and yet they (Maeroff, 1988; Macleod, 1995; Lipman, 1998; Anyon,1997) often describe student behaviors and attitudes that make clear that students do play an active role in that process. Various researchers offer reasons for students' participation in their low achievement. Mahiri (1998) suggests that low achievement is in part a result of students' resistance to classroom environments and curricula that do not acknowledge or value students' experiences, youth culture, and communicative styles. Metz (1989) contends that "the basic common script for 'The American High School'"(p. 77) leads to frustration and alienation for some students, particularly students from low income families.

> Especially at students in the poor neighborhoods, students cut classes or cut school; at these schools there were chronic problems with severe tardiness. Once in class . . . students often carried on social conversations or read or wrote on unrelated projects, or sat limply staring, or put their heads down and slept. . . . In a few classes some students carried on a running guerrilla warfare, teasing and badgering teachers in various ways. (p.78)

MacLeod (1995) argues that some inner city students actively resist school (both attending school and working in school) because the kind of achievement ideology schools promote denies the social and economic barriers and realities urban students face. Other researchers (Covington and Omelich, 1979; Hiebert, 1983; Rosenholtz and Simpson, 1984) theorize that much of the resistance to learning exhibited by low achievers is attributable to the fact that having internalized the cues teachers and the school give them about their low academic potential and having constructed ability concepts based on those cues, students resort to behaviors that indicate learned helplessness or a need to protect their sense of self worth. Covington (1984b) argues that

for many students having to put forth effort on an academic task is proof enough of low ability (if you're really able, their thinking goes, you wouldn't have to try), but to put forth effort and fail would be proof positive that you lack ability. Thus, says Covington (1984a) for many students, effort is a "double-edged sword": "Obviously, the most direct way to avoid school failure is simply not to participate" (p. 83).

Much of the conversation in school reform efforts over the last forty years has focused on how to end the destructive teacher, school, and student behaviors that result in the construction of low achievement. Almost all of that conversation is couched in the language of equity but, as many researchers point out, equity in public education is far from being a reality.

> Currently, educators are under enormous pressure to make systemic reforms and restructure schools so that all students will reach high academic standards. This pressure resonates with the cultural ideal that schools serve all students well. Yet this policy exists side by side with persistent inequalities along race and social class lines as low-income students and students of color experience fewer resources and less powerful learning environments— conditions about which current policy says little. (Oakes, Wells, Yonezawa, & Ray, 1997, p. 43)

While academic excellence and equity may be viable dual goals in some minds, reforms that are "fundamentally redistributional across race and social class lines"(Oakes et al, 1997, p. 44) meet powerful opposition. Nowhere is that opposition more apparent than in detracking reforms. To preserve their position of privilege and access to the best classes, resources, and teachers, "elites" (Serna & Wells, 1996) use their cultural capital to frame detracking reforms as a mechanism that "neglect[s] 'gifted' students or us[es] resources 'meant' for one group of students on other, 'less deserving' students (Oakes et al, 1997, p. 55). If that kind of opposition doesn't dissuade reformers, elite parents threaten to

abandon the public school system. Rather than face that exodus or face down the threat of that exodus, reformers turn (or are forced to turn) their attention to less threatening "equity" reforms.

Little wonder, then, that Rist (2000), notes sadly that despite decades of reform, little has changed in the last 30 years in U.S. public schools for low income students and students of color. "The sobering reality is that when it comes to both color and class, U.S. schools tend to conform more to the contours of American society than they transform it. And this appears to be a lesson that we are not wanting to learn" (p. 260).

The Setting and the Study

El Cerrito High School is one of five comprehensive high schools in a school district that includes five cities, five unincorporated areas, and covers 110 square miles. The school draws its population from a wide and economically diverse geographical area. Feeder schools include elementary schools with the highest achievement test scores in the district and schools with very low scores. The student body is racially diverse. According to data for the 2000-01 school year, 39% of the students are African American, 27 % are white, 20% are Asian, 11% are Latino, and 2% are Filipino, less than 1 % are Pacific Islanders. Typically 1425 to1450 students are enrolled in the school. For the past decade and a half, the school has been the site of various external-initiated and internal-initiated reforms (Cone, 2000, unpublished dissertation). Since the spring of 1997, the school has received funding as a Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC) school.

In the English 4/ Essay Writing class there were a total of 29 students. Two students left after the first term and one student enrolled at the beginning of the second term. There were 16 girls in the class, 13 boys. The class was racially diverse with 11

African American students, 9 white, 6 Latino, 2 Middle Eastern, and 1 Southeast Asian. The highest (weighted) GPA in the class was 3.9, the lowest was 1.2; eleven students in the class had a 3.0 or higher GPA, six had 1.8 or lower.

For this study, I collected a variety of student writing: essays, personal narratives, and reflections on their work in the class and their lives as students. I also collected transcripts of grades, attendance records, and lists of seniors by class rank. For purposes of comparison, I collected data on three AP English classes I taught the same year. Those data included lists of grades, attendance records, and various pieces of written work. I conducted taped interviews with three students in the class and two AP students. I chose interviewees on the basis of their ethnicity, work in the class, and the relevance of their written reflections to the focus of the study. Those interviews—which lasted from 45 to 90 minutes long—were conducted on my conference hour or after school. As soon as possible after each interview, I transcribed the tape and gave the student a copy of the transcript and asked for feedback. I also conducted short, informal interviews with students on my conference hour. During those interviews I took notes which I did not share with the interviewees. I used my daily lesson plans as a quasi-journal and wrote regular comments to myself in the margins of the plans.

It is important to note that in this study I limited myself to students' school lives. In choosing to limit the scope of the study to what happens inside the school that affects academic success or failure, I do not discount the important influence of the lives students live outside school. I am keenly aware that many of my students' lives are profoundly affected by poverty, violence, loneliness, and inadequate or non-existent

mental and physical health care and that those issues weigh heavily on academic performance.

THE WHAT OF CONSTRUCTING LOW ACHIEVEMENT

English 4/ Essay Writing: First Term [4]

After the first two writing assignments—the letter to me and a self-introduction students read from the "author's chair"—I assigned students Anne Tyler's *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*. I chose the book because I saw it as an accessible text (both in subject matter and in reading level) that I could use as a vehicle to introduce my ideas about reading as transaction (Rosenblatt, 1938) and for teaching effective strategies for making meaning of text (Brown, Palincsar, & Purcell, 1986; Rabinowitz, 1987). I also saw it as a book whose somewhat complex characters and nonlinear structure would prepare students for more complicated books I intended to teach later in the year such as Marquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* and Morrison's *Sula*.

I began the book much as I begin works of fiction in my AP class. We read the first chapter aloud in class, stopping at regular intervals to make sure everyone understood what was happening. At the end of the chapter I asked students to write about what they knew so far about the characters, plot, and setting and what they thought was going to happen in the book, When they finished writing, I called on students to read their responses and discuss them. I then assigned the second chapter for homework—34 pages—(a somewhat hefty number judging from students' reactions) and told them there would be a quiz on the reading. I explained that my purpose in giving regular quizzes was (a) to make sure that everyone kept up with the reading and understood the book as we went along and (b) to beget exciting class talk—the questions would ask for

interpretation and analysis not mere recall and would be the basis of our discussions. I gave over the last fifteen minutes of the class for silent reading so that students could get started on their homework. Few students began reading. Most put away their books in backpacks or purses, started talking with their neighbors, or put their heads down to go to sleep. Wait, I said. I was giving time to read, not time to talk and sleep. Most retrieved their books but few read.

