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## **Voices from the margins : a phenomenological interview study of twenty vocational high school students' educational histories.**

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VOICES FROM THE MARGINS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INTERVIEW STUDY  
OF TWENTY VOCATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' EDUCATIONAL  
HISTORIES

A Dissertation Presented

by

JANE P. NAGLE

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

February 1995

Education

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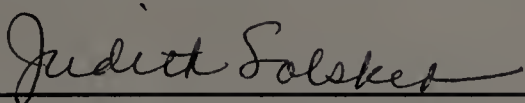
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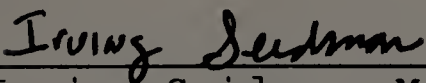
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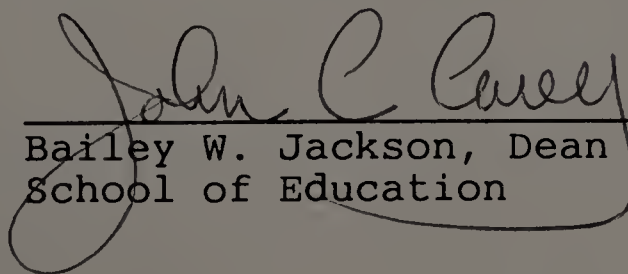
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DEDICATION

To the educators  
who showed me the path to understanding the stories I was  
told

and

To the participants  
who renewed my faith in the strength of the human spirit

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I want to thank Professor Judy Solsken whose quiet dignity and scholarship have been inspirational to me. She offered probing questions that move my research to a higher level and gentle encouragement when I was at points of struggle. Professor Irving Seidman was always available to help me make meaning from the participants' stories. He personifies the intellectual work of teaching. Professor Charles Moran's verve and enthusiasm about teaching and learning are models for me as a researcher and a teacher. David Bloome's writings and teaching helped me to build a strong theoretical foundation for my research.

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ABSTRACT

VOICES FROM THE MARGINS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INTERVIEW STUDY  
OF TWENTY VOCATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' EDUCATIONAL  
HISTORIES

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This dissertation reports a study of twenty vocational high school students' educational histories. This qualitative phenomenological interview study examines the participants' school experiences in order to explore connections between those experiences and an understanding of empowerment, in relationship to marginalization, voice and voicelessness, and access to school literacy. The purposes of the study were: to investigate how the participants' educational experiences inform our understanding of the origin of the marginalization; to analyze the ways the participants' educational experiences inform our understanding about voice and voicelessness; and to examine the connections between the participants' school

literacy experiences and our understanding about accessing school literacy as a component of empowerment.

This study used in-depth phenomenological interviewing as qualitative research. Three sixty minute interviews were conducted. The audiotapes, transcriptions, and notes from the interviews became the raw data for the analysis. Salient points were recorded in individual stories and across the twenty stories. This process led to the identification of three specific themes: marginalization and home experiences; voice/voicelessness and classroom experiences; and access to school literacy in relationship to social identity and status.

The results of the study show that the home/school disconnection played an important role in positioning participants within the margins of school. That disconnection was influenced by their working class status. The working class status was intergenerational and contributed to the decision to attend a vocational high school. Voicelessness within the classroom increased the participants' sense of disempowerment in school. Voicelessness was examined on the levels of administration and discipline. The effect of voicelessness on peer interaction was also a focus. The effect that accessing school literacy had on the participants' social identity and status within school was the final component of empowerment that was discussed. Three areas were highlighted: the disconnection between home and school literacy practices;

the treatment received by participants who had difficulties accessing school literacy; and the connection between school literacy and social identity in schools. The participants' school experiences inform our understandings about the boarder social issue of inequalities of public education.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION AND FOCUS OF THE STUDY

#### A. Overview and Background

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological interview study was to learn more about the educational histories of twenty vocational high school students in order to understand the effect those school experiences had on their decision to attend a vocational high school as their option for secondary education. Qualitative phenomenological interviewing as a research methodology provides the opportunity for participants to tell their stories. After the in-depth phenomenological interview process is completed, the stories became the participants' reconstructed histories. "Reconstruction is based partially on memory and partially on what the participants now sense as important about the past event" (Seidman, 1991, p.67). Seidman's model (1991) for phenomenological interviewing is used in this study. The interviews for this study focused on the school lives of the participants and were structured so that the following areas were covered: participants' school and family histories; the present school experiences of the participants; and reflections by the participants about meanings they drew from their school histories and their choice of vocational education.



There are several layers to the school experiences of these participants. Uncovering the layers of their stories through the in-depth phenomenological interview process allows the participants to have their stories heard and examined. From the stories told by these vocational high school participants, answers emerge to broader social issues concerning the causes of inequalities in public education. The interview analysis led to an exploration of the connections between their educational histories and an understanding of social and cultural reproduction and production in schools, especially in relationship to the issue of empowerment and disempowerment. Empowerment is a process that challenges assumptions, defines power in a new way and gives voice to the one who is empowered (Barrow, 1990). "Empowerment means not only helping students to understand and engage the world around them, but also enabling them to exercise the kind of courage needed to change the social order where necessary" (McLaren, 1989, p.182). Disempowerment is an inability to access the process of empowerment. Three specific components of the issue of empowerment and disempowerment considered in this study are: marginalization, voice/voicelessness and access to school literacy.

Vocational education is one of the connections among the twenty participants. This study uses the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Department of Education, Chapter 74 Regulations (1993), definition of vocational education.

That definition states that the primary purpose of vocational education is to prepare students for profitable employment. The study is concerned with two issues. The first issue of concern is the effect that the school and literacy histories had on these participants' decisions to attend vocational high schools. The second issue focuses on the broader social concern of whether or not vocational education is the ultimate marginalization from the mainstream of secondary public education.

This study examines the possibility that the choice of vocational high school for secondary education may be reflective of a sense of disempowerment as often as it is reflective of the desire to become a tradesperson. The idea is explored that the desire for vocational education may be coupled with a sense of failure either socially or academically or both in earlier school experiences. The connection between the decision to attend a vocational high school and inequalities of public education prior to secondary schooling is an important aspect of this study.

### B. Theoretical Framework

#### 1. Critical Theory: Reproduction and Production

This study uses concepts from critical theory (Apple, 1988; Aronowitz, 1981; Freire, 1990; Giroux, 1992; McLaren, 1987) in relationship to three of the components of the issue of empowerment and disempowerment: marginalization, voice/voicelessness and access to school literacy. These components of empowerment and disempowerment are at the

heart of the questions I have concerning the places in school occupied by vocational high school participants. The concepts of critical theory will inform the analysis of the stories told by these participants.

Critical theory has two tenets that are important to the focus of this study: reproduction and production. Reproduction theory states that existing social structures maintain and reproduce themselves. Understanding the concept of reproduction will be helpful as a framework for an analysis of the school experiences of this study's participants in relationship to their places within the power structures of school. There are two types of reproduction, social reproduction and cultural reproduction and an understanding of both is important in the exploration of the complexity of the school experiences of these participants.

