

High School and the 3Rs: Students' Perspectives on "Good Work"

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OP-06, March 2007

Introduction

Calls and proposals for reforming high schools are perhaps as old as high school itself. Educators, politicians, and others have continuously sought to change and improve high schools since their inception in the late 19th century. Reformers variously have argued that high schools would be better if they were larger and more comprehensive (Conant, 1959) or smaller and more personal (Meier, 1995; Raywid, 1996); if they offered more choices like a "shopping mall" (Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985), or if they better prepared students for the worlds of higher education and employment (National Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2006). Perhaps, because the shape and future of public education remains both a national and a local concern, there is a tension with respect to which reforms high schools choose or are compelled to institute. Public education continues to be one of the rare institutions where the values and virtues of American society, both public and private, are still actively and explicitly debated and reproduced (Labaree, 1997). This debate has led, as Joe McDonald (2004) characterized it, to "alternating efforts to tighten and then loosen the mission and the curriculum of the high school" (p.26).

High Schools Today

Despite all the attention, high schools are enormously difficult to change. Because of their size and specificity of content areas, they are typically more complex than elementary or middle schools and also more expensive to operate and maintain. Reform models come and go, and yet problems persist. Dropout statistics remain high, especially among low-income and minority youth (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). Unlike the trend in the lower grades, test scores remain flat, and reaching agreement about content standards across disciplines has proved to be a long and protracted struggle for consensus.¹ Recent studies also have shown that many students across a broad spectrum view their high school experience as boring or as a mere grade game, and they try to get by with as little effort as possible (Burkett, 2002; Pope, 2002). Additionally, both colleges and industry complain about the lack of readiness that recent graduates possess (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2006; Griffith & Wade, 2001). Urban schools present particular problems. While

¹ For a brief history of the standards movement up to 2000 and the myriad of commissioned reports calling for new ones, see: www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/docs/purpose.asp

there are small-scale examples of successful reforms of select urban schools (Toch, 2003), large-scale efforts have not improved outcomes for most urban youth (National Research Council, 2002; Puma, et al., 1997).

Anyone entering an urban high school today can immediately sense an emphasis on security and control as they walk through metal detectors, past armed guards and, in some schools, through gated hallways. This is the environment that over one-third of the nation's low-income students and nearly half of all its minority students enter daily. (Letgers, et al., 2002). It also is growing more common to find urban high schools where a dozen or more different languages are spoken, and where incoming students' reading and writing skills are several years below grade level (National Center for Education and the Economy, n.d.). Additionally, urban high schools struggle to meet (and in some cases to finesse) the federal legislative requirement of having a "qualified teacher" in every classroom. In spite of these challenges, each day students carry into urban high schools their own and society's expectations that learning will occur. High schools remain a place where the belief is that each new generation will become prepared and equipped to take its place in society as citizens, workers, and responsible adults.

Overlaying the environment in high school today is a political landscape dominated by a push for higher standards and accountability. Since the early 1980s, the standards movement has steadily gained traction and prominence as the major school reform dialogue. Standards advocates argue that not unlike other aspects of society (e.g., water, air, and food quality) public education should operate under a comparable set of federal standards to

The research in this volume would not have been possible without financial support from the United States Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (Grant number R308A96003). The grant support provided to the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) has made possible this and other important investigations of education improvement efforts. However, opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of any of the organizations named above.

ensure a certain level of quality (Ravitch, 1995). In essence, the formula for success requires students to be held to high, common academic standards, and schools and teachers held accountable that their students achieve them.² At the high school level, the presence of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation has served to give the "high-stakes" testing movement greater momentum and legitimacy. This is the overall environment in which students are expected to perform and achieve success. But what does success actually mean? The simple equation suggests that success equals scoring at or above passing levels on state exit exams. The scores are indicators that schools and students are performing at a level that, at the least, meets with state expectations. These indicators operate irrespective of whether they correspond with what college or the world of work says is needed for success, or whether standardized tests alone are an accurate means of assessing students' skills and

² Cynics and skeptics counter that the new accountability system is not intended to bring all students up to an agreed-upon standard but rather to accelerate the collapse of the system of public education and open wider options for privatization and free enterprise. For example, see A. Kohn (2004) and S. Karp (2004).

competencies—to say nothing of what the individual student might need.

Research Agenda

Despite their prevalence today, standardized tests, including state exit exams, are but one measure of school achievement. What interested us is what students have to say about what academic achievement and personal success means to them. How do high school students articulate the conditions inside and outside of school that contribute to their academic achievement? As we describe in more detail in the section on Study Design, we chose the term “good work,” rather than “academic achievement,” as a more student-friendly and less research-laden term to get at students’ own ideas of self-assessment. We posed the question, “How do you know when you’ve done ‘good work’ in school?” as an entry point for students to discuss and describe their own criteria for success in school. How do students’ opinions and perspectives mesh with what the adults in their lives think about their school performance and success, and where do their ideas fit within the current accountability framework? Inquiring into how students talk and make sense out of what engages and motivates them to do well in school and in life are questions that researchers rarely ask. In this report, we present findings from our study of 11th and 12th graders and their perspectives on “good work” in school. In this climate of increased accountability, our research seeks to better understand what students have to say about their own performance and experiences in school, what their own academic achievement (i.e., good work) looks like and means to them, what roles their teachers and families play in their motivation to do good work, and lastly, where, if at all, do their state’s exit exams fit

into their concepts of academic achievement.

Why Talk to High School Students?