The next day, I gave a quiz. When we began our discussion of the questions, it was immediately clear that only about half the students had done the reading. After the discussion and a review of what had happened so far in the book, I began reading aloud, stopping regularly to make sure all students were understanding. Again I left time at the end of class for students to begin reading the assigned pages. By the fourth day on the book, more than half the students read only when we read aloud in class. “This book is stupid,” they told me. “This book is boring.” When the book was finished, I gave students an overall grade on their quizzes and assigned them to write a paper on the character they saw as the strongest. I had them break into discussion groups according to their choice of character. I hoped that in working together, those who had not read the book but who had been in class for our discussions and class reading of the book might manage to gather enough material to write a paper.

As I looked over my grade book at students’ quiz grades on the book (13 F’s) and essay grades (14 F’s), I reflected on what had gone wrong. Why had some students—even students whom I knew from ninth grade were capable of reading the book—done little or no reading outside the class? Why had students who had done the reading and knew I was counting on them to participate in the discussions been so

reluctant to talk? Why had so few students taken advantage of the opportunity to salvage their grade by working with their small groups on the essay assignment?

To recapture the excitement of the first week of class, I returned to a focus on writing. This time, I asked students to write an argumentative essay. The assignment is one I regularly give in AP English that requires students to observe a class (with the teacher's permission) for a full 90-minute period and then write a description of the class that makes and defends a claim about some aspect of the class (i.e. class atmosphere, academic content, physical setting) and incorporate into the piece specific rhetorical and stylistic devices. I give the assignment for a variety of purposes: I want students to learn to write with an argumentative edge, to write with an awareness of audience (they read their essay to their classmates and give a copy to the teacher whose class they observed), and to practice using various sentence forms, punctuation, and figurative language to enhance the sophistication level of their prose.

That assignment, too, was a failure. Some students cut the day of the observation; fewer than half of the students brought multiple copies of their various drafts to writing response groups, only 13 students handed in final drafts. As with the final products on *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, I was filled with disappointment. And, again I took responsibility for what had gone wrong: I should have asked students to incorporate fewer rhetorical and stylistic strategies in their papers; I should have corrected the first drafts myself and then had students rewrite their papers before having them go into writing response groups; I should have given clearer directions about the kinds of revision feedback they needed to give each other in response groups.

From that essay, I moved on to two other kinds of arguments: a three paragraph argument-on-an-argument model and a personal argument based on a five-part model (introduction, concession, pro points, and conclusion). Although I focused the majority of my teaching for several weeks on these two forms of argumentation, I taught other lessons as well. I presented strategies for reading non-fiction and had students practice those strategies by analyzing a variety of op ed pieces and feature articles from the *New York Times*, local newspapers, *Vibe*, *Newsweek*, and *Psychology Today*. After correcting a set of arguments I typed up “style sheets” of various grammar, mechanics, and usage problems I had gleaned from their essays and then taught mini-lessons on correctness and style. I taught *Monkey Bridge* (Cao) and showed film *Regret to Inform* (Sonneborn). I asked students to choose a “comfort” level book they wanted to read and discuss in small literature circles.

None of these assignments worked well. Most students didn’t consult the style sheets when they revised their papers and thus continued to make the same errors they had made in previous essays. Even though I assigned fewer pages per day and took more time with *Monkey Bridge*, it was as unsuccessful as *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*. The book group activity looked promising at first but fizzled out. Several students came with book suggestions such as *Coldest Winter Ever* (Sister Souljah), *Friday Night Lights* (Bissinger), *Peal My Love Like an Onion* (Castillo) and promoted their books. Every student signed up for a group, but on the first day they were to bring their book, only about half the students did and, although by the third day all students had a book to read, at the end of the week the majority of the students had stopped reading.

Reflections and Resolutions at the End of First Term

By the end of the term, I felt totally frustrated by the resistance most students in the class had to work, a resistance that was reflected in their thin writing portfolios and the high number of zeros, D's, and F's recorded in my grade book. Interestingly, the fact that many of them were doing poorly or failing did not, for the most part, affect their relationship with me. Quinetta, for example, came to my class on my conference hour to chat, seemingly unaware that I might find it strange to "conversate" with her about cheerleading, her senior ball dress, and her boy friend when she had cut the day before or had not handed in the last paper. Other failing and near-failing students came during my conference hour to talk with each other or me, surf the Internet, or do homework. None of these students seemed embarrassed about the fact that they were doing poorly or failing the class. When I talked with them about the fact that they hadn't handed in a particular assignment or needed to find a book to read, they would appear contrite. "I know, I know, Ms. Cone," or "I'm just lazy. I'll be better. Promise." But they did not change.

It seemed as if many of my students—especially the ones who came to class every day and did little or nothing—were oblivious to the consequence of not doing work. Only at grade time did they appear to see the cause and effect relationship of work and grades, but for the most part, the cause of their bad grades was the work I was assigning not the work they were not doing. Why did I, they asked, choose such boring books? Why couldn't they write short stories and fantasy or science fiction instead of arguments? Why didn't I show more movies? Why didn't I let them do extra credit projects to improve their grades? That kind of talk lasted only a few days—just before and just after progress reports and first term grades. Then most students who had expressed concern over their grades—even those who had earned F's—returned to not doing work.

While the class was to my eyes a failure, I need to make clear that that perception would probably not have been the perception of a visitor to the class. In fact, a visitor might have been impressed with the class: the curriculum was demanding, there were student essays, poems, and photographs on the bulletin boards, the class was orderly, the students were playful with each other and friendly to the teacher. The resistance to work might have looked like senioritis. But for me, who had come into the class anticipating a new and exciting senior English elective, the class was a failure. The clear mark of that failure was that I had lost all sense of fun with the class. I felt humorless and uncreative. I had no sense of lightness in teaching the class, no sense of freedom about changing lesson plans midstream inspired by exciting ideas that came up in the middle of lessons.

When I thought about the second term of the class, I felt torn. On the one hand, I felt like succumbing to the resistance. If students wanted to watch films, fine, that's what we would do. Thirty pages too much to read? Make it 15. Homework onerous? Okay, no more homework. On the other hand, I trusted the instincts that had led me to focus on teaching exposition and argumentation and strategies for reading fiction and non-fiction. As frustrated as I was with how the class was going, I saw that my students were telling me something I needed to know—that their resistance was far more complicated than merely not wanting to work.

I spent the weekend between terms, reassessing and planning, deciding what to toss out and what to keep. Among the things to jettison: style sheets, writing response groups, whole class books. Instead of teaching whole-class lessons on usage and mechanics, I would work with individual students on correctness issues. Instead of peer response groups, students would work on revisions with a partner or with me. Instead of

my selecting books to teach to the class, students would select the books they wanted to read. (Here my thinking was that it was more important that they develop the habit of reading or the beginnings of the habit than that they read a particular text—no matter how brilliant that text.) More than anything, I was determined not to let my class get destroyed by the inertia and resistance to work that had marked the first term.

English 4/ Essay Writing: Second Term

During the first week of the second term I reviewed the essay forms I taught first term. My purpose was to explicitly build on what they knew. I then assigned an in-class persuasive argument about a school rule students believed needed to eliminated or changed. For two days we worked through the various parts of the essay—introduction, concession, pro paragraphs, conclusion. As they completed each part, I read it and gave suggestions. With the less proficient writers, I stressed form, logic, and correctness; with the more proficient, I stressed teasing out the complexities of their arguments and expanding their ideas into multiple paragraphs. At the end of each day's class, I collected their work and assigned no homework. On the third day, I had students work in partnerships on a final draft of the paper. At the end of class, I collected their papers and graded them that night. Because I wanted to spend no more time on the assignment, I did not ask any student to revise a paper based on my corrections.