Social reproduction refers to a belief which often is unstated and yet is inherited by each generation in a society. This belief is that reproducing class relationships and structures is inevitable and unchangeable. Cultural reproduction is the premise that schools legitimize certain groups through language, knowledge, and patterns of interaction. These two tenets are important to this study because they raise questions concerning the inevitability of working class students entering vocational education. Weiler (1991) writes that dominant social classes are successful in school because they already know what is

valued. If this is true, then the working class students, as well as others outside of the dominant social classes, would have to battle to gain access to school success and that success, if achieved, may have little value since it is not part of their social or cultural background.

All of the students within this study meet the study's definition of working class and are therefore located in the margins of the mainstream middle class discourse of schools. The definition of working class for the purposes of this study is that members of the working class are paid for their time (an hourly pay rate) and not for their skills (a salaried pay rate). Some writing done about the working class in the world outside of school (Meier, 1989; Weis, 1990; Snow, 1990) suggests a powerlessness that critical theorists see replicated within the institution of school. Sennett and Cobb (1973) explain that what is most insidious about the American class system is the willingness, if not the felt need, of disenfranchised citizens to rationalize their inequality. Harrington (1984) claims that in this country we have a working class that exists but cannot say its own name. Harrington feels that it is not an issue of distaste for class but how distaste obscures class.

Critical theorists (Persell, 1977; Aronowitz, 1981; Giroux, 1983; McLaren, 1989) suggest that the exclusion experienced by students like the participants in this study does not happen by accident. They acknowledge that through instruction and social relationships in school, school



participants learn their place in the world as well as the lessons that are being taught. School reproduce the social relationships and attitudes needed to sustain the existing dominant economic and class relations of the larger society (Aronowitz, 1991). This leads to a sense of isolation for those school participants who are not part of the dominant mainstream culture. Their places in school become places within the margins of the classrooms. They are not the focus of the lessons or the social activities within the classrooms. They are marginalized. Within this study marginalization refers to the students who are never in the direct view of the teachers when they are planning and conducting lessons (Sinclair, 1987). These students are often viewed by school personnel as deviants from the mainstream of public education. Students who are in the margins are often times aware of the fact that their needs are somehow not being met by schools. They frequently accept responsibility for that and do not blame the institution of school but rather blame themselves. On the surface they seem to accept reproduction and yet there is evidence within the stories of the participants in this study that the majority wanted to fight for their place in the mainstream of public education.

The working class status of the participants within this study was solidified by the decision to attend a vocational high school. The goal of vocational education is to prepare students to go into the work force as opposed to

continuing formal education at a post secondary level. Through the choice of vocational education reproduction occurred: the working class student usually became the working class adult. Understanding the reasons for this choice informs our understanding of the mechanisms of reproduction within school.

Critical theory would suggest that one way to combat this reproduction is through production. Production refers to the ways that individuals and social classes assert their own experiences and resist the status quo. Unfortunately often times the forms of resistance used by marginalized school participants are self-destructive. When they practice resistance, it is often self-destructive because of its antisocial nature. Marginalized students frequently begin to despair of sharing the mainstream structure of economic and social opportunities. "I learned to be silent in school," and "I was a rebel. When I was causing trouble everyone knew I was there," are two quotes from young men who were explaining how they learned to exist in schools where they always felt on the outside looking in. They resisted the unfairness of schools in self-defeating ways. The silent one felt he had made himself invisible to the teachers and felt it was his own fault. The "rebel" felt that even the teachers he liked were happy when he was absent. Both of the young men had a sense that their voices were not heard within school.

The concept of voice is multilayered and complex. "Voice is the tool by which we make ourselves known, name our experience, and participate in decisions that affect our lives" (Shannon, 1993, p.91). Having voice is one of the keys to equality in schools. Voice refers to a private internalized discourse that can only be understood if one understands its history and cultural position. "Discourses are about what can be said and thought, but also about who can speak, when, and with what authority" (Ball, 1990, p.2). The educator needs to know and respect the place the school participant occupies outside of school, if the voice of that school participant is going to be heard within the classroom. The boy who was silent was apparently given the message that his inner voice was somehow inappropriate for school so it never became part of the classroom discourse.

Giroux (1983) believes that school participants in subordinate groups rarely learn to tell their own stories because their voices are not heard within schooling. Voice can provide the critical conditions by which people in the margins of the mainstream can reclaim their own stories and histories and so begin the struggle to challenge those powers that attempt to silence them.

The issue of voice/voicelessness is pivotal to understanding production. Analyzing the stories told by the participants about not being allowed to speak or how they silenced themselves out of either fear or ignorance of the

school culture will inform our understanding of how production is practiced or not practiced within school.

## 2. Literacy Practices in Schools

Having voice is one of the keys to opening the door to school literacy in the same way that school literacy is one of the keys to obtaining a position of power within schools and therefore to the practice of production. There is a long tradition in the United States of viewing schools as neutral institutions whose language and social regulations mirror the principles of equal opportunity. Critical theory states that it is a misconception that school participants have open access to the language and knowledge that schools provide as part of their public responsibility to educate. Understanding my theoretical reference concerning literacy is imperative to understanding the importance of the school literacy experiences in positioning this study's participants within school. Solsken's (1993) conceptualization of literacy and literacy learning is the model for this study's theoretical framework for literacy.

The beginning literacy experiences of this study's participants are important in the analysis of their school literacy experiences. Solsken (1993) frames three perspectives on beginning literacy that inform current research. The most influential of these perspectives in relationship to school literacy instruction is that of emergent literacy.



The assumptions of this perspective about literacy and learning are largely those of cognitive/developmental psychology and developmental psycholinguistics. Literacy is regarded as a body of cognitive knowledge about written language and a set of processes for using that knowledge; learning is seen as the gradual development over time of that knowledge and those processes on the basis of biologically given properties of the mind and exposure to and interaction with written language. (p.3)

Solsken wrote that the emergent literacy perspective has taken the place of the earlier perspective of "readiness" for reading instruction in the first grade. The readiness theory sought to "identify knowledge and skills children needed to benefit from conventional modes of reading instruction and defined literacy learning as the child's response to literacy instruction" (p.3-4). The emergent literacy perspective shifted the emphasis from teaching to learning. Solsken goes on to suggest that both the emergent perspective and the reading readiness perspective make assumptions that literacy is a "cognitive commodity possessed by individuals to greater or lesser degrees and that the achievement of literacy may be measured along a single continuum oriented toward school standards" (p.4). The shift from teaching to learning does not necessarily include an expansion of the concept of literacy. There remains the strong association of literacy with schooling. The implication is that the most important form of literacy is school literacy. Failures to access school literacy are attributed to cognitive processing deficiencies or to differences in experiences with written language.



Literacy is viewed within this study from Solsken's second perspective the social construction of literacy. This perspective suggests that literacy can be examined as the community's ways of using written language to serve social purposes. Bloome (1989) writes that readers and writers are not only constructing meanings but are also using literacy for social agendas. Literacy is part of the social interactions of a community. Within schools, in particular, literacy can be defined in terms of social interactions and social order. Literacy from a social construction perspective would view "learning as the process of adopting community practices for using and interpreting written language through participation in its social life" (Solsken, 1993, p.4).