Even though decisions associated with school improvement affect them directly, students do not have much, if any, occasion to tell adults what those decisions mean to them. While there are a growing number of research studies that pay attention to youth perspectives (Mitra, 2004, 2005; Pierce, 2005), most adults and most reports on high school reform have not incorporated students’ views into their analyses. It is comparatively rare for students to have opportunities to think and talk openly with people in power about why, how, and when they learn. Additionally, students are held accountable to many layers of adults, including parents, teachers, school boards, or districts, about their performance in school, but rarely are students in positions to hold adults directly accountable.³ As Wilson and Corbett (2001) and Cushman (2003, 2005) have shown, educators should not continue to ignore students because in fact they have particular insights into what is going on in their schools. Students also will vote with their feet, either by dropping out or by allowing themselves to be “pushed out” by school authorities. In an era of increased accountability, one in which students and schools are held to more rigid standards, and in which dropout rates, especially among minority students, remain unquestionably high (Orfield, Losen, & Wald, 2004), we believe there is benefit to

³ There are a series of grassroots student activist movements that hold schools and school districts accountable for the quality of education promised and mandated by law. It is beyond the scope of this brief to discuss them. For examples of their activism efforts, see Websites: www.soundout.org; www.yuc.home.mindspring.com; www.nwbcc.net/nwbcc.

listening and considering what students think about their own work and what experiences in high school are valuable to them.

Study Design

This report is based on a study conducted during the 2004-05 and 2005-06 school years. Our data came from a series of 18 semi-structured focus groups of between eight and twelve 11th and 12th graders that we conducted at nine schools, four in New Jersey and five in New York. We selected these two states to see what the presence and importance of these exams have to do with how students think about them and their relationship to “good work” in school. The New York Regents Examinations (Regents) are the oldest of all state tests, while the New Jersey High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA)⁴ has been in place since 2002. Although the New York Regents date back to 1878, they only existed as minimum competency tests required for graduation beginning in 1974. In 1996, the Regents Competency Tests began to be phased out and were replaced with Regents examinations in five subject areas (English/language arts, mathematics, global studies, U.S. history, and science) required for graduation from high school. These exams were first administered in 1999. Because the New York Regents exams cover a wider content area than does the New Jersey HSPA (which at the time of this study covered only language-arts literacy and mathematics, with science to be added in 2007) and because the Regents have a longer history of development and are a more rigorous set of exams, we chose to focus our study on these two states with

⁴ An earlier iteration, the High School Proficiency Test was first administered in 1983 and became a graduation requirement in 1991.

their very different histories with exit exams.

While insights from 9th and 10th graders could provide a valuable perspective, we opted to interview only those students who had already taken their state tests because we wanted to include data on the impact of exit exams. We recognize that by electing to talk only with 11th and 12th graders we omit a key, younger subpopulation who are quite vulnerable to leaving school prematurely. In New York, where we were unable to gain entry to our schools until 2005-06, we chose to interview 12th graders in order to keep the same cohort of students we had interviewed in New Jersey the year before. In all, 125 students participated in the focus groups (two focus groups at each school); the students also completed a short written survey. Although we asked the schools to provide us with focus groups that were representative of their overall student body, we had little control over who showed up. During the course of our interviews we discovered, through student self-reports, that slightly more than 25% of the focus groups in our schools were composed entirely of honors, Advanced Placement (AP), and/or identified student leaders.⁵ Not having access to school records, we relied upon self-reporting measures and what we could learn about the schools from Internet Websites. In terms of their academic performance, 8.5% of students reported getting mostly As, while 48% said they got mostly As and Bs, 14% said mostly Bs, while 24% of students said they earned mostly Bs and Cs. Approximately 6% reported that their grades were either only Cs, or Cs and Ds.

⁵ One theory we had was that when we asked for a sample of students who were representative of the school at large, administrators heard us ask for representatives of the school.

The schools all were either urban or urban fringe, and ranged in size from over 2,300 to several small schools of slightly more than 400 students. Their populations ranged from between 71% and 99% minority students. Of the students we interviewed, 44% were African-American, 28% Hispanic, 9% Asian, 8% identified as biracial, 7.5% were Caucasian, and less than 3% said they were either Native American or Jamaican. When we looked at the school data on free or reduced price lunch, we saw a wide range from the lowest at 8% to the highest at 93%.⁶

Written surveys also were administered to their teachers. Our intention was to administer surveys only to those teachers who worked directly with our sample of 11th and/or 12th graders. Some of the schools were traditional comprehensive high schools. Some operated small learning communities within their school, and others recently reformed as small public charter schools. Teachers' self-reported survey data on their years of experience showed that slightly more than 24% had five years or less while 23% had been teaching for 20 or more years. In all, we collected 214 teacher surveys, although this number represents a disparate response rate across the sample schools. Those schools where we were personally administered the surveys during our visit, the response rates were between 80% and 100%. Not surprisingly, at schools where we were not permitted to administer our survey and left the task to school administrators, our response rates fell to between 0% and 40%. Because of the variance in response rates, we made use of

⁶ It is worth noting that applications for free or reduced price lunch still carries some stigma or embarrassment for some families, and the reported percent at one school, for example, was 30% while its mean annual family income was less than \$30,000. For a more complete demographic profile of each school, see Appendix A.

the teacher data for descriptive purposes and as modest contrasts with our student data. We did not attempt comparisons of teacher data across schools and/or states.