From that essay, we moved on to reading short pieces of fiction and non-fiction and writing in-class analyses of them. With these lessons as a foundation, I began to plan units. I showed a series of short films *Gap-toothed Women*, *I Am Not a Freak*, and *Eat a Bowl of Tea* and asked students to "read" them and write about them. I taught a unit on short stories that dealt with provocative social issues—Bambara's "The Lesson,"

Hecker's "The Birthday Party," and Proulx's "Brokeback Mountain" and asked students to summarize, interpret, and connect the stories' themes to their lives. I gave regular practice in writing in-class arguments on newspaper articles and op ed page essays. I asked students to write personal pieces patterned after short prose and poetry models and to read their writing from the author's chair. I did a second documentary film unit using *The Thin Blue Line* and *Incident at Oglala*. On literature circle books, I gave students a great deal of latitude: I made clear that I didn't care which books they chose as long as they read them with at least two other people in the class and they finished their books in a prescribed number of days (usually eight to ten).

Gradually I regained my sense of fun with the class. Things were by no means perfect: students still missed class, still didn't do homework, still had to be reminded to stay awake in class, still complained. But bolstered by my resolution at the end of the first term, I found myself focusing on making sense of which students were having trouble with specific lessons or parts of lessons and enlisting their assistance in helping me make that sense. I regularly asked them to write about themselves.

Tell me about your history as a math and science student in high school—which math and science classes have you taken? how did you do in those classes? do you see yourself as a strong student in math? why/why not?

Tell me about where you fit in at this school—who do you hang out with/ where do you eat lunch? how would others classify you?

What are the most and least worthwhile classes you have taken in high school and why?

About a month before the end of the term, I assigned a final project that I hoped would give my students a meaningful way to reflect on their high school years. I asked them to write a series of reflective pieces about experiences in high school and their thoughts as they were preparing to leave: a statement of identity, a personal credo, a

description of an El Cerrito High senior based on E. B. White's "Everyone knows what democracy is" model,[5] three personal narratives/ vignettes inspired by songs that had meant something to them over the last four years, and a "found" poem from signs posted around school based on the public-signs-as-coded-messages passage from Toni Morrison's *Jazz* (p. 64). I stressed that (a) all pieces had to go through three revision drafts—one with a classmate and two with me, (b) all pieces had to be typed or neatly handwritten in ink, (c) the finished product had to be bound and artistically presented, and (d) the due date was firm—I would accept no late papers.

From then on, except for days when I wanted all students to read a particular short story or news article or watch a particular film, the class became a writing lab with students working on various parts of the final project. The change in the class from the first term was palpable. The class was busy and serious. Good attendance on the day of the senior ball (a day students typically cut so they can to pick up flowers and tuxedos and have their hair cut or styled and their fingernails painted) told me how seriously many students were taking the assignment.

Ten days before the last day of the term, as is required of all senior teachers, I wrote out "senior F cards"—notices to counselors (who then notify parents) that a student is unlikely to pass a class required for graduation. I made out eleven senior F notices, one for each student who had earned a D or F the first term or was earning a D or F at that point in the second term. Of the eleven, only four were actually in danger of flunking, but I worried that if I did not give them an F notice they might decide to stop working.[6] Reaction to the F notices came swiftly. The students who had gotten notices but who were working hard on their senior project came immediately to check that they would

graduate if they got in their senior projects. Two students' mothers responded. Ray's mother worried that relatives from out of town were coming for graduation; Jaime's mother (accompanied by an older daughter who served as translator) worried that if he didn't graduate he would not get to join the Navy in July—something she saw as necessary to get him away from gangs. I told both mothers that their sons had to come to class every day (up to that point a problem) and had to complete the senior project.

On May 29th, twenty-five students handed in final projects. At the end of the term, three students in the class did not graduate, but only Ray failed the class. To the very end, he did not believe he had to do the work and neither did his mother. She called two days before graduation to ask if there was any make-up work he could do that would allow him to graduate. On the very last day seniors were in class, Ray came to protest the unfairness of my giving him an F. "That's not right—to flunk someone who comes every day." (In fact his claim of being there every day was far from true: the first term he missed 15 days out of 45 days, the second term he missed 16 out of 42 days.)

A Summer's Reflections

Once school was out, as preparation for teaching the class the coming year, I began to make my way again through the senior projects and other pieces of writing I had collected from my students' portfolios. Some students' work indicated they had learned almost nothing. When that thought came to me, I recalled the words of a veteran teacher at an English department meeting in early October. "These kids haven't learned anything," she said, as she launched into a description of seniors who were coming to class late, cutting on test days, not having first drafts ready, not working in response groups, not doing assigned reading. At the time, I wanted to say to her, "But they *have* learned!

They've learned they can do all these things and *still* pass. And it is we who teach them—explicitly and implicitly—that there are ways to "get over" in school, ways to circumvent assignments and rules, ways to pass with a minimum of time and effort. In my class, for example, Phillip and Zack had learned that they didn't have to work in groups with low-achievers: if they didn't take the group seriously or if they complained that they did all the work and never got good feedback, I would let them work by themselves or with other high achievers. Dwayne had learned that he could refuse to read all books except Harry Potter books and that I, relieved that he was "at least reading," would not insist he join a group. Nat had learned that he could cut class regularly and still earn a B because he was a talented writer and that I would accept first draft writing from him because what he produced was significantly better than what most other students produced after several drafts. Guadalupe had learned that by being rude and disruptive, she could win an easy exit out of my class—to the lavatory, counselor's office, or library. And, as much as I hated to admit it because I saw the senior reflection project as such a redeeming end to the year, that one end-of-the-year assignment had allowed some students to make up for weeks of doing little or nothing.

THE HOW OF CONSTRUCTING LOW ACHIEVEMENT

In studying their personal reflections on their lives as students throughout high school, their interview transcripts, and their transcripts of grades, I came to see how my students had *learned* to be the kind of students they were. Through qualitatively different curricula, instruction, and expectations for honors and college prep students, the school and individual teachers had constructed school identities for my students—some as high-achievers and some as low-achievers. And, judging from what they said and wrote and

from what I observed, my students had willing and actively collaborated in that construction.

The Role of the School and Teachers in Constructing Low Achievers

As ninth graders, my students had been programmed into their first math and science classes based on math and science classes they had taken in middle school, their success in those classes, and the decision of their high school counselors. The students who had successfully completed algebra as eighth graders were programmed into geometry; those who had done well in pre-algebra were programmed into Algebra 1; those who had not done well in pre-algebra or who had taken a general math class in eighth grade were programmed into Algebra A.[7] In science, certified GATE students and some high achievers were programmed into honors biology; students who had done poorly in "general" science classes were programmed into physical science; all others were programmed into "regular" biology. In their reflections on those initial math and science classes, students painted starkly different portraits. Students programmed into Algebra A talked of teachers who had little control of their classes and who did not explain math concepts well, of numbers of students who did poorly in the class and had to repeat the class, of themselves as poor or failing students who hated math, quit doing work, quit coming to class. Students programmed into geometry classes as ninth graders talked of doing nightly homework and having that homework checked, of being expected to come for help at lunch or after school if they didn't understand concepts, of "ace-ing" tests, of being surprised that there were older students in class ("I found it hard to believe that there were seniors in the class and that they could hardly pass this easy level of math"). The same kind of contrasting portraits was depicted in students' recollections of

their science classes: students in physical science talked of classes out of control and of teachers not knowing how to teach; students in honors biology talked of a demanding teacher who worked them hard, insisted upon neat and organized notebooks, and assigned nightly homework. Placement in those initial science and math classes set in motion placements in or choices of subsequent math and science classes. Of the fourteen students who started in Algebra A, for example, over the course of their four years at the school, ten failed and repeated at least one math class, six got no farther than algebra, only two got beyond geometry—one for one term (with a grade of C), one for a full session (with a grade of D). Of the five students who started in geometry, three made it into calculus and another into Probability and Statistics.