School literacy is the written and spoken language that is sanctioned in the classroom. Ideally school literacy would be seen as only one set of standards among many. Realistically success or failure meeting the standards of school literacy is seen as a means to gauge success or failure in the larger society beyond the classroom. School literacy is a form of social and economic regulation. It is through school literacy that voices are heard within the classroom. School literacy is the defining type of literacy that not only is used "to set the standards for other varieties of literacies but also to marginalize them and to rule them off of the agenda of literacy events" (Street and

Street, 1991, p.143). School literacy becomes an agent of empowerment and disempowerment.

Looking at literacy in relationship to issue of empowerment and disempowerment helps to focus this study's definition of literacy. Literacy within this study will be discussed specifically from Solsken's (1993) third perspective of literacy as social identity and status. This perspective "examines the learning and teaching of literacy as part of the status and dominance relations in the larger society, and has been particularly concerned with a socio-political analysis of disparities in literacy achievement" (Solsken, 1993, p.3).

Critical theory and the perspective of literacy as social identity and status would seem to support the fact that school literacy does not occur as an isolated event, but is part of social and political structures. The literacy as social status and identity perspective would offer a framework for examining the ways schools are reproductive through sanctioning school literacy and thereby supporting the status quo.

One aspect of reproduction is the assumption that literacy learning will go smoothly only for members of the socially dominant group. What the perspective of literacy as social identity and status recognizes are the complexities of individual experiences within social groups and institutions. It examines the ways that people actively

use literacy to construct social relations and thus incorporates production as well as reproduction.

Literacy as social identity and status can also be a tool in activating the theoretical perspective of the critical educator. Within this perspective particular literacy practices position people in hierarchical power structures and social relations. Solsken (1993) writes about literacy learning from this perspective as the negotiation of one's orientation towards written language and thus one's position within multiple relations of power and status.

### 3. Summary

Becoming a person is a social, cultural and psychological production. Who one is, how one's identity is formed as a classed, gendered, and raced subject, occurs in specific economic, political, and cultural circumstances. Schools play a major part in the process of identity formation (Apple, 1988). Page (1991) writes that school participants are complex meaning makers rather than self-evident functionaries. School knowledge is not a neutral tradition but a potent resource that participants use in establishing fateful social and scholastic relationships. It is important for educational researchers to examine the delicate yet durable processes by which school participants learn their places as well as their lessons. Through an examination of the practices of reproduction and production within school especially in relationship to literacy,

insights into the hierarchical power structures of schools that empower some while disempowering others will emerge.

I see the message of critical theory as egalitarian. It seems to offer hope to those who are in the margins of public education. Critical theorists (Apple, 1988; Aronowitz, 1973; Freire, 1990; Giroux 1981) do see society as exploitative and oppressive, but emphasize the possibility for change. They point out the political forces that they see within education. The critical theorists recognize that obstacles exist that prevent certain groups from gaining access to schooling. How students are able to adapt to these practices is one of the most significant gauges for defining their school success and is at the heart of this study.

### C. General Research Questions

Within the context of the in-depth phenomenological interview method, the following general research questions provide the initial framework for the analysis of the participants' stories:

1. How do the participants' educational experiences inform our understanding of the origins of marginalization as a component of empowerment and disempowerment?

2. How do the participants' educational experiences inform our understanding of voice/voicelessness in school as a component of empowerment and disempowerment?



3. How do the participants' educational experiences inform our understanding about accessing school literacy as a component of empowerment and disempowerment?

#### D. Structure of the Study

These research questions are not questions I asked when conducting the interviews, but I used them as a basis for my analysis of the interviews. At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the stories of others. The researcher who uses this process has to see the value of all stories. There needs to be a belief on the part of the researcher that the way to understanding people is by understanding their actions. Interviewing provides access to the context of people's behavior and therefore provides the researcher with a way to understand the meaning of behavior.

Twenty vocational high school students in either their junior or senior years were interviewed about their school experiences. Each student was interviewed three times over a five day time frame. Each interview lasted for approximately one hour. During the interviews the students had an opportunity to reflect on their school experiences. Their stories became the data used to explore the research questions raised in this study.

#### E. Assumptions

This study is based on a critical theoretical perspective that accepts the following assumptions:



(1) Becoming a person is a social, cultural and psychological production, and school plays a major part in the process of identity formation.

(2) Success or failure meeting the standards of school literacy seems to be one of the gauges for measuring success or failure in the broader society beyond the classroom. School literacy empowers some and leaves others disempowered.

(3) From the literacy as social identity perspective, literacy attainment is one of the main tools used in schools to position a person in the hierarchical power structure of social relationships.

(4) One of the most oblique barriers to becoming part of the mainstream of public education is social class. The cultural belief that school is transformational and can get one out of the working class is at the heart of classism in education.

These assumptions are important to this study. By stating them, I made them an overt part of the study open to reconsideration, rather than have them covertly influence the way I interpreted the data.

#### F. Significance of the Study

This study is significant for three reasons. First, it is a qualitative study that examines the issue of empowerment and disempowerment by exploring three specific components: the connections between one's life in school and marginalization; a sense of voice or voicelessness

within school, and the ability to access school literacy. Those specific components are important because they will help to inform our understanding of the broader socio-political issues of empowerment and disempowerment within school. An understanding of those issues will inform us about the still broader issue of the inequalities that exist in public education.

The second significance of the study is that it focuses on a specific group of school participants whose school experiences are often overlooked in educational research. By overlooking the school experiences of working class students in vocational high schools, educational researchers are practicing reproduction and supporting the status quo. This failure suggests an elitist attitude on the part of educational researchers. Recognizing the complexity and the significance of the experiences of these school participants will enrich the understanding of the hierarchical distribution of power structures within schools.

Finally, data that emerged produce important information about classism in a supposedly classless society. Classism is not always as visible as other issues of inequality. Often class is examined as a secondary issue to the primary issue of racism or sexism. This study explores the school experiences of working class students and the issue of classism is a primary concern in the examination of the distribution of power in school as it relates to their school experiences.

I also believe that the process of in-depth phenomenological interviewing puts critical theory into practice. The interviewing process allows for the participant to have voice. The stories are told and are heard by an active listener. By telling their stories, the participants are becoming productive. They are making meaning. They are examining their places in schools and not just the lessons they might or might not have mastered. By telling their stories, the participants are empowered because they are no longer practicing resistance by remaining silent or acting in an antisocial manner. They are practicing production.

#### G. Limitations of the Study

Qualitative studies sacrifice the quantity of participants for the information that can be developed only through extensive interviews or long periods of participant observations (Barrett, 1993). This study is limited to twenty school participants. Although three different school settings have been used, these three schools are in one geographic area.

As a teacher/researcher, my own professional teaching experiences at a vocational high school over a long period of time has left me with a sense of advocacy towards vocational high school participants. My bias in their favor is one that I have tried to keep on a conscious level throughout the study, so that I do not edit information that

could present the participants less favorably than I wish to see them.

During the study I repeatedly wept when reading the profiles of the participants. Professor Seidman questioned me on the meaning of my tears. I now believe those tears have been and will continue to be symbols of my passion for and commitment to these participants and their places in school. This passion and commitment has driven me to continue to hear, to record and to learn from these stories. The tears had the ability to cloud my vision at times and I needed to be aware of that so that my political agenda did not become the primary story being told in this research.