As we stated above, when designing this study, rather than use a more school-based notion of success, such as "academic achievement," our research team chose to use the term "good work" to gain an understanding of the effort and work students put into particular tasks. We made this decision for several reasons. We wanted to get a sense of students' engagement in tasks both inside, as well as outside, of school, and we felt the term "good work" was more applicable to both these environments. Along with that, we wanted to encourage students to think more expansively about how they describe and discern their own quality of work. Finally, because we had such a brief window of opportunity (i.e., one meeting with each group) in which to build trust, openness, and ease within the context of our focus groups, we deliberately avoided using academic jargon that might further distance us from students. We did not define the term "good work" for students, but rather let their discussions about how, when, and why they put effort into projects or tasks serve as definitions for the term itself. We found the focus group format particularly useful for this purpose, as part of the nature of this data collection tool is that an individual's ideas can develop as other participants weigh in with their views on a given topic. For example, we found that while our initial question, "How do you know you've done good work?" generated responses such as teachers' comments, grades, and test scores, further discussion and cross-talk around this topic resulted in richer and more nuanced responses centering on students' internal measures of what good work looked and felt like to them.

Data Analysis

All teacher and student survey data were coded and entered into SPSS, a quantitative software program, and simple frequencies were calculated. Answers to the one written question, which asked teachers for an explanation of the letter grade they awarded their students, we collated and examined for patterns or categories of response. All student focus group data were recorded and transcribed. One or more researchers then read the transcripts and listened to the recordings to clean up any errors. All the focus groups were coded and entered into a qualitative software program (Atlas ti). Our approach to analysis was a series of stages of moving the raw data to final conclusions using a process of data reduction. Working from our interview protocol, codes were developed that broke down the transcripts into large categories. Once entered into Atlas ti, codes were run, read, and re-read to identify thematic categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994), and the data were further reduced into smaller categories. Our researchers collaborated at each step along the way, from code creation to data reduction and analysis, providing inter-reader reliability to the process. The first level of analysis produced summary reports that were delivered to each school we visited. It was our hope that schools might want to discuss our findings, which we called analytic memos, and that the ensuing dialogue would add to our understanding and serve as further reliability checks. However, given the demands of operating urban high schools, it was no surprise that no school had the time (even if they wanted) to respond to our work. Nevertheless, these memos served as an important iterative step in data reduction and analysis and allowed us to look for thematic categories across schools and states. It was only after producing the analytic memos that it

occurred to us to employ as a conceptual framework what is being termed the “new 3Rs”—rigor, relationships, and relevance. Further, because this framework is in current and widespread use among high school reform proponents, we found it to be a valuable set of lenses with which to both view our own data and situate our findings within the larger context of contemporary high school reform.

The New 3Rs in High School Reform

While talk of standards and accountability continues to dominate the editorial pages and policy debates, another less publicized but widespread set of reform ideas also has surfaced and provides some pedagogical structure and promise to high schools. These reform ideas are being called the new 3Rs—*rigor, relationships and relevance*. Although its actual origins may be in question, the concept seems to have first been described by Dennis Littky and the Big Picture Company⁷ in the late 1990s, and soon thereafter became a central tenet of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation’s \$800 million investment in an initiative to reform high schools by making them smaller.⁸ A quick Internet search reveals tens of thousands of specific references to these three qualities as well as examples of their use in one form or another by a diverse array of school districts and schools, as well

⁷ Littky also is the founder of the Met School in Minneapolis, MN. See: www.bigpicture.org

⁸ It should be noted that the initiative to create small high schools is currently being contested, and that even the Gates Foundation is questioning the practicality of restructuring urban high schools. For a detailed discussion of this debate, see the weblog of Mike Klonsky from the Small Schools Workshop. <http://blog306.yahoo.com/blog-6z6lhP08cqXCp9kfshYQPv87gCfJyFg-%20>

as research, policy, and governmental groups, who refer to these 3Rs as key components of successful high school reform.

While there is a lack of agreement in the 3Rs' precise meaning, we offer the following definitions. In general, these 3Rs can be understood as serving as the ligaments with which to tie together a philosophical and pedagogical approach to high school reform that strives to be intellectually challenging, that connects on some personal level with all students, and is linked to perceived useful purposes by students. Increased *rigor* in the content of what is being taught is seen as a means to improve students' intellectual growth, and for most schools and districts this means offering an academic curriculum intended to prepare all students for college. It might also be seen as a direct link to more conservative reformers who see schools in need of a return to traditional subjects and the preservation of a canonical American culture (Hirsch, 1987; Bennett, 1997).

The focus on *relationships* acknowledges that for a high school education to be effective, there must be meaningful connections between students and teachers, and that a higher degree of personalization in teaching and learning relationships is beneficial to all students. Further, relationships are important for the culture of the school to better ensure that every student is known to at least one or more adults in their school, lessening the chances of the student being ignored, failing, or dropping out. This is one of the key appeals of the Gates' small-schools initiative as well as the Coalition for Essential Schools (Sizer, 1992). Having fewer students suggests more direct and personal attention for all students. An emphasis on relationships also can be seen as a direct link

to the progressive movement of the 1960s and 1970s and a time when humanistic psychology and concepts such as self-actualization (Rogers, 1967) were key reform emphases in educational thought.