The kind of mechanisms for ability group tracking (see Oakes, 1987, for a distinction between curriculum tracking and ability grouping) operating in ninth grade math and science did not operate in ninth grade English and social science classes. As ninth graders, my students had been programmed into carefully balanced heterogeneous college prep English and world history classes. In tenth grade, however, a kind of self-selected tracking system took over in both English and social science. Given the option of choosing their sophomore English and social science class, students tracked themselves into classes that closely mirrored the make-up of their science and math classes—with the highest achieving students choosing English 2 honors and World War II in tenth grade and the others choosing English 2 college prep and either Minorities in America or Social Living.[8] That same kind of self-selection was repeated in eleventh grade English and social science classes.

The different academic paths my students had taken from ninth to twelfth grade had led them to very different places. As seniors, some were finishing their high school years taking AP Chemistry, AP Biology, physics, and Calculus BC while others were struggling to meet minimal graduation requirements by repeating science, math, English, and social science classes failed as ninth and tenth graders. Still others were coasting to graduation day in elective classes that required little or no homework or working for one or two block a day as teacher or office aides. As different as their high school academic paths had been, those paths converged in the two classes required of all seniors: twelfth grade social science and English 4.

Only one of my students had chosen to take the honors level 12th grade social science class—American Experience 12 Honors paired with AP US History (tellingly dubbed "A PUSH" by students). All others had elected the far less demanding American Experience12 college prep course, which is paired with one of three electives: Law and Justice, California History, or International Problems. In reflections on their senior social science electives (which over half of my students had taken fall session), both high and low achievers described classes in which little work was required. "It felt like every single day or every other day we were either coloring or watching a movie"; "We only had one test the whole session"; "We didn't do a lot of work in that class." One student wrote that the class "is referred to as 'ghetto' history. In other words, [a class for] scabs who are not in AP." A few students expressed regret that the class was not more rigorous. "I was pretty disappointed with the class because it was almost completely made up of 'busy work'—coloring maps, BS! There wasn't much homework, but it was interesting when there was. We actually had/got to deal with world issues and governments—the

point of the class." Interestingly, the students who described the class as disappointing because of its lack of rigor also characterized it as fun: "Pretty disorderly, but very fun and loose"; "[The teacher] was not that successful in making the class valuable for an education, but he did make it fun for everyone."

For twelve of the twenty-nine students, English 4/ Essay Writing was their only academic class spring session. For seventeen students, it was the only class that required homework. Among the courses they were taking that required no or little homework: art, chorus, Business Computer Applications, Web Page Design, chorus, teacher aide, dance, Radio Broadcasting, Teacher Cadet Corps.

As I studied my students' reflections on their high school classes, I saw clearly that it was not only the curriculum that was differentiated in honors and non-honors classes: the quality of the teacher, the teacher's expectations about student work, and the atmosphere in classes were also differentiated. In describing honors and AP classes, students noted their teachers' ability to teach well, clear intention that students work hard in and outside of class, and skill in maintaining a classroom learning environment. In Algebra 2/ Trigonometry, "People did not have time to fool around because the information we learned was too important. The atmosphere is quiet because everyone is trying to understand the confusing work." "In AP Biology, when its time to work, it's time to work." In AP Chemistry "there was time for some joking around, but when we sat down to study, we really intended to learn."   In advanced math and science classes, students were expected to do homework. In Algebra 2/Trigonometry "we received homework on the first day of class—lots of it" [and] "in math analysis there is homework every night and a test every two weeks"; in calculus "one section from the chapter a

night"; in AP Chemistry "We would receive a due date to read a chapter and finish the problems by and we were expected to do that"; in AP Biology "the only night there was no homework was the night before a test"; in AP Biology/ Physiology there was "homework basically every night consisting of essays, study guides, color plates, projects, lab books, and more." In contrast to these descriptions, students described various non-honors courses as poorly taught classes in which students acted out and/or did little work and teachers expected little. One student described Geometry Concepts as a class in which students "always make fun of [the teacher]. The work is very easy and he never gives homework." Another student characterized physical science class (the school's lowest level science class) as "horriable": "That class should not be at our school." A student in the twelfth grade college prep social science class wrote, "[The teacher] was cool and the info was interesting, but some of the people who were taking the class didn't want to learn and made it perfectly clear they didn't want anyone else to learn either."

The Role of Students in Constructing Low Achievement

From students' reflections and my own observation, it was clear that students in English 4/ Essay Writing class actively participated in their construction as poor students. Ray is a good example. He never handed in assignments, never did the assigned reading, never brought a book to class, missed class constantly, and came tardy almost every day he did come to class. Although he was the lowest performing student in the class, Ray was not the only student who actively constructed himself as a D and F student. Guadalupe came to class late regularly, complained constantly about class assignments and due-dates, left her assigned seat to chat with friends across the room, combed her hair

and put on make-up during class, and, although she almost never did assigned readings, argued passionately about her interpretation of characters' motivations and actions—often rudely dismissing the interpretations of students who had done the reading. Dwayne came to class with the sports page. When he finished reading it, he engaged as many of the student athletes around him as he could in talking about what he had read, and then he began doing the previous night's homework. When I told him to put away the paper or stop doing the homework, he accused me of hassling him or wanting him to fail.

By habitually cutting classes, acting inappropriately, and/or doing little or no class and homework, these and other students were reifying the school's decision about their placement in low-level classes and validating teachers' low academic expectations for them. In essence, they worked *with* the school and their teachers to construct an identity for themselves that became ever more consistent. And as those identities became increasing concretized, students lost their ability to change their negative identities and to construct themselves as achievers because they had not acquired the skills they needed for that new identity or they had not practiced those skills recently or frequently enough to employ them effectively when they needed. Dwayne's work at the end of the second term illustrates this point. In the last month of school, aware that his low grade was putting his graduation (and athletic scholarship) in jeopardy, Dwayne began to work. His lack of writing skills and lack of discipline about doing assigned work hampered his success. Again and again he handed in work that clearly demonstrated he had not read and followed the prompt, had not proofread his writing carefully, had not thought deeply about his work. As I worked with him on his writing and asked him to rethink and revise

it, he often grew frustrated. “You’re never satisfied,” he complained. For Dwayne, handing in the paper was the objective. In his mind, handing it in—word processed in elaborate script and large font and printed on fancy paper—should have satisfied the assignment. He repeatedly told me that the fact that his writing had spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors or did not follow the prompt should have resulted in a lowered grade, not an insistence on a rewrite.

There were other low-achievers who, having consistently not done assigned work in my class and in previous English classes, found it painful to begin working the last month of school. Brent struggled at every step—from generating ideas to doing first drafts to handing in revised and edited final drafts. It was if he had almost no skills to draw on—either he had never learned them or had not practiced them for so long they were hard to call into use. And there were low-achievers—like Michaela—who had no trouble with the assignments except that she chose not to do them. During the first term, when Michaela came to class, she came late and sullen. Because of absenteeism and lack of work, she earned a D. When I talked with her about the fact that D’s (to say nothing of the F’s she had earned in Spanish 3, Algebra 2/ Trig, AP biology the fall session) would not count for college admission, she said, “It doesn’t matter. Nothing matters.” For Michaela senior year was not about academics; it was about adjusting to living with her mother after having lived in a supportive foster home. Like Dwayne and Brent, Michaela had a poor work ethic in the class, but unlike them, she had a previous identity as an achieving student, an identity that she could draw upon when she needed, an identity that served as a safety net. As a ninth grader, Michaela had been programmed into algebra and biology; in tenth she had elected English 2 Honors, chemistry, and geometry; in

eleventh English 3 honors, American Experience [social science] Honors, and physiology. Starting the third week of the second term, Michaela made a decision to work in English 4/ Essay Writing and, because she had good reading and writing skills and a previous identity as a good student, she knew how to succeed in that decision. She came to class on time, read the assigned books, wrote the assigned essays, and pulled her D grade up to a B. Her senior reflection project (which required almost no editing assistance from me) was particularly fine work as is clear in the following excerpt from an essay she included in her senior project.