#### H. Summary

My research goal for this study was to examine the experiences and meanings of the educational histories of twenty vocational high school students to see if connections existed among their stories in relationship to three components of empowerment and disempowerment:

a) marginalization, b) voice and voicelessness and c) access to school literacy. There were contradictions and complexities embedded within the stories of individual participants. More complexities and contradictions arose when the twenty stories were examined as a unit. The richness of the stories told by the participants led to tensions and a sense of contradictions in some areas and thematic connections in others. It was never the intent of this study to assign blame for injustices or to give



accolades for successes experienced by these participants in school.

The dissertation examines twenty working class vocational high school participants' subjective understandings of school. The study analyzes how the participants' educational histories influence their senses of empowerment or disempowerment in school. Marginalization, voice/voicelessness and access to school literacy are examined as interconnecting components related to the hierarchical distribution of power within schools.

The remainder of this dissertation consists of seven chapters. Chapter II contains a review of previous research and literature. Literature from the following related areas of research is explored in order to place this study in the context of prior research: critical perspectives on power structures within school; research about the issue of classism in education as it relates to working class students; and specific studies about the school literacy experiences of vocational high school students.

In Chapter III an explanation of the method of data collection and analysis is given. The discussion of the data analysis occurs in Chapters IV, V and VI. Each chapter uses profiles and data from the participants' stories to identify thematic connections among the participants' educational histories. Chapter VII draws conclusions from the results of the analysis and suggests directions for further study and instructional applications.



CHAPTER II  
LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Introduction

In this chapter I review theory and research related to three areas: 1) critical perspectives on power structures within schools; 2) the relationship between issues of empowerment within school and classism; and 3) the connection between accessing school literacy and vocational education. The components of the issue of empowerment and disempowerment that are central to this study are: marginalization, voice/voicelessness and access to school literacy. Those components are embedded within any discussion of empowerment/disempowerment. A thoughtful examination of marginalization, voice/voicelessness and access to school literacy can occur only when there is an understanding of the hierarchical power structures of schools. Since this study is focused on working class students within a vocational high school, it is imperative that issues related to classism and vocational education be identified.

The first section of this chapter is a conceptual description of scholarship. This will reinforce the theoretical framework that has been introduced in Chapter I. In the second section specific studies that deal with social class as an issue of empowerment and disempowerment in

school are discussed. These studies provide insights into marginalization and voice/voicelessness as components of empowerment and disempowerment. The third section provides a perspective on school literacy as a component of the issue of empowerment and disempowerment in vocational schools.

### B. Power Structures within School

In order to examine the places the participants in this study occupied within school and the connections between those places and marginalization, voice/voicelessness, and accessing school literacy as components of empowerment/disempowerment, it is necessary to have an understanding of the concept of power within society, in general, and within schools, specifically. Being able to conceptualize power allows for a frame of reference in the exploration of the distribution of power. It would be impossible to give serious attention to those who are powerless, if power and the people with power have not been identified.

#### 1. Definition of Power

"Power is not simply a commodity which may be acquired or seized. Rather it has the character of a network; its threads extend everywhere" (Sarup, 1989, p.82). Foucault (1972) suggested that if one wanted to understand power, one needed to look not at the question, "Who has power?", but at the question, "What intentions do power holders have?". Foucault saw power as specific struggles and not as a massive condition of domination and repression. This would support the premise of this phenomenological interview study

that individual stories provide insights into larger social concerns. In order to understand power abstractly, it is necessary to accept the significance of individual and specific struggles. Foucault (1980) developed his concept of power further by suggesting that social power is omnipotent and therefore all social relations are relations of power. The possession of social power allows for the access to and availability of resources needed to get what is wanted and to influence others (Barrow, 1990). Critical theory was born from a desire to understand and then to work to control the unfair distribution of social power among individuals and within institutions.

Critical theory grew out of the intellectual resistance to political and social difficulties that arose in Europe in the 1920's and 1930's.

Critical theory, in general terms, is a form of analysis of social, political and economic life, designed to enable people to gain insight into the oppressive forces that control their lives. In the everyday world, the (critical) argument goes, many institutions, practices, and beliefs are so familiar to us that they are accepted unthinkingly. Yet many of these routinely accepted features of everyday life are inherently unfair, unjust, and undemocratic. Individuals with special status within society have an inherent self-interest in maintaining the prevailing social structures and in promoting ideologies that justify their privileges (Barrow, 1990, p.74).

One of the goals of critical theory is to empower those without special status within society. One avenue to empowerment is the acquisition of knowledge. Lyotard (1984) wrote that knowledge is what makes someone capable of not

only meaningful denotative statements but also of meaningful prescriptive statements and meaningful evaluative statements. Lyotard suggests that if one has knowledge, one also possesses the possibility to get what one needs and to influence others by sharing the knowledge. So the person with knowledge has social power. The knowledge/power connection is an important aspect of the examination of the distribution of power within schools.

## 2. Knowledge/Power Connection

Knowledge is seen by critical theorists as a social construction deeply rooted in the issue of power. Critical theory is concerned with understanding the relationship between power and knowledge. Critical theory asks how and why knowledge gets constructed the way it does, and how and why some constructions of reality are legitimated and celebrated by the dominant culture while others clearly are not. Understanding the social function of knowledge is an important part of understanding the school experiences of the participants in this study.

Foucault (1972) viewed power and knowledge as being enmeshed. Power is necessary for the production of knowledge and having particular knowledge in particular social situations gives one social power. Knowledge is always historical, partial, multiple, and political. Knowledge is affected by its historical reference. Knowledge is never completed because it is never static. Knowledge is not singular but it is multifaceted. Knowledge



is always affected by the political climate within which it exists. Since power is deeply connected to knowledge, it shares these qualities.

The issue of the knowledge and power connection is pivotal to understanding the social institution of school and the places occupied within schools by the participants in this study. Giroux (1992) suggested that in the best of all possible worlds, power/knowledge within schools would be given to all students, so that they could become reflective thinkers about their own experiences and the experiences of those who have a different cultural reference. That political enlightenment should be encouraged within schools. From a critical perspective one of the goals of school should be the development of a concern for equality and social justice in school participants. This would be empowering to school participants not only in school but in the world beyond school. If this occurred marginalization and voicelessness would no longer exist within the institution. Unfortunately the stories told by the participants within this study show that political enlightenment was not part of their school experiences.

Bowles and Gintis (1976) wrote that schools reproduce the social relationships necessary for a market economy. According to theorists, like Giroux (1986) and Aronowitz (1992), Bowles and Gintis provided a foundation for a new language that went beyond the earlier critical tradition of John Dewey and his colleagues. It wasn't critical pedagogy



but an attempt to unravel certain political and economic injustices within education. Bowles' and Gintis' work politicized the issue of schooling. They concluded that schools produced passive workers who would adjust to the imperatives of the capitalist order.