The rationale behind emphasizing *relevance* in high school posits that students will learn more and be better engaged in school when the curriculum is linked with the "real world" of students. This typically means linking school to the broader worlds of work, community, and the skills associated with different professions. It is an interesting dimension inasmuch as it can appeal to progressive reformers, hearkening back to John Dewey and a child-centered approach to curriculum. It also has appeal to a conservative view that wants students better prepared to enter the work force with hands-on experience via internships, service learning, job shadowing, and hearing first-hand from professionals which academic skills are applicable to their work. Advocating relevance in high school curricula also can be a radical idea that pushes the boundaries of what constitutes the "real world" for many high school students. This reality can include students' feelings of powerlessness, rage, and idealism, their experiences with violence, experiments with emerging sexual mores, drugs, and alcohol, as well as a level of technological sophistication that often is far beyond that of their teachers. It is unclear how willing are schools and school boards, and how well equipped teachers are to welcome the full range of what is relevant to students into the content of their daily curriculum. Welcome or not, as most experienced and observant teachers can attest, students *will* bring their worlds into school.

The remainder of this report examines several dimensions of the high school

experience of students in light of what the students themselves say about the presence or absence of rigor in their academic content (including their state exit exams) and the demands placed upon them, the relationships they have with their teachers and families, and the immediate and/or long-term relevance of their high school education. We also offer several recommendations for school staff to consider about how they might work the views of their students into local school improvement plans.

Students Talk About “Good Work”

We expected that students would conflate their talk about what their “good work” looked like with their grades. It was true that some students (more in New York than New Jersey) did say that grades and the opinions of teachers told them whether their work was good. What we also heard from the vast majority of students was that good work was linked to their own appraisals of themselves and as something that they were able to recognize individually. Regardless of the type of classes they were in, their definitions had much more to do with how they felt about their work, their degree of effort, and whether what they learned had any relevance to them. Students, especially those not enrolled in honors or AP classes, told us that they wished that their classes were more challenging and that their teachers pushed them harder. By “harder” they meant not simply giving them more difficult work, but leading and encouraging them to rise to the challenge, as well as having the work itself rooted in some relevant way that extended into the larger world. When they could see how the content of a subject connected to a profession (e.g., chemistry with alternative energy sources for powering cars), they began to recognize that learning abstract properties made a

certain practical sense. These are examples of what we mean by the 3Rs operating dynamically. A recent national survey showed that students across the country felt the same (National Governors Association, 2005) and believed that they would be more motivated and engaged if classes were more challenging.

Many of the students in our study also understood that what constituted good work and the rigor associated with it was bundled into a kind of classroom performance or game that they learned how to play, even if some felt the outcomes were rigged. As one student in New York put it, “*Some teachers, it don’t matter what you do, you get the same grade.*” Students believed that sometimes teachers graded them on how well-behaved they were. We heard such examples as, “*Like, my grades are good, but it’s not because I learned a lot and I did so well on the test. It’s because . . . I’m not rude to them, so they’re just grateful for that, so they give me a good grade.*” Another student said:

If you come to class and you just are quiet and you stay to yourself, even if you do your work sometimes as opposed to somebody that’s more vocal, but they do work all the time, you’re going to get a higher grade than them . . . just for the fact that you’re, like, quiet or you just sit in the corner to yourself or whatever, that’s what I see.

Students distinguished between work done an hour before class and work where they had invested their time and selves in understanding something deeply, or the work they did for one teacher who did not seem to care versus another teacher who cared deeply. As one student put it, “*You get one A and you just say, ha, and put it in your book bag or something. And the other kind*

where you get an A and then smile and look through the paper even though you know what it says.” As tautological as it sounds, these students knew the difference between an A and an A.

Students talked about their academic achievements in terms of what they needed to obtain the grades they wanted and to graduate. When asked specifically if it was important to do well in school, we heard mixed replies. Honors students told us that it was and added that their own friendly competition with each other for the best grades spurred them on to do their best. Many not in honors classes were content to do what was needed to pass and viewed college and not high school as the time and place for their academic performance to be significant and relevant. For now, getting out of high school—*“I won’t have to come back and I’ll be very satisfied”*—was the overriding goal of 99% of the students we interviewed.

Students talked about doing good work when they worked to the best of their ability and saw the utility or relevance of what they learned. *“You feel much better when you know you did something. You know you learned that or you know the subject or you know what’s going on in the class, like you’re not lost anywhere. You know you learned something. You know you’re passing this class for a reason, because you put the effort into it.”* Students also were not above holding themselves accountable for their performances. In our survey data, while over 90% of the students said that it was important to do well in school, only 60% claimed that they did their best on a regular basis. In fairness, these students are still adolescents who are discovering who they are and what they care about, and it seems a little unrealistic to expect a consistently high level of concentration on academic

achievement across the board. Still it was impressive to us to see them include honest self-appraisals of the gap between their desire and their effort in what they thought constituted examples of their own good work. Finally, when it came to their concepts of “good work,” they also talked about not getting this feeling of accomplishment often enough in school or in as many classes as they would like. They wished that more teachers cared and pushed them to stay motivated to perform their best. One student, a recent immigrant and English-language learner, talked about how gaining academic competence inspired him to want to do more.

I like the fact that I’m the second [ranked] person in my class, and I just had two and a half years here. And that motivates me. I want to keep being the best. I want to keep doing the best I can. And when people say, “Oh my god! You’re only two years here? Look at your English. How’d you learn so fast? Look at your grades turned out so great.” And that’s another thing that makes me want to do better.

Recommendation 1

This notion of “success breeding success” was powerful for these students. Just because they scored high or low grades and exams scores, it did not necessarily mean the same thing to them as it did to their schools or school districts. These students described their good work as connected to a sense of intellectual and personal integrity. They knew when they had worked hard and earned certain grades and scores and when they had not and/or when they were able to play the grade game with certain teachers. When they saw themselves as confident and able to excel at

something, their drive to continue with mastery was often quite strong. All the students we spoke with had some area of their lives where they felt they were doing good work, be it art, sports, child care, or even braiding hair, and it was an area where they willingly gave time and effort to developing their particular skills. Teachers and schools could build upon students' sense of competence outside of school and use those out-of-school experiences as a means of understanding what is relevant to students and how to engage them more meaningfully with the work inside school.