> Our life has been one battle after another. Though we have inflicted pain on each other, I remember when I would run to her for safety. I would sit up, suddenly kick off the covers, and run across the hall to her door. Nervously my voice would squeak out the question, "Can I sleep with you?" and a half sleep moan would blurt out, "Hurry up and get in." Jumping over her covered torso, I plunged into the warm sea-colored blankets. Stretching out and yawning, I moved in closer to the heat radiated by the sleeper next to me. The darkness would engulf me, stealing me from the conscious world and I wouldn't open my eyes until the morning. The last sound I heard was the light snore of slumber and, no longer afraid, I drifted off to sleep.

As I studied my students' work over the summer, the issue of unlearned and unpracticed skills became pivotal in helping me clarify my ideas about student responsibility in the co-construction of low achievement. With students like Michaela, the school and teachers were not responsible for constructing low-achievement; she and her personal life were responsible. With students like Dwayne and Brent, however, the school and teachers because of their programming decisions and low curricular expectations and tasks did play a significant role in constructing low achievement. In holding the school as an institution and teachers responsible in large measure for the construction of students like Dwayne and Brent, I am not making the claim that teachers

or the school *determined* their low achievement. I am making the claim that while the school and teachers are primarily responsible for their low achievement, Dwayne and Brent actively collaborated with the school and the teachers. Both students (and others like them) made conscious choices in English 4/ Essay Writing to not work, to not bring books and materials, to not pay attention, to disrupt. While I believe that a good deal of the motivation for those actions came from a need to protect their sense of self worth (Covington and Omelich, 1979; Covington, 1984), I know that there were many opportunities to safely choose to learn and to work which they did not take advantage of. And, judging from what I learned in talking with some of their former teachers, I know that they were offered a variety of opportunities to construct themselves as achievers that they did not take. For example, in tenth grade, according to his English 2 Honors teacher, Brent did little or no work and did not come for help at lunch or after school. According to what his own reflections, he also did not attend any of the math tutorials available to Algebra 2/Trigonometry students, which may explain his D in the class. And in my class, when given the opportunity to rewrite papers I had carefully responded to, he chose not to.

The Role of Students' in Constructing Teachers' Low Achievement

A particularly insidious aspect of students' co-constructing themselves as low-achievers is the effect that process has on the teacher: it sets up a recursive dynamic in which they—the student and the teacher—constantly co-construct each others' negative behaviors in the classroom. During the first term, I saw this dynamic play out frequently. When students consistently came late to class, I stopped expecting them to come on time. When the majority of the students didn't bring in multiple drafts of their papers for

writing response groups or didn't bring in books to read, I wasn't surprised or, after a while, even disappointed: they were doing what I had come to expect. Over time I learned to take the course of least resistance with the students who resisted me and the work I assigned. And as I made those tacit agreements, I accepted my complicity in students' low achievement. Some days that acceptance was painful. Most days it was a pragmatic response to a situation I felt overwhelmed by.

An Exception: Student Agency in Constructing Achievement

In discussing the role of students in the co-construction of low achievement, it is important to hold students accountable—even those students whose sense of themselves as achievers is fragile. If we do not, we create them as powerless, incapable of asserting or reasserting any sense of agency in their lives. And if we do not acknowledge the capacity for student agency, then how do we explain the fact that there are students who choose not to go along with the school's construction of them as low achievers? How do we explain a student like Julio?

Julio was a student in the AP English class I taught the fall session of the year I taught the new Essay Writing class. When he was in ninth grade, Julio was programmed into Algebra A and physical science.

> I don't know why I was placed in those classes, I just was. I don't know if it had to do with my background from middle school. I don't think so because I was in regular math in middle school. I wasn't in advanced—like, some people had algebra already in middle school. I was just in regular math which meant I should've gone to algebra. And as for science—the same. I had regular science and I had a pretty decent grade. So I should have been placed in biology in freshman year. (Interview 1)

He remembered the Algebra A class vividly: it "was filled with minorities—African Americans and Mexicans—I mean Hispanics—and I think there were some Asians. Mostly it was seniors." Although he had a sense that he should have been in a more demanding class, he liked Algebra A: "It was easy, a piece of cake" and "it set a good foundation for my math knowledge." He did not like his physical science class, and after the first few weeks, went to his counselor and dropped the class. "I told her it was a—not a waste of time—but it was, well, yeah, it was a waste of time."

As a tenth grader, Julio took two science classes, biology and chemistry. In biology, he had a revelation.

> [W]hen I took biology, there were people who should've been in that physical science class if you categorized them by their wanting to succeed and not their race. I'm sure that everyone who was in that physical science class could have done just as good as the people in biology. It wasn't that much of a difficult class. It was just a matter of telling people to work harder and to show them how to work harder.

In tenth grade, Julio also took two math classes—algebra and geometry—and the next year two more math classes—Algebra 2/Trig and math analysis—so that he could take calculus as a senior.

How was it that Julio could go against the identity the school had given him in its placement of him in low-level math and science classes? He credits his being in orchestra.

> The people around me were all smart people. They were all in higher, upper-level classes. . . . And I think that's what sort of started me focusing on trying to get into higher classes because people around me were taking those classes. I think if it wasn't for band, I probably wouldn't have been aware of the classes. (Interview 1)

Because of his association with students taking challenging academic classes, Julio had access to information most students in low-level math and science classes do not have. He used that information to learn that he could double up in math and science classes and could enroll in honors and AP classes. As much as those choices advanced his opportunities to go to college, win scholarships, and move forward in realizing his dream to become a musician, Julio was also aware that in making those choices, he had become estranged from his friends who stayed in the low classes.

> I sort of am like two different persons. Like in band—with the white people and Asian—and with my friends at the wall [the area at the school where many Latinos gather]. I feel comfortable with both and at the same time—not. Like with my friends, Latinos, I feel comfortable talking—I speak Spanish and English. And I can relate a little bit more to them because they're Latino and because they--. . . . And with band—I can relate to them because I play a musical instrument and because I am in the same classes as they are. I do feel that if I wasn't in band, I don't think I would've been in upper-level classes. I would probably even been getting very bad grades and probably being—going into a gang. I seriously feel that because of where I lived and who I was hanging with. (Interview 1)

As one of the few Latino males in AP and honors classes, he saw inequities at the school in terms of programming decisions based on race. He compared our school with the high school in his neighborhood (which his mother did not allow him to attend).

> I have lots of cousins who go there. Lots of friends who are there. And they're Hispanic. There are all kinds of minorities there. And there are AP classes there. And so it's kind of interesting how here at El Cerrito, we have a lot of whites [and] Asians [but] not too much minorities in the AP classes. But at Richmond High, since those are the students who are there, they are taking them and they *can* do those classes. It's proof that they *can* take those classes and they don't need to be placed in Algebra A or physical science. (Interview 2)

IMPLICATIONS

Implications for Me as a Teacher:

Examining Wrong Assumptions and Learning from Them

When I began the year, I was unaware of the stark differences in senior English classes at our school. I assumed that I could give many of the same assignments in English 4/ Essay Writing that I give in AP—same quality, just less quantity. When I began the year, I thought that saying, "I respect you as learners and that is why I am assigning demanding tasks" and bringing to bear my strengths as a veteran teacher, I could inspire students to work hard and learn. What I did not take into account in my assumptions about the kind of work I could assign was the fact that the students in AP with low SAT scores and marginal reading and writing skills sign up for the class *because* they want rigorous reading and writing tasks–something that was not true for the majority of the students in Essay Writing. The majority of the Essay Writing students did not want academic challenges. They wanted free days, movies, personal writing, lax attendance rules, extra credit and make-up work—an easy ride to graduation day. So, my plans about same-quality-not-as-much-quantity did not work because a high percentage of my students *would not* take on the academic challenges I assigned. My assumption about work was wrong for another reason. Many of my students *could not* take on the tasks I assigned: they lacked the necessary practice with the reading and writing skills required to succeed in the tasks and they lacked the discipline to work through the disequilibrium of acquiring them. From early in the term, then, English 4/ Essay Writing was about resistance driven by fear of failure, learned behavior, poor work habits, and inadequate skills or a combination of the four. My way of dealing with the resistance

was to plow through it. “They’ll catch on,” I’d tell myself. “If not this essay, the next; if not this book, the next.” I operated out of the assumption that what I needed to do was to persevere.