Daniel Bell (1973), a conservative cultural critic, saw the present distribution of knowledge/power as necessary and fair. He claimed that in today's complex technical society people will get knowledge/power by getting educated. "Getting educated," from Bell's perspective, implies the mainstream middle class concept of schooling beyond secondary school. Those who get educated will be those who get the most knowledge/power and who can handle it most effectively. Bell believed that there is a need in American society for "an intelligentsia" who can handle concepts and for a subordinate group who can handle data. In Bell's theory knowledge/power not only preserves the status quo, but explains the underclass. Information, according to Bell, is free to be had, it is ubiquitous, it is endless. The only issue for Bell is how this knowledge is to be distributed. Bell's work suggests that if a school participant fails to gain access to school knowledge, it is a personal failure because the knowledge is there for the taking. I see flaws in this logic from my experiences interviewing the participants within this study. In listening to the stories told by the majority of the participants, I have been left with the feeling that they

felt that the doors that lead to this knowledge/power were never opened to them. The knowledge was only ubiquitous to those school participants whose cultural reference was the dominant one in schools. I would argue strenuously with Bell's assumption that knowledge/power is there for the taking.

Whitty (1985) stated that one needed to examine the theoretical dynamics of capitalist societies and how those theories get played out within schools, before changes can be instituted to address injustices. The concept of schools as neutral places where all participants are equal is a concept that is often accepted unquestioningly and ironically by groups who are disempowered within school. The school experiences of the participants in this study support the premise that schools are not neutral and that some school participants are marginalized from the earliest school years and see that marginalization as simply the way things are in schools.

The critical theoretical assumption that schools at present are cultures which legitimize certain forms of knowledge and disclaim others is an assumption accepted within this study.

We have instrumentalized the process of education so much that we have forgotten that the referent out of which we operate is a white, upper middle class logic that not only modularizes but actually silences subordinate voices. If you believe that schooling is about someone's story, someone's history, someone's set of memories, a particular set of experiences then it is clear that one logic will not suffice (Giroux, 1992, p.14).

If only the white middle class voice is heard, then the silenced voices will be taught that they do not matter. Although the majority of voices within this study were white (eighteen of the twenty participants were white), none had middle class status. Their working class status was the aspect of disempowerment most accepted as inevitable within schools.

Walkerdine (1986) wrote that within the middle class discourses of the schools, middle class values become truths. She stated that the schools do not just teach subjects, they produce subjects. Walkerdine is concerned with the middle class as the dominant discourse silencing other voices, especially the muted voice of the working class. The fact that Walkerdine was from a working class background and shared her own sense of isolation from the mainstream of schooling, made her writing even more powerful. Although Walkerdine is a product of the English system of schooling where the issue of class is more obviously an obstacle to school success, the sense of isolation about which she wrote is very similar to the experiences shared by the working class participants in this study who are part of a supposedly classless school system in the United States.

Since this study examines the school experiences of working class participants who chose vocational education as their option for secondary school, it seems important to look at the history of vocational education in order to

understand the relationship of social power or the lack of social power attached to the knowledge emphasized within vocational education. Understanding the history of vocational education may help in understanding the power/knowledge position those who attend vocational high schools hold in the hierarchy of public secondary education in the United States.

### 3. History of Vocational Education

The focus of vocational education is not the production of the "intelligentsia" that Bell suggested is the class of thinkers who possess the power to direct the work force in society. The focus of vocational education is the production of skilled workers who would, from Bell's perspective, be under the supervision of the "intelligentsia." While the majority of Americans view high school as the educational stage at which the school participant is preparing for a college education, the goal of vocational education has been and continues to be the production of skilled workers who usually enter the work force immediately after high school. As the history of vocational education is examined, it becomes evident that it has its roots in industrial craftsmanship and had as its earliest learning process the master-apprentice model. During the Renaissance and Reformation, something like formal industrial education came into being. The guilds had added a mark of respectability to craftsmanship. Martin Luther's educational plans made provision for trade



education. Educational reform of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries provided for vocational education in theory and in some instances actually included industrial-related instruction in programs of formal education. This apparently reflected a new respect for the skills needed for trade related work (Barlow, 1967).

In the nineteenth century with the emergence of the Industrial Revolution, gains were made in utilizing industry in education. The apprentice systems were supplemented, mechanics institutes were established, and eventually special schools were developed in which vocational education was given a new emphasis (Barlow, 1967). It is important to note that at the height of interest in vocational education, the plan was to separate it from traditional academic schooling.

It was the report of the Commission on National Aid to Vocational Education in 1914 that resulted in the passage of the Smith-Hughes Act in 1917. The Smith-Hughes Act provided for the building of the professional structure required to sustain and enhance the new program of industrial education. The Smith-Hughes Act defined vocational education as being "designed to meet the needs of persons over fourteen years of age who have entered or who are preparing to enter work (work of the farm or the work of a trade or industrial pursuit)" (Thompson, 1973, p.107).

With the end of World War II came a concern for offering the American soldier educational opportunities.

The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, better known as the GI Bill, was the most comprehensive educational act passed by Congress. Although most people associate this bill with opening college doors to middle class soldiers, the bill also benefitted vocational education. "Thirty percent of the soldiers who benefitted from this bill received job training in educational institutions of less than the baccalaureate level" (Thompson, 1973, p.76).

In 1947 the George-Barden Act was passed. The philosophical base of providing a skilled work force remained in place but each state was given more flexibility in deciding how the federal funds were to be spent. The industrial needs of individual states would be met by the trades that were offered in the state's vocational high school (Barlow, 1967).

In 1990 congress passed the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act. This act accepts that the original goal of vocational education, to provide a skilled work force, is still a valid goal. The Perkins Act attempts to bring that work force into the twenty-first century through an emphasis on the advanced technology that will be needed by all workers in the future.

When one reads the history of vocational education, one can sense the subtext of classism. The separatist philosophy was one way that a work force was guaranteed. If the goal of one's education was to perfect one's trade skills, it would be difficult to recognize that there were

other options in terms of work. The opportunity for choice was limited by the separation of vocational education from the academic mainstream. The knowledge/power available in vocational education is limited.

The concept of vocational education insures a working class. Conservative thinkers, like Daniel Bell, would argue that this is advantageous since an underclass with a specific knowledge/power that is less privileged than that possessed by the intelligentsia is needed in order to keep the status quo in place. From this perspective the concept of vocational education diminishes the school participants social power by limiting the knowledge made available to them. By limiting knowledge/power, the status quo remains in place because the working class student becomes the working class adult.

#### 4. Summary

An examination of the power structures of schools from a critical perspective points out an elitism that excludes those who do not have access to the dominant school discourse. Ironically the egalitarianism that is the basis of critical theory becomes somewhat lost when it explores the connections between multiple sets of knowledge and the degree of social power those knowledges produce. There seems to be an unstated agenda that the highest degree of knowledge/power that should be attainable to all is the knowledge needed by the intelligentsia. What seems to be missing from the exploration of the hierarchical power

structures of school from a critical perspective is that other types of knowledge are valuable and should lead to empowerment. As I studied critical theory, I became aware of a sense of removal from all knowledge/power except that which is valued by the dominant middle class culture. There was a subtext that suggested that the way to empower those who are marginalized and/or voiceless in school was to make them a part of the middle class discourse. There seemed to be little recognition that the working class wasn't always a place from which one needed to escape if one was to be empowered. Lip service was played to celebrating diversity but that celebration was done so that the diversity, at least in relationship to social class, could become assimilated into the middle class discourse.