Motivation in Students' Lives

Many students associated their motivation to do well with their imagined future, be it to graduate, go to college, acquire money, or have a career. Students also recognized that they needed to finish high school because, as one put it, "*without a diploma you don't get nothing, [sic] that's where everything begins.*" When we asked what it would mean to graduate, we repeatedly heard such simple declarations as "Everything;" and "*I just want to be done with high school.*" These comments came from students who told us they like their school, attend classes, think they are getting a good education, and want to be challenged further. Although it is clear that students are motivated to finish high school in large measure because they find it boring and/or uninspiring, others are driven by the prospect of graduation as the long-anticipated entry into their own independent adult lives.

Quite a number of students described their motivation to do well in school introspectively and placed the onus for their performance on themselves. One student

analyzed his situation: "*...I push myself in classes that I'm good at. And classes I'm not good at, some of them are the classes I don't want to take so I'm not motivated to push myself to work harder in them, which is a problem.*" For many of these students, the negative aspects of life after high school served as stark motivators. "*A lot of kids drop out of school by the time they get to the 12th grade. ...How far can anyone go? Being in the street you got two options, jail or death. You pick the option. You know there is more to life.*" Despite their insights into the future, these students also were realists and questioned what it was about high school that was worthwhile in the here and now. One young woman's perspective captures some of the ambivalence about the utility of what they were learning:

When I'm in school I say, like, I really need to do this because what am I going to do later on [in the future]. But it's like you think about it at the time, but then I look at my mother. I ask her a question about math and she will say, "Oh, I forgot about that years ago." So why am I studying it now? Am I going to forget it in a couple of years? ... You think yes and then you think no; you really don't know. You're confused on what to do.

Our data show that students come with goals and expectations that something good will happen and that they want some valuable teaching and learning to take place. These students *are* motivated. If not, more than likely, they would have already dropped out or changed schools. They also are not simply at school for the social life. Students' explanations for why they are motivated to do well in high school seemed to us to be very much a part of what could be meant by the reality of the new 3Rs.

Teachers' Influence

Perhaps not surprising is the fact that students spoke about their schools as having teachers who challenged them and who were strong motivators as well as ones who were unsupportive, not engaging, or had little control over their classrooms, even if they were likeable. Overall, students seemed to genuinely appreciate being made to work hard in their courses. There was a degree of energy and pride with which students spoke about being put to a challenge and then meeting that challenge. However, among all of their courses, students admitted to being challenged and engaged in only a few and, for some students, not at all. Perhaps because of their scarcity, those teachers with whom students had good relationships left strong impressions in students' minds. One student offered an example of the interpersonal qualities he appreciated.

Like some teachers, they'll see something wrong, they notice. Once Mr. Johnson noticed that it was something, like, in my work. He's like, "You're going down, what's wrong?" Like they notice a certain insight in you, so it's not so much being a friend, it's just being there for you. And it's true, they grow accustomed to you and they get that connection. And they just do it to help.

Students had very clear ideas about how and what they were being taught in their classes. When students told us that "*I didn't feel I was learning the way I needed to learn,*" or that long-time teachers need to "*[refresh] themselves and really [get] involved in what they teach,*" or "*the teachers, some of them are concerned with test scores, while some of them actually want you to gain and retain information,*" those comments indicated some level of

awareness of the interaction between teaching and learning. It was through the best relationships with teachers that students' examples of the interaction between the new 3Rs were most telling. Students described challenging and engaging teachers as individuals who "*motivate you beyond the curriculum,*" who are passionate and knowledgeable about the subject matter, and who not only help them understand the material but also can make it relevant and connected to the world outside the classroom. According to many students, this type of "good teaching" also includes offering more than surface-level comments on student work and/or comes from teachers who make themselves available to students individually if they need extra help. One young woman had this to say: "*I like it when teachers tell me when something is wrong and they show me what I can do to improve, or teach me different techniques instead of saying, 'Oh, well, you didn't know what you were doing.'*" Students reported not only wanting, but needing, substantive feedback on their work in order to excel in their classes. Students in honors classes cited teachers' written comments as the type of constructive feedback that all students said was important to them. "*They say something unique to that person about, like, well on your paper, I really liked how you did this. Or you could have done this a little more. And that shows they took the time to actually read and care about it, which makes you feel like they are actually reading and caring about what you are doing.*" Other students, not in honors classes, echoed this sentiment by saying that, along with one-on-one meetings, written comments were helpful to them because that practice allowed them to re-read their teachers' remarks and think them over without having to remember exactly what they said.

The importance of relationships was not limited only to classroom teachers. Because our sample was composed of juniors and seniors, college and life beyond high school was very much on their minds. The guidance counseling staff were frequently mentioned, and we heard in many (but not all) schools that the counseling office was understaffed and not as responsive or available to help with the college application process. One young woman characterized this lack of guidance as a misalignment of emphases. *“So it’s like her priorities over ours. You’re a teacher, I believe your priority is supposed to be students first, I’m guessing. But it’s like, ‘No, I’m first going to eat my lunch and do my class work and things like that. And then, after I’m done and I’m all prepared and everything, I’ll come and get you.’”* Many students reported filling out their college applications without help from school staff. Some received help from supportive teachers or administrators rather than the guidance counselor. Others reported that they felt discouraged by the application process and chose to consider entering community college or not to apply to school at all. This small data sample is illustrative of the types of relationships or their absence that teachers and other school staff have with students and their impact on students’ immediate futures.