There were other false assumptions.

Role models. Even though there was clearly an imbalance of low achievers in the class, in the beginning I was hopeful that the work ethic of the high- and middle-achievers would serve as a model for the low-achievers. This assumption comes out of my experience in detracked ninth grade classes in which clusters of high-achievers set good work models for middle- and low-achievers and help to create an environment in which students of all achievement levels learn with and from each other. But within the first month of class, the high- and middle-achievers did one of two things. They joined the low-achievers in their resistance to work: they began not handing in papers or handing in papers late, they came to class late and occasionally cut, they did homework for other classes instead of paying attention, they complained about the amount of work I assigned. Or (and this was true only for the highest achievers) they continued to work hard but stopped participating in class discussions, resisted sharing their writing with the class, and gave only minimal feedback in writing response groups. The only reading and writing groups they worked actively in were groups with other high-achievers; mostly they worked alone.

Attendance. I also assumed that my being strict about attendance rules would lead students to attend class daily and get there on time. That didn’t happen. My insistence that students serve fifteen minutes for being tardy was disregarded by all but the most compliant. My checking on absenteeism resulted in students getting their absences

excused—either by convincing their parents to write notes or by writing their own excuses. My policy of giving credit but no grade to late papers resulted in students handing in no papers.

Grades. I assumed that receiving D's and F's on major assignments would motivate students to begin working—especially in light of the fact that they needed at least a D to get English 4 credits to graduate and they needed better than a D if they wanted English 4 credits to count for college admission. I was wrong. D was an acceptable grade for many of my students: as long as they were passing, they were satisfied. Those who were earning F's—even two weeks before the end of the term—assumed that they could bring up their grade to a D with an "extra credit" assignment even though I had made clear that I do not give extra credit assignments. I was also wrong in assuming that a grade of R (for rewrite) would motivate students to revise their papers for higher grades. For most students, an R meant that I had recorded in my grade book the fact that they had handed in a paper and that was enough.

This year in teaching English 4/ Essay Writing for the second time, I was determined not to bring to the class the assumptions that had led to the mistakes in last year's class. The most fortunate decision I made was choosing to begin with Kent Hanuf's *Plainsong*. The chapters are short and tight, the plot is involved but not confusing, and the subject matter is engaging—a pregnant girl, an abusive mother, a teacher who is having marital problems and being pressured at school to pass a failing athlete, two elderly bachelor brothers who become surrogate grandfathers. We read the first chapter aloud and discussed it: what did we know so far? how did we feel about the book? what was going to happen next? Then we read the next chapter and discussed

how the new characters—seemingly unrelated to the characters in the first chapter—were going to work into the plot. I took time with these initial discussions, inviting all students to play psychologist in analyzing the characters, to take chances with interpretations, to connect their lives with the lives in the book. Toward the end of the class, we decided how much to read for homework and I announced that I would be giving a test on the reading. At the beginning of the next day's class I handed out the test and told students who hadn't done the reading that if they wanted, they could move into the adjoining empty classroom to finish the assigned reading. Every day we followed this pattern: those who had done the homework, took the quiz, discussed, and read together. Those who hadn't done the homework, read in the next room where I joined them halfway or two-thirds of the way into the period for a discussion. Every day after the discussion, we read aloud which gave me opportunities to weave in instruction on writers' conventions (Rabinowitz), ask aesthetic and efferent questions (Rosenblatt), and draw into the discussion students who needed to be called on to share their ideas. When students in the main room had finished the book, I had them write about the various resolved and unresolved issues in the book and to speculate about what would happen with the characters after the book ended. On the last day of our study of the book, all students came together for a discussion on those topics. Aware of how I had helped to construct low achievement in my previous year's class, this year my emphasis was not on moving through a book fast so that I could teach students strategies to use on their next book. Instead I focused on building a community of readers with the first book, a community with many experts—not only recognized, high-achieving experts.

What I learned in teaching *Plainsong*, I tried to apply to everything I did. I worked hard to create lessons that engaged and challenged all students but did not overwhelm them and, equally important, I did not let those students who chose not to do the work negatively affect the learning environment in the class as a whole. I moved ahead carefully with each new activity, explicitly building on what students already knew as a way of increasing their sense of confidence about taking on a new task. Instead of focusing almost exclusively on expository and persuasive writing the first term, this year I incorporated several autobiographical essays and short pieces into my writing curriculum. In addition to the style sheets I gave out after each major writing assignment, I taught regular short lessons on grammar and mechanics. These lessons allowed me to build a sense of fun and camaraderie in the class (I made up dictations that included students' names and timely class and school issues), to teach complex sentence constructions and sophisticated uses of punctuation which I then required students to incorporate into their essays, and to review again and again common errors in mechanics and spelling. I also made changes in independent reading. When students came to class without a book on the day we were beginning our literature circles, instead of giving them books to read to keep them occupied until they came with their own book, I let them go to the library to choose their group book. What I learned in doing this was that the way I had structured the book assignment the previous year required students to take on an identity—reader/group leader—that many students did not feel comfortable taking on. In requiring them to take on that role, in a very real sense I was contributing to their constructing failure. But when I allowed them to go to the library and choose a book together, I was helping them construct success: they could share the responsibility of

choosing a book like *Monster* (Shakur) or *Black Like Me* (Griffin) or *Do Right Man* (Tyree) and come back and read and discuss it. This year I was also far more accepting of the books students chose to read in groups. When numbers of students wanted to read *A Child Called It* (Pelzer), I was disappointed because I viewed the book as too simple and simplistic for many of the students who chose it. But, unlike last year, I didn't dissuade them: if they wanted to read it, I let them. (That is not to say that I never encouraged them to choose challenging books. After the first independent book, I did suggest to some students that they push themselves to read books like *In the Heart of the Sea* (Philbrick), *Fast Food Nation* (Schlosser) and *Brothers and Keepers* (Wideman), but if they chose not to, I did not pressure them.) And this year, when students decided that they were not going to make it through a long and demanding book like *On the Rez* (Frazier) by the due date, I did not object when they opted for a shorter or easier book like *Flyy Girl* (Tyree) or *Scorpions* (Myers). I saw my purpose this year as getting students to choose a book and read it, not read the book I saw as suitable for them.

This year I dealt with student resistance in a new way as well. When students did little or no reading and writing and when they cut or came late to class, I did not take responsibility for their failure. I did not nag them or get angry with them. Nor did I listen to their reasons for not having assignments done. There might be times, I told them, when it would be impossible for them to do assignments but the rest of the time they needed to have their work, not the reasons for not having it. I was clear with them and with myself that I was not constructing the failure that resulted from their actions; they were. I was also clear that when they chose to fail, I would not allow that choice to control the tempo

or atmosphere of the class or cause me to lower my expectations about their capacity to take on rigorous academic work.

Implications for the English Department

The more I study the low skills and poor academic work habits of many of my Essay Writing students (both last year's and this year's), the more I see that issues in my classes are issues the whole English department needs to address.