### C. Classism and Disempowerment

One of the most oblique barriers to becoming empowered within schools is social class. Unlike gender and race, it is not always physically identifiable. The participants in this study were from the working class. This resulted in a different cultural reference than the dominant middle class reference of public school. The participants' struggles to find their places in school are reflected in their school stories. Often those stories were ones of marginalization and voicelessness based in an unspoken but pervasive classism. In order to understand their struggles it is important to look at previous research that examined classism in schools.



Weis (1988) felt that the critical ideological analysis of the meaning of school knowledge and its link to power often avoided an in-depth examination of classism within schools. "In their early works, culturalist school critics chose to follow the well-tried but less knotty path of reading off ideological and cultural homologies between the formal school curriculum and class divisions outside the school" (Weis, 1988, p.20).

Weis goes on to say that a continuing flaw in critical education theory is an apparent uneasiness about exploring class dynamics within school. This is not to imply that social class reproduction was ignored. Many (Anyon, 1980; Kohn, 1977; Ogbu, 1986) looked at social reproduction as a process that required involvement from both the dominant culture and the subordinant culture. There was exploration as to why people tolerated subordination. Weis stressed that an almost determinist version of class was often employed. This apparent unwillingness to look closely at the presuppositions and biases Americans have about social class status may result from the acceptance on an emotional, if not intellectual, level that America is a classless society.

Hall and Jefferson (1976) wrote about the less than defined division between classes after World War II. They used the term "embourgeoisement" to describe the issue of working class people identifying themselves as middle class. They explained this class crossover in the minds of the

working class as resulting from a dramatically increased hourly wage for manual labor jobs after World War II. This concept of embourgeoisement was evident in the responses of the participants within this study. The majority defined themselves as middle class. The determinator for class status for them was employment. If one was employed and earning a paycheck, in the opinions of the majority of the participants, one then had middle class status.

There are previous research studies that are related to the issues examined in this study. Two of those studies look at the issue of classism in secondary educations in countries outside of the United States. The others look at working class students in secondary schools in the United States.

#### 1. Related Research Conducted in England

A study looking at working class students' school experiences in England, where the division of class is more obvious, was conducted by Paul Willis (1977). He examined the forms of resistance employed by working class "lads" in the English school system. He studied the transition from school to work of non-academic working class boys in England from 1972-1975. His study included interviewing, group discussions, and participant observation with the boys through their last two years at school and the early months of work. Willis stressed the importance of counterculture among those who are somehow marginalized from the mainstream. He showed how students, through their own

activities and ideological development, reproduce themselves as the working class. The mechanism is their opposition to authority, their refusal to submit to the imperatives of a curriculum that encourages social mobility through acquisition of credentials.

Willis pointed out that working class "lads" create their own culture of resistance to school knowledge. They acquire none of the middle class skills that are the intended result of faithful subordination of the three R's. Instead, the students produce themselves as rebellious, "uneducated" workers whose single choice is the unskilled and semi-skilled occupations found in manual labor. Willis showed the unintended consequences of oppositional culture in the schools by looking at the everyday relations and at the conditions under which working class kids, by opposing the aims of education and its mechanisms of social reproduction, constitute themselves as working class subjects (Aronowitz, 1981). He reminded the reader that if some working class kids make use of existing opportunities, others lose them. For the marginalized school participant, he emphasized the need for the recognition of the logic of their cultural forms in a non elitist way. Specifically he suggested that the strict meaninglessness and confusion of the present proliferation of worthless qualifications be recognized and that there needs to be a recognition of the likely intrinsic boredom and meaninglessness of most unskilled and semi-skilled work. One of the most important

factors that should be acknowledged by educators, according to Willis, is the contradiction of a society and educational system where the majority must lose but all are asked in some way to share the same ideology.

Willis' work is important to this study, if for no other reason than that he has dignified the working class student by making that student worthy of being a subject for educational research. It is also important to this study because the issues of marginalization are ones that are evident in the school experiences of many of this study's participants. The need to resist the inequality of school with antisocial behavior which becomes self-destructive is a theme that connects Willis' "lads" with some of the participants in this study who label themselves as "rebels".

Although Willis' study is an important example of previous research for this study, there were two troubling points. The first point was that the subjects were all male. Working class females also exist within school and their marginalization is intensified by sexism. The other point that is disconcerting is the fact that Willis seemed to see the working class as a place where those who succeed leave. This raised two questions: Can successful students strive to become working class adults or do only unsuccessful students remain in the working class? Are we as educators making the assumption that all people who are in the working class are in something that they should want to escape?



## 2. Related Research Conducted in Australia

Another study that looked at the issue of classism in secondary schools was conducted by Connell, Ashenden, Kessler, and Dowsett (1982). They did include females in their study of the issues of class in the Australian school culture. Their subjects were teenagers from Sydney and Adelaide. The research was based on the premise that social inequality was not an issue in Australian high schools because it was built into the system from the start. The "cream" went to high schools and private colleges. Technical schools were set up for some of the workers' children to learn the trades. The obvious connection to vocational education in the United States should be noted. The technical schools were the educational sites for working class students in the same way that vocational high schools in the United States are, if not overtly then covertly, the educational sites for working class students in this country. The focus of the Connell et al. study was to examine the criticism that the school culture gave the working class youth a separate and inferior education and therefore limited future opportunities. The authors claim that very few researchers even pose the question of why we have a hierarchical schooling system. If this is true how can we effectively encourage production if we, as educational researchers, aren't willing to even look at the distribution of power within schools?

Their research was focused on two specific groups of families whose social positions and relationships to each other were reasonably well understood, and whose relationship to the school system could be expected to cast a particularly clear light on what was happening generally. On one hand were the families of people doing manual or semi-manual labor. On the other hand were families of managers, businessmen and professionals. In order to understand the school experiences of the teenagers in these families, the researchers interviewed the teenagers, their parents, their classroom teachers and their school principals.

Some of the conclusions drawn by Connell et al. related to the issue of classism are important to this study. Connell et al. stressed the fact that understanding the interplay of class relations and gender relations is one of the most difficult problems in the social sciences. It is important to acknowledge that they do interact. Connell et al. wrote that schooling is a place where both class and gender relations are present in the same sphere and within the same practice. According to their research, both class and gender are structures of power. They involve control of some people over others, and the ability of some groups to organize social life to their own advantage. As social power is exercised and contested, social relations are organized and come to be in some degree a system. So an important corollary about class and gender relations is that

they are systematic rather than random. Class and gender are also seen by these researchers to be historical systems, riddled with tension and contradiction, and always subject to change. The most important aspect of class and gender to grasp is their dynamics, "the ways in which they exert pressures, produce reactions, intensify contradictions and generate change" (p.180). This supports the complexity of power structures within schools. The suggestion is that the complexity of the power/knowledge distribution makes resistance to that distribution difficult for people who are marginalized and/or voiceless. This difficulty pointed out in the Connell et al. study is supported by the words of the participants in this study. The power structures were so firmly entrenched within the schools attended by the participants within this study that the participants expressed a sense of personal failure rather than institutional failure about their sense of being marginalized or voicelessness.