One of the more telling, if not upsetting, contradictions we found in our survey data involved students' aspirations for post-high school education versus their teachers' beliefs about the level of education their students would achieve. Overwhelmingly, students held much higher aspirations for themselves. Their survey answers indicated most planned to obtain a college or graduate degree, whereas many of their teachers believed that fewer than half of their students would even attend, let alone complete college. While it is possible that

teachers’ responses held a more accurate appraisal of what is involved in college work and the attainment of degrees, this distinction between students’ and teachers’ aspirations is deserving of further investigation. In an environment that is shifting towards providing a curriculum that prepares all students for college, this variance in beliefs about students’ futures is a potentially large gap to bridge.

Recommendation 2

Students’ critiques of the quality of teaching and teachers in their schools highlight the interactive nature of the 3Rs. For students, the best teachers were those who were able to establish personal relationships and help students see the practical relevance to what they were teaching. This in turn made students want to work harder and bring more rigor to bear. One important intersection between rigor and relationships was in students’ appreciation of and desire for (more) detailed, written comments on their work, as some teachers provided. Students said this attention was quite useful in learning what they had done well and what they still needed to work on, and they wanted more of this feedback from more of their teachers. In addition, by high school, students have a long history of observing and experiencing the full range of teaching. Considering the potential value of their unique perspective, school officials would do well to invite students to participate on school improvement committees and solicit their advice and counsel about what, in their view, makes for effective teaching and learning. Their input could help schools build strategies for improving the rigor, relationships, and relevance that school holds or could hold for students (e.g., Cushman, 2003, 2005).

Family Influence

A most interesting divergence in our data came from questions about family involvement. When we surveyed teachers, they named families' lack of participation and interest in their children's school as major obstacles to the quality of education students received. Teachers also believed that parents by and large looked at students' grades to ascertain how they were doing. More personal interactions such as in-school meetings, telephone calls, or face-to-face conversations with parents were hardly mentioned as ways teachers communicated with their students' families. In comparison, we heard students talk at length about the roles their families played in their education. Although they admitted that their parents rarely showed up at school, in no way was this an indicator of their non-involvement. Some students did acknowledge that the amount of time their parents spent working prevented direct involvement with their school. In these instances, students said their parents generally deferred to the authority of the teachers and school officials to manage and monitor what occurred in school. However, it is important to underscore that a lack of direct parental participation with the school was not, in these students' views, the same as a disinterest in their education. Students said that their parents pushed them to excel in school and encouraged them to remain focused, avoid conflict and problems in school, and not be distracted or sidetracked by less-than-perfect learning environments. Consider this exchange among several students about the kind of advice they had received from their parents:

[Student 1] *My parent is like this: Don't go to school worrying about what this person do, what that person do. You're here for one thing and one thing only – that's to benefit yourself*

so that you can do better, and that you can graduate.

[Student 2] *It don't matter how bad the school is...it's just that you matter...and if you are the one that want to graduate, you are the one that has to be responsible for what happens to your grades...so it doesn't really matter about the school, it matter s about your effort.*

[Student 3] *It's your responsibility to graduate. It's your responsibility to be good. It's your responsibility to do what you have to do.*

Family members were cited repeatedly as key motivating forces in students' lives. We heard examples of parents questioning them on their work in school. Some families, they told us, offered them incentives in the form of praise, money, and extra freedom for exemplary performance. There also was punishment, largely in the form of a loss of individual freedoms and extracurricular activities, if their grades fell below an expected level. Others made mention of how their parents expect them to do well without any incentives, as this dialogue among several students illustrated:

"My mom is, like, since I was little I always do my work, so I used to be, 'Hey, can I get something for doing my work?' And she's, like, 'No, because you do it anyway.' "

"Yeah, you shouldn't be rewarded for your work."

"You should be, but not from your parents. If you get an A, you don't have to be rewarded because that is your reward already."

"That's what my mom says all the time. It makes me so upset."

Doing well in school was an important way these students showed respect and honor to their parents for the sacrifices they made and the expectations they held. A number of students were proud that they would be the first or among the first in their families to graduate high school and/or attend college, and what that achievement would mean to their parents contributed to their motivation to succeed.

Recommendation 3

A common problem in high schools is the perception that parents are not involved and care less about their children's education than when the students were younger. Our data show that student relationships with family and parental interest in school success both remain strong and play an important role in how students understand the relevance of their high school experience. If high schools want to promote parental involvement, they might invite students to work with guidance and other school staff to develop new strategies for better engaging their families.

State Exams

I did it. I didn't want to fail it but I really didn't care.

This statement sums up much of what we heard from students about the HSPA and the Regents exit exams they needed to pass in order to graduate. "Boring" and "easy" also were adjectives they frequently used. Students said that their teachers did a pretty good job preparing them, but in New York, students added that it was their responsibility to motivate themselves to do well on the Regents exams. While one school enrolled all students whose diagnostic test scores were low in a semester-long HSPA course, most New

Jersey students rarely mentioned the need to be motivated to pass the HSPA.

Interestingly, in response to the survey statement, "*It's important to me to do well on the Regent or HSPA exams,*" virtually 100% of students said they either "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with the statement, and yet when talking in the focus groups about the actual test, they expressed both ambivalence and doubts. Additionally, we heard comments across the schools that their teachers had "hyped" the exams and made them out to be far more challenging than they turned out to be. There were a number of students who said they felt some stress and anxiety, with their graduation at stake if they failed. But more often, these students described the state exams as a waste of their time and objected strongly to any inference that the test results were a reflection of what they knew or how they thought. Honors students in New Jersey went so far as to complain that the HSPA was an insult to their intelligence.