Curriculum consistency. As a department we need to interrogate why it is that some students come to senior English knowing how to write a well-reasoned argument and some do not know what a thesis statement is, that some students come having read numbers of canonical texts and some having read one (*Romeo and Juliet*) or two (*Romeo and Juliet* and *Of Mice and Men*), that some students know final draft writing requires thorough revising and editing and others see final draft writing as recopying first drafts. My analysis of students' reflections on the curriculum in their English classes strongly suggests that the department needs to agree to teach specific texts and specific writing genres as well as specific practices such as asking students to take some essays through multiple drafts and having students read self-selected books. Here I am making the case that no matter which teacher students get a particular year, that teacher will (a) build on what students have learned the previous year and (b) present new skills that equip them to take on ever more demanding and sophisticated reading and writing tasks, give them skills that will help them meet the demands of other classes, and prepare them for reading and writing demands after high school. The issue of building on what came before is a delicate one. It is important that we maintain connections with what students learned in previous classes as a scaffold for presenting new materials, but we need to make sure that

we do not focus on review in a way that keeps students relearning materials they have been taught. At each grade level, English teachers need to be vigilant that we are differentiating instruction so that all students learn the grade-level curricula.

Theory into practice. As important as it is to examine our classroom and departmental practices, it is equally essential that as a department we examine our theories about teaching English. What, for example, do we believe about literature and how do our department and classroom practices reflect those beliefs? Which texts do we teach and why? What explains the disconnect between teachers' emphasis on literature and students' resistance to reading? In terms of composition instruction, which writing genres do we emphasize and why do we focus on them? What are our beliefs about issues of correctness and how do we address those issues? What are our theories about second language acquisition and how does what we believe inform our practice in addressing the needs of immigrant students?

In calling on English teachers to examine their theories I am, in effect, calling on teachers to see themselves as theorists and to see everything they do in the classroom as based on a theory—articulated or not. As English teachers we need to discuss our theories so we can bring them to light—make the tacit explicit—and then examine how our theories influence our thinking about classroom and departmental practices. As a result of this examination we may come to understand why the Maritzas in our classrooms have read only one book by senior year, why the Dwaynes would hand in an essay and think the quality of the paper it was printed on made it a final draft, why the Charleys know how to work in a writing response group and the Emilys do not.

Detracking. It is clear to me from students' reflections and work habits in my senior English classes, that advertising the differences between college prep and honors and college prep and AP as a choice between "want[ing] to work hard or harder" sends a message that translates for most students as a choice between "wanting to work or not work." Additionally, we need to examine how offering the choice of college prep and honors/AP influences our teaching of ninth and tenth grade English classes. That is, does our awareness that students have a choice of honors or college prep in English 3 and English 4 lead us to construct some students as honors students and others as college prep? In eleventh grade, do students get the same quality of instruction and curriculum in college prep classes that they get in honors and how do the decisions we make about the English 3 curriculum affect students' choice of their English 4 class?

Implications for the School as an Institution

In their reflections on their high school, low-achievers in Essay Writing overwhelmingly took responsibility for their failures. In writing about his freshman year, for example, Jakari wrote about himself as the cause of his poor grades: "I didn't pay attention and I was always goofing around, always messing with someone." Other students voiced the same kind of culpability. Isabel admitted to failing algebra "because I didn't like the class and I didn't like the teacher either." Amber confessed to not doing any homework in her junior social science class: "When we did have it, I rarely did it. Just didn't have time." Except for three students who continued to blame teachers (including me) for their poor school performances, students who had failed or done poorly saw themselves as responsible. That kind of acceptance of responsibility for school failure is the kind that the school as an institution needs to take. And, just as the

students looked at specific classes and specific behaviors on their part, teachers, counselors, and administrators should begin their examination of their roles in constructing student failure by looking at specific policies and practices.

Programming. English 4/ Essay Writing students' histories in high school point out major problems with programming. In terms of ninth grade, the school needs to investigate the causal link between ninth grade programming in math and science classes and later school failure. It is also important to investigate why some students (mostly low achievers) have no science class as ninth graders and why teachers of physical science classes at our school are typically uncredentialed teachers and almost always new teachers, unfamiliar with the curriculum and classroom management strategies. A telling illustration of the value of the physical science class: in April, 2002, a few days before the SAT 9 was administered, teachers were asked to list which students were taking which science class so that on the day of the test each teacher's packet of tests would contain the correct number of the appropriate tests. Next to the names of students taking physical science, teachers were instructed to write "no science" and to provide alternate work for those students during the test time. Additionally, given the opportunities offered by the block schedule for students to accelerate or "double up" on classes in a year, the school needs to investigate why ninth and tenth grade students who fail a class are not programmed to repeat the class the following session (even within the same year in many cases) and thus avoid falling farther and farther behind their classmates. As an institution, we also need to investigate why so few low-achievers are aware of or use the option to double up.

Programming of twelfth graders bears special notice. The school needs to interrogate why programming decisions for seniors seem determined by the district's requirement that all students have full class loads rather than by a commitment to have senior year be about learning. In following this district directive, counselors often program students into classes they do not need for graduation which often leads students who are not worried about maintaining a GPA that would qualify them for college to cut class or to do as little as possible in class. The school also needs to look into the high number of seniors who fill their schedules with teacher aide (TA) positions, positions that for the most part are periods of acting as go-fers for teachers and secretaries. Ten students in English 4/ Essay Writing (one third of the class) had at least one TA block during their senior year. The worst violation of this was Allie's case: three of the six classes she was enrolled in as a senior were periods of TA for a PE teacher. Several students in the class, however, had had two and three TA classes during high school—even some students whose GPA's were as low as 1.8 and 1.2.

In not facing the problem of twelfth grade programming, the school promotes the idea that senior year is a year of little or no work that requires students to take only two academic classes: English and social science. The school needs to examine if and how the block schedule has helped to create the problem with senior programming. That is, are there too few classes available to seniors—especially spring session—and what alternatives could the school provide for students that would emphasize learning or service?

Curriculum. Just as the English department needs to look at the choices it offers students and the kinds of curricula those choices set up, other departments need to look at

the choices they offer. This study suggests that in offering students a choice of classes, departments are in fact often offering students a choice of track. All departments need to interrogate whether or not they have one set of classes for students they see as bound for four-year colleges and another set for students they see as not college bound or bound for a two-year college. The issue of choice is a complex one that involves far more than an examination of curricula. Ostensibly, choice gives students a say in their education and, to many detracking reformers, offers an opportunity for low and middle track students to take on the challenge of honors classes. As the strongest advocates of detracking have discovered at El Cerrito High, however, choice as a method of detracking has not resulted in the kind of movement we had hoped for: honors and AP classes still do not reflect the racial and socio-economic diversity found in the school at large. That finding corroborates the findings of Yonezawa, Wells, and Serna (2002) who, in their study of six racially-mixed high schools, report that "[h]idden institutional barriers within schools, the students' tracked aspirations, and the desire of students to learn in 'places of respect' thwarted reformers' efforts to detrack through the mechanism of choice" (37).

> [U]sing choice as a detracking tool is unlikely to change the racial and socioeconomic stratification of track systems because it fails to tackle track structures and to address sufficiently the cultural link between students' identities and places they occupy in track hierarchies and surrounding communities. . . . [L]ow-track students, particularly students of color, did not take advantage of seemingly open doors to honors classes. They did not advance into honors courses, as some educators had hoped, for a variety of interrelated reasons: institutional barriers, feelings of inadequacy, and a determination not to leave the safe spaces they knew in low- and middle-track classes, made up mostly of minority students, for seats in majority-White honors courses where they felt unwelcome. (p. 59)

Beyond looking at the kind of choice they offer students, departments need to examine the morality of offering students a choice in the first place. What sense does it make to offer students choices we do not want them to make and that our experience tells us they will make? Just as Yonezawa, Wells, and Serna discovered in the students they studied, El Cerrito detracking advocates find that students "[w]hen left to their own devices, [choose] familiar spaces with familiar faces, resegregating themselves along the same lines and labels" (p. 51). Where choice seems the only viable (and perhaps "inescapable") answer given existing university admissions systems of weighting grades in certain honors and AP classes, departments need to examine what it is about the hierarchical structure of their department and the school in general that makes it so difficult for many students, particularly low-income students and students of color, to take advantage of choice.