### 3. Related Research Conducted in the United States

Weis (1990) conducted a study in the United States that examined similar issues to those in the Willis study and the Connell et al. studies. What makes Weis' research significant to this study is that her participants, like the participants in this study, were working class secondary students in the United States. Weis examined the identity-formation process among white working class secondary students in the context of the de-industrialization of the

American economy. The study explored the ways these participants viewed themselves as individuals and as members of the working class within the culture of school. The role that schools play in identity formation for these students is the part of her study that is most closely connected to this study. Weis (1990) wrote that "the school embodies and promotes a contradictory attitude towards schooling and school knowledge, with a stress on the form of schooling rather than the substance of learning...Both the treatment of knowledge and the enacted ritual of control serve to contain any real struggle to the surface, preventing meaningful issues from being discussed, and at the same time serving to give the appearance of order" (p.81). She goes on to write that the schools encourage the creation and maintenance of separatist identities along gender and race lines and promote the white male identity as superior. Although Weis' conclusions are supported within this study, the stories of this study's participants would suggest that the high status of white male identity is lessened if the white male is working class in a predominately middle class school.

One of the premises of Weis' study is that the American economy is changing so radically that the only jobs available to working class students after high school are those that offer low pay with little security and virtually no benefits. What makes the working class participants in this study different from the ones studied by Weis is that



these participants have chosen vocational education. While that choice does limit their work options to trade related jobs, it does prepare them to become skilled and employable workers in today's post industrial society. By separating from the traditional academic high school culture that is the setting of Weis' study, these participants are accepting, at least on an unconscious level, their working class status and are preparing to become employable in the trades in a changing technological world. Weis' argument that there is not work for the working class may be true for those working class students who graduate from traditional academic high schools. Working class students who receive a vocational education are being prepared to become skilled workers in the trades. The underfunding of vocational education, that Weis makes a brief reference to in her study, suggests that there is a continuing elitist attitude towards vocational education because of its focus on jobs that have a traditionally working class status.

One way that academic high schools attempt to meet the vocational training needs of students is through cooperative work programs. Valli's (1988) research looked at cooperative work programs in academic high schools as examples of inequalities in educational offerings and unfair tracking within schools. She suggested that cooperative work programs become ways of marginalizing students who are poor or of color. She did not write about upgrading the standards of preparation and implementation of the concept

of cooperative work programs but instead wrote that the programs needed to be eliminated so that all students would have access to higher levels of mathematics and science curricula. Within this recommendation is an implied elitism about job status. The option of vocational education as an alternative to an inadequate cooperative work program was never suggested.

The participants within this study viewed vocational education not as a dumping ground but as a way out of a system of schooling that was intolerant of them and so it became intolerable to them. Many found the education they were receiving in the vocational high schools as the first meaningful school experiences they had had. Yet they seem to have internalized the elitist attitude that is embedded in Valli's research which states that certain kinds of knowledge are more prestigious than others.

Lightfoot (1978) suggested that the internalization of a sense of being unsuccessful in school often has a home and school connection. The same attitude is that school is inaccessible is found in the school experiences of the parents and becomes intergenerational. When Lightfoot interviewed parents about their children's schooling, the parents often told their own stories of school rather than talking about their children's school experiences. The legacy of school experiences appears to be passed from one generation to the next and does have an impact on the child's school experiences. This intergenerational

transference of marginalization was part of many of the participants' stories within this study.

"Students do not go to school neutral-their views of school and of one another are filtered through the images, dispositions, and myths that accrue from sources such as family, peers and the media" (Brantlinger, 1993, p.4). Once in school their cognitions are shaped by what happens to them there. Students are told their comparative worth indirectly on daily basis in school. The participants within this study have accepted their places as outside the mainstream of public education. This acceptance was reinforced by their parents' attitudes toward schooling, by the affect of many of their teachers when dealing with the participants' school needs, and by their social interactions with peers.

Research that closely parallels this study was conducted by Ellen Brantlinger (1993). Brantlinger interviewed high- and low-income teenagers in a midwestern city. There was a distinct social class split within the city with low-income residents located on one side of town and high income people on the other. Because of the geographic location of the two high schools, they did not represent the clear division of social class and there was a mixed social class enrollment. Brantlinger conducted interviews with high- and low-income teenagers following Glaser's and Strauss' (1967) methodology. The narratives of the adolescents confirmed for Brantlinger a number of

propositions of critical theory pertaining to social class influences on schooling. These included: "social class conflict is ubiquitous (in schools); school is not a neutral setting; adolescents bring their social class-determined subjectivities to school; social perceptions are shaped through school discourse; and, human thought is heteroglossic and dynamic" (Brantlinger, 1993, p.192). The participants in Brantlinger's study apparently were aware that social class positioned them within the social structure of school. Brantlinger's research also suggests issues of classism are brought into school from the larger society and then are reinforced by the dominant middle class discourse of school. The participants in Brantlinger's study talked freely about social class and recognized its role in positioning students within the social, and in some cases academic, hierarchical power structure of school.

A disconcerting point about Brantlinger's research is that she does not mention vocational education as a viable educational option for the lower income students. It is also important to note that working class was used as a synonym in her study for low-income when discussing parents social class status. She did briefly explore the possibility that the reason for the school's failure to inform students about working class positions after high school was an elitism about social class. She wrote that "middle class school personnel may be elitist scorning nonprofessional jobs or failing to differentiate between



various types of blue-collar jobs, seeing them mainly as fall-back-on jobs not worth mentioning and preparing for" (p.188). This elitist attitude disempowers the working class families in their dealings with school and does limit the working class students' options for vocational training.

In Eckert's (1989) ethnographic study of social motivations of linguistic change, she presented the premise that sound changes have social symbolic significance and are used in connection with the expression of social identity. She wrote that it is adolescents who lead their communities in sound changes in our society. According to Eckert, this is not surprising since adolescents are engaged in the development of social identity and are deeply entrenched in a sense of community structure outside of the family. Their use of social symbols (dress, music and language) is part of their social identity formation. For Eckert, the high school was the ideal locus for her study because it is a site where a variety of social backgrounds are forced to interact with each other. The focus of her research was the dynamics of socioeconomic class within the high school culture. She was interested in studying the social identity formation in an adolescent community and the significance of socioeconomic class within that community. She focused on "the social polarization between the class-based social categories, the Jocks and the Burnouts. While these two categories only account for part of the school's student population, they emerged as the basis of the social

organization of the high school community and of individuals' sense of identity within that community" (pp.viii-ix). She made the point that although categories like "Burnouts" are usually used as a term for deviant or acutely acting out students, she felt that Burnouts and Jocks are "normally abiding, conservative-and mutually defining-forces in the school institution. What is deviant about the Burnouts is the active neglect that they receive in their school society" (p.ix).