Students in both states expressed ambivalence about the relevance of the exams. They understood their short-term impact, but questioned their viability as an assessment tool. One student explained her incentive to do well on these exams: "*Like, you don't pass the Regents, you can't get into a good college. You don't pass the Regents, you won't graduate.*" Another admitted he was not particularly motivated. "*...I'm getting out of here, I'm good. I don't aim for 80. Because, to me, passing is passing. I don't care about being on the honor roll, because I don't like the attention. I just like my 65s and that's it.*" What relevance students derived from the exams were the benefits associated with passing them, but beyond that, students did not mention any value added to their education. One of our initial focus-group questions was, "What will it mean to graduate?" By

far, the most common answer had to do with getting out and being done with school—a response even from some students who were among the first in their families to graduate. Not unlike their sense of high school in general, the Regents and HSPA exams were viewed as something they had to get through. Regarding state exams and the 3Rs, only their relationships with a handful of teachers who provided encouragement and coaching in preparation for the exams figured in a positive way into the testing experience of the students in our study.

Because students received their scores many months after taking the test and, according to these students, because the results did not provide them with specific information on the content areas they either did well or did poorly on, these students viewed the exams as not especially useful. Most preferred to cite their coursework as a better measure of their scholastic abilities and accomplishments. Few students' perspectives on the exit exams signaled that there were elements of rigor associated with them. Additionally, their objections to the measurements conferred, both real and imagined, underscored the absence of relevance that accompanied the exams, apart from their gate-keeping purpose. Some students complained about the contrived nature of the exams and that never again would they be asked to show their knowledge in this same way. Apart from the exams they expected to take in college, they could not imagine other situations where such an individual, private, and timed approach would be required to sort out or answer particular problems.

Conclusion

The data from our study strongly suggest that many students' views echoed the current reform language of the new 3Rs. However, students described an absence of the 3Rs as much as their presence. It is important to keep in mind that these three concepts operate dynamically and interact one with the other. For example, it is unlikely to expect much rigor from or relevance for a student who has no positive relationship with his or her teacher(s). Conversely, as our data indicated, students were more likely to work hard and accept more challenges from teachers whom they felt cared about them as learners and/or who could successfully link the content of their class to issues and concerns in the larger world that affect and animate students.

Students' views of the future and their goals for themselves, be they college attendance, advanced degrees, or specific professional lives, also served to make relevant what they were doing and learning in high school. They accepted the fact that getting through high school was a necessary pathway leading them to where they wanted to go. We found that students' relationships with key teachers, and the ability of these key teachers to imbue a sense of relevance to what students were learning, were valued more by students than the grades they received. This was true even though the students knew enough about how the system worked to know that earning grades helped them play the game to win. Certainly, their faint interest in their scores on state exit exams did not indicate either a sense of rigor or relevance, beyond the immediate need to pass them in order to graduate and move on.

The majority of students in our study talked about not being challenged academically and wished that more teachers

and classes were more rigorous. Frequently, they pointed to relationships with key teachers as critical to their schooling experience. It was highly important to students to have at least a few teachers who genuinely cared about them personally and about how they were doing academically, who believed in them and pushed them to reach their ability to succeed, and who took time to adjust their instruction to individual learning styles. In the experiences of these students, only a few teachers embodied these qualities. We heard this across all the schools we visited, whether large comprehensive, a small learning community within a school, or a small charter school.

Contrary to our survey data from teachers, who reported students' parents as uninvolved with their children's education, students told us that relationships with family members figured into their motivation to succeed academically. Lastly, as mentioned above, the relevance of their high school education was most often expressed in terms of their future goals and aspirations. Students reported doing what was asked of them in school because they saw it as a means to an end, be that college admittance, obtaining an advanced degree, working in a particular profession, or simply graduating. What we did not hear were examples of how their high school education was providing students with value in the here and now.⁹

What puzzles us is thinking about the larger picture of how and in what ways an emphasis on accountability and a concentration on the 3Rs contributes to

⁹ One exception was students in an Applied Engineering Small Learning Community in one school. Their practical hands-on work building robots for competition and vehicles that ran on alternative fuel sources were largely what inspired them to attend school and continue learning.

clarifying the purpose of what a high school education means. One question we put to students was, "What will it mean to graduate?" Far and away, their primary answer had to do with simply getting out and being done with school, even from the students who were school leaders and who were excelling in school. Across the board, students seemed to be ready for the experience to be over. Currently, there is a shift in reform thinking that posits that all students, regardless of ability, should have a curriculum that prepares them for college. Making a college-preparedness curriculum available to all students also appeals to a societal interest in redressing inequities of the past and explicit and implicit forms of tracking that have persisted. Although a college curriculum for all sounds attractive and reasonable in abstract and simple terms (sort of like being in favor of rigor, relationships, and relevance), such a curriculum still leaves unanswered the larger question of what is worthwhile about being in high school. As we read it, a focus on a curriculum to prepare all students for college seems to perpetuate the message that high school is not meaningful on its own. Instead, high school exists to be a portal to college where real learning of real importance and value will take place.

Although subject to much ideological debate, the purpose of school typically has been variations on the axiom, "Wait until you're older"; that is, what you learn in the first grade is supposed to prepare you for the second grade, just as Algebra I prepares you to take Algebra II. However, it remains an open question whether what students learn in today's high schools actually prepares them for college. Colleges are saying that is not the case as evidenced by the number of students, especially from urban schools, who spend their first year or more in remedial

coursework (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2006).