School divisions. The use of the term "ghetto" about such classes as physical science, Algebra A, Geometry Concepts, and college prep American Experience 12 should alert teachers, counselors, and administrators that the school needs to examine racial and socio-economic divisions. While many students say they do not see the descriptor "ghetto" as racist, it is always used to characterize a class that has a majority of African Americans or students from poor neighborhoods. The school also needs to look at the racial segregation evident in honors and AP classes not only in terms of why the numbers of African American and Latino students in those classes do not reflect the school's demographics but also how the low number of students of color in those classes has a causal relationship on younger students electing to take honors and AP classes.

Failure: Teachers, counselors, and administrators need to look at the percentage of students earning D's and F's *and* at which students are earning D's and F's. In accepting the fact that numbers of students earn low grades and/or numbers of students earn low grades in specific classes, the school needs to confront the fact that it is creating a niche for D and F students in the school culture. That is not to say that all teachers participate in the creation of the culture of failure. Some teachers insist (with varying degrees of success) that students who are struggling meet with them at lunch and after school for extra help. Other teachers have set up student-staffed tutorials at lunch and after school. One English teacher, at the end of a fall session course, refused to give a student a failing grade on his report card: instead, she gave him a grade of "incomplete" and insisted that he meet with her on her conference hour for two weeks the following session and rewrite the papers he was unwilling to rewrite in her class. In discussing that experience, the teacher reflected on the fact that she had chosen to work with the student because he was so "profoundly" unskilled in writing that she could not in good conscience allow him pass with a D-. In the main, however, individual teacher efforts do little. The school on an institutional level needs to confront failure and to stop accepting the fact that numbers of students—particularly numbers of African American and Latinos—fail and fail regularly.

My experience in English 4/ Essay Writing suggests that as an institution we need to pay particular attention to D's. Many low-achieving students saw D's as acceptable and had learned various ways (requesting an extra credit assignment or make-up assignment or doing a minimal amount of work either at the beginning or end of the quarter) to earn D's. Some teachers also see D's as acceptable; rather than fail students

who come to class every day but do little or no work, teachers give D's; in effect, they avoid confronting the issue of failure by rewarding attendance. What would happen if we decided to not use D's? Would that help to clarify to us and to students the role D's have come to play in our grading system?

Attendance. The school as an institution needs to look at how its attendance policy contributes to the construction of low achievement. Attendance records in Essay Writing reveal that low-achieving students have learned that they can miss class regularly and pass. It is important to note that not all students participate in the culture of cutting. The difference in the attendance rate among students is telling: over the two terms of English 4/ Essay Writing, there was a total of 372 absences which averaged out to 13.3 per student; in my second block AP English the previous session there were 127 absences which averaged out to 3.7 a day. Only one student in Essay Writing went a whole term with perfect attendance; In AP English, 13 students did. Only two students in Essay Writing had 5 or fewer absences over the course of the session; in AP English 22 students did.

Theoretical issues. As important as it is for the school to look at specific institutional policies and practices that play a role in constructing low-achievement and failure, it is equally important that we look at what these practices and policies reveal about our theories of intelligence and our beliefs about students as learners. Teachers, counselors, and administrators need to examine beliefs about intelligence and how those beliefs inform institutional decisions that set up success for some students and failure for others. This examination might bring to the fore an understanding of the explicit issues of

power that exist in schools as reflected in programming decisions and the saliency of race (Ladson-Billings, 1999) and class in those decisions.

As educators we need to examine as well what we believe about how students learn and how learning takes place in our classrooms. How do we as teachers validate a state of not knowing, encourage students to embrace not knowing as an essential stage in learning, and then lead students to work through not knowing? Besides examining these ideas ourselves, we need to engage students in examining them as well so that they will come to see intelligence as a repertoire of skills not a static entity, will recognize disequilibrium as an essential part of learning, and will value persistence and resilience as qualities that characterize serious learners. Additionally we need to ask students to reflect regularly and deeply about their sense of control over what they are learning in class and to explain their reasons for their successes and failures. Regular reflection on learning—what is happening to me as a learner in this class at this moment?—could provide students with a way of thinking about intelligence and learning that gives them a sense of power over their lives as students.

CONCLUSION

In studying my English 4/ Essay Writing class, I learned a great deal about myself as a teacher and my students and about our interconnected roles in constructing low achievement in the classroom. As the research moved outside my classroom, I came to understand how the dynamic of co-construction of low achievement is a phenomenon not limited to my classroom and my department or even to my school. Through extensive reading and talking with teachers from other schools about school failure, I have come to

see how my findings resonate with other urban teachers' experiences and how endemic to urban and inner-city schools the phenomenon of co-construction of low achievement is.

How does a school begin to confront the construction of low achievement? A line from Toni Morrison's Jazz offers a suggestion. "This city is good at this . . . disguising coded messages as public signs" (page 64). I suggest schools read the coded messages in their public lists. What messages are hidden in class rosters and the lists posted on school and classroom bulletin boards, published in school and local newspapers, tacked on the teachers' workroom door? What, for example, do lists of honor roll students, suspended students, students excused for forensics tournaments, seniors repeating algebra, ninth graders in physical science, ninth graders in honors biology reveal about the school? Sometimes the lists appear innocuous, as did the list I saw posted in several places last year with the names of students who were to be excused from classes to take the High School Exit Exam. What an outsider might not have understood but all insiders—teachers, students, administrators—understood perfectly was that the students on the list had failed the previous year's HSEE. Even more indicting, the list revealed that the school had no compunctions about advertising that failure.

If teachers and administrators—with our insiders' knowledge—read critically, we will come to see that school lists reveal a good deal about school culture, about who has power and who does not, who is valued and who is not. Reading the lists critically should provoke questions. Where are the African American males on the list of calculus students? Why are there so few native Spanish speakers taking AP Spanish? Who is not on the list for AP Chemistry, leadership, varsity basketball? Who is on the daily

suspension list? Who are the students who earned $1000 for their score on the SAT 9? Who graduated with honors? Who did not graduate?

If we read the lists thoroughly and thoughtfully, we will see—if we allow ourselves to see—how complicit we are in assigning names to the lists. What we do with that sense of complicity is inextricably bound to the construction of success and failure of urban public education.

Footnotes

1. Students' work is quoted as they wrote it.

2. To be admitted into AP English classes, students are required to read two or three teacher-selected texts, write essays on them, and submit them by set due-dates throughout the summer. See appendix for summer assignment.

3. In the end, in addition to AP English Language Composition and AP English Literature and Composition, we offered only three new senior electives: because few students signed up for English 4/ Women's Lit and English 4/ Shakespeare, those two classes were not included in the final roster of classes.

4. On the 4x4 block schedule, the school year is divided into two sessions (fall and spring), and each session is divided into two terms.

5. **See Gray and Benson, page ????**

6. Teachers may not fail a senior to whom they have not issued an F notice. Several of these students got F notices from other teachers as well, some got F notices from all of their teachers.

7. Algebra A is paired with Algebra B which together equal algebra.

8. As note on page 3, after two years, when we saw this retracking phenomenon, the English teachers voted to get ride of the tenth grade honors track and program all tenth graders into carefully balanced heterogeneous English 2 classes.

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