The Burnouts in Eckert's study in two areas closely parallel the prototype of the participants in this study. The Burnouts and the participants in this study came from working class homes and were enrolled primarily in general or vocational courses. The Burnouts were unlike the majority of this study's participants in that they frequently skipped classes and admitted to frequently using chemicals and drinking alcohol. The majority of the participants in this study did not skip classes at the vocational high schools and did not talk about drug and alcohol use as an important part of their school life. The Burnouts resistance to school was rebellious and antisocial. The resistance was noted in the stories of pre-vocational high school experiences by the participants in this study. That type of resistance dissipated once the participants entered the vocational school. This difference may be explained by the fact that in the Eckert study the high school was comprehensive (the vocational component was part

of the academic program). The vocational high schools in this study were separate from the academic high schools. The vocational high schools had their own physical plant and the academic component was also not connected in any way to the academic high schools. This separatist model made the entrenched comparative nature of vocational tracking less obvious.

Eckert acknowledged the position of vocational education in the hierarchical structure of school:

If Burnouts' failure in academics puts them at a disadvantage in school, success in areas that interest them brings them little external reward. The vocational arena is clearly isolated in the school. Vocational teachers by and large do not participate in the school's power structure, and the vocational curriculum frequently has low priority and prestige. Many Burnout boys are deeply involved in automotive mechanics and pursue this interest in and out of school with the same intensity with which Brains pursue their academic work or Jocks pursue their activities. But the expertise and commitment of those Burnouts, far from earning them recognition in school, stigmatizes them as being "only" interested in cars. The school-sponsored competitions and activities that bring prestige and visibility to sports never extend to cars (p.169).

In the comprehensive high school, like the one in Eckert's study, the vocational track would also be viewed as a second class track.

Wexler (1992) wrote that "class difference is the overriding organizing code of social life that sets one school apart from the other" (p.8). In Wexler's research, to be in a working class high school was the same as being in a school where nobody cares.

'Nobody cares' is not the result of cutbacks, inadequate professionalism and over rationalized administrative regulation on the teachers' side, and family neglect, mass media, poverty, materialism and general cultural "backslide" on the students' side. The mutual non-caring- which comes from different sources on each side of the failed pedagogic relation-is a closed feedback loop (p.35).

The negative message given about the working class high school reflects the social class elitism that is evident in the most of the research conducted in secondary schools examining the issue of classism. The working class student who is not aspiring to escape from the working class is often viewed as not worth an effort on the part of the school. As Wexler pointed out that negativity is pervasive in working class schools. As with any cyclical situation, it is difficult to identify where the negative attitude began because all members of the circle are part of the negativity. This sense that schools had nothing to offer the working class student was felt by students within this study prior to coming to a vocational high school.

#### 4. Summary

Research that examines the issue of classism in secondary education points to the inequality of public education for those who have working class status. The dominant middle class values are the ones that get validated in school. The vocational high school is rarely discussed as a viable option for secondary education. When vocational education was discussed it is as part of the traditional comprehensive high school model where it is seen as a second



class educational track. There is an unstated elitism that is evident in the fact that so little attention is paid to vocational education as a viable educational choice for students. This study will look at what brought the participants to vocational education. The third and final section of this chapter will examine research that explores the school literacy experiences of vocational high school students. Since school literacy is one of the tools of empowerment in schools, it is an aspect of previous research that needs to be examined in relationship to the vocational high school experience.

#### D. Vocational Education and School Literacy

Studies specifically examining the school literacy experiences of vocational high school students in the United States are limited. Hull (1991) conducted an ethnographic study looking at the connection between the skills taught at a vocational school and the skills needed in the world of work. The experiences of low-income people of color were the focus of the study. Kalman and Fraser (1992) examined a union-sponsored workplace literacy program for working class adults. In both studies workplace experiences as opposed to vocational high school experiences were the focus.

The emphasis in current studies examining vocational high schools appears to be special populations: Wermuth (1992) examined effective vocational education for students with special needs; Zellman, Feiler and Hirsch (1992) explored the role vocational education plays in meeting the

needs of teen parents; Arnold and Levesque (1992) analyzed the status of and outcomes for Black Americans in secondary vocational education.

One of the current studies that came closest to specifically exploring issues of school literacy at vocational high schools was done by Platt and Shrawder (1992). In this study the connections between language skills and successfully mastering vocational skills were explored. The focus of the study was a collaboration between academic English teachers and vocational teachers at vocational high schools.

Another study that was of particular note because it acknowledged the issue of classism in vocational education was done by Oakes, Selvin, Karoly, and Guiton (1992). They discussed their premise that historically the matching of students to different high school programs has carried certain racial, ethnic, and social class overtones with immigrant, poor, and minority youth more often enrolled in low-level vocational and academic training and middle and upper class whites more often enrolled in academic, college preparatory classes. They saw a need to reconstruct the high school curricula in ways that break down the distinctions between the vocational and academic domains. Their two year study examined how three comprehensive high schools make decisions about what courses to offer and which courses are appropriate for various students.

Studies that examined the integration between vocational and academic education do so with the emphasis on the assessment of employment outcomes (Grubbs and Stasz, 1992; Grubbs and Kraskouskras, 1993; Grubb, Davis, Lum, Plihal, and Morgaine, 1991; Mitchell, Russell, and Benson, 1990; Beck, 1991). The focus of these studies was the production of an effective member of the work force. Academic subjects apparently have value only in their ability to enhance the vocational training of the school participants. Hull (1991) reported on the popular notions about workplace literacy, including claims that much of the American workforce is deficient in basic and higher order literacy skills; that there is a link between this illiteracy and poor job performance; and that there is a need for school-based, skill-driven literacy programs tied to the workplaces. By drawing on sociocognitive and historical research on literacy and work, the author challenged some of these views and argues that different voices need to be heard in the debate, especially those of vocational students and workers so that their experiences can be used to understand ways in which literacy can play a role in promoting economic productivity and personal empowerment.

The most popularly accepted current trend in vocational education research is a Technical Preparation (TECH PREP) curriculum and has as its focus the preparation of the technocrats of the twenty-first century. The jargon can be

changed from worker to technocrat but the emphasis of vocational education has not changed; it still has as a goal the reproduction of a working class.

This study will contribute to the literature by building on previous work in related fields that examined school literacy experiences in relationship to students' social class backgrounds. Much of the work done in the United States on this issue has been done with children and not adolescents. Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) point out the need to understand how the personal biographies and educative styles of families shape the literate experiences of children. Their work stresses the need to know more about the learning styles, coping strategies, and social support systems of young children if reading and writing instruction in school is to become a meaningful complement to their everyday lives.

Heath (1983) examines a white working class community and a black working class community to see how the children were socialized as talkers, readers, and writers. Heath feels that teachers **could** make school a place which allows children to capitalize on the skills, values, and knowledge they bring to the classroom. "Children and teachers across cultural groups, if provided adequate information in suitable forms, could learn to articulate relations between cultural patterns of talking and knowing and, understanding such relations, to make choices" (p.13).



In the work of Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines and in the work of Heath the myth that all children outside the dominant middle class culture live in homes that are barren of literacy materials and practices is dispelled. The studies point out the fact that poor and working class families often value literacy and make heroic efforts to provide print-rich environments for their children. It is the differences between home and school practices rather than deficits in the home which account for differential school achievement. In a culture that