During our data collection, knowing that we represented a well-known Ivy League University, students had questions for us about what college life was like. Most students were genuinely shocked when we told them that they could expect to be assigned considerably more pages of reading per class and per week than they were asked to read in high school. These students seemed not prepared for that aspect of college life. Additionally, when we told them that their success in coursework would be even more their responsibility than in high school and that they might not find many professors who took as personal an interest in them as they described of those high school teachers they admired and respected, they expressed anxiety, as if they also were not prepared to become the autonomous learners we suggested college would expect them to be. These are but two of a myriad of aspects of college life that high schools may not attend to even as they advertise an academic curriculum that prepares all students to go to college. These factors—the disconnect between high school and college, and the emphases on passing tests and doing enough to get by—contribute to our understanding of why these students said they were bored, not challenged, uninspired, and eager to be done with high school. If it is only going to be a means to an end (e.g., getting into college), how will high school sustain its meaning and value to students, especially over time?

As we heard it, these students wanted their time in high school to mean something. They were excited when there were challenging encounters with teachers and subject matter, and that engagement inspired them to want more. But, they also were well aware of how often their time in school

meant little or nothing and were resigned to doing what was necessary to get out in the hope that life beyond high school would be more fulfilling. If these students are any indication of the overall population in urban schools, it seems unlikely to expect that more accountability measures will make students more motivated and school less boring. However, recent interest on the part of educators, administrators, and policymakers in the 3Rs as organizing principles for high school reform were not so far from the language that these students used to describe which aspects of school mattered most and held the most value for them.

In her recent book, *Critical Lessons*, educational philosopher Nel Noddings (2006) makes a detailed and persuasive case that, pedagogically, high schools should center on teaching students critical thinking. In her conclusion, Noddings writes, “Students do not have to study traditional academic courses to become critical thinkers, but when their own interests are respected, they may listen attentively to what the great thinkers have said about those interests. They may even add productively to that thinking” (p. 290). What Noddings is advocating is not what most people think of when they use the term *academic rigor*. For many, *rigor* is associated with “hard” and “serious” subject matter—nothing that could be construed as extracurricular or arts-related. Noddings argues that what is needed in high schools is a commitment on the part of educators to provide young people with things to think about, to take their views seriously, and to work with students to develop the shape and direction of their thoughts and ideas. Locating where those “things to think about” exist can be found by looking into what happens in students’ immediate worlds as well as in the larger worlds that adults, educators, and leaders

want them to enter with confidence and good judgment. Noddings' emphasis on critical thinking offers a way of seeing the dynamic interaction between and among the 3Rs. She argues that this dynamism occurs by encouraging and trusting that when students are engaged in thinking critically about real things they will, among other activities, come to discover the value and utility of academic content areas and the need for serious study.

However, it also is important to keep in mind that students will arrive at this point from a variety of entry points and not simply the lock-step routine of earning Carnegie Units that lead to a diploma. From our small sample of students as well as from national student survey data (National Governors Association, 2005), it seems evident that far too many students experience high school as a business-as-usual approach, full of rote requirements. They tell us that this leads to their sense of boredom, a lack of intellectual challenge, and, for far too many, a premature exit from school. If students have little else to think about except getting out, passing exit exams, and/or following an increasingly standardized and limited set of curricula, what can we honestly expect to change in schools or in their attitudes? Students' perspectives on their own education can contribute to defining and giving some traction to what is meant by rigor, relationships, and relevance. Offering students the chance to think and act critically and inviting students to contribute their opinions and ideas to plans for school improvement (as well as for how the 3Rs could best be employed) seem plausible ways to make a difference in the meaning and outcomes of a high school education.

Acknowledgments

The authors of this paper would like to acknowledge the help of Karen Hussar and Richard Elmore at Harvard University and those who read and commented on earlier versions of the work, including Jean Anyon, Liza Finkel, Elliot Weinbaum, Kate Hovde, Peg Goertz, and Cathy Dunn Shiffman.

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Appendix A. Characteristics of Participating High Schools

School Name (pseudonyms)	School Size	Location	Ethnicity Breakdown	Free and Reduced Lunch*	Academic 2004-05 HSPA or 2005-06 Regents Data
Blue Mountain	430	Urban	2% Asian 61% H 34% AA 2% W	84%	37% Math A 61% Eng
Fish Creek	430	Urban	1.1% Asian 61.1% H 36.1% AA 1.7% C	93%	35% Math A 39% Eng
Ford	1484	Urban Fringe	11% Asian 11% H 49% AA 29% C	27%	83% P/A LA 74% P/A Math
Forest Hills	430	Urban	2% Asian 67% H 30% B 1% W	84%	35% Math A 44% Eng
Kennedy	2336	Urban	1% Asian, 27% H 69% AA 3% C	40%	52% P/A LA 32% P/A math
Long View	430	Urban	55% H 43% B 1% W 1% Un	92%	51% Math A 33% Eng
Polk	2137	Urban Fringe	22% Asian 9% H 33% AA 35% C	12%	87% P/A LA, 78% P/A Math
Treetop	430	Urban	2% Asian 58% H 37% AA 2% W	75%	39% Math A 58% Eng
Truman	1375	Urban Fringe	8% Asian 17% H 46% AA 28% C	8%	81% P/A LA, 71% P/A math

HSPA scores are reported as aggregate totals of P (passing)/A (advanced).

Source for all this data: www.publicschoolreview.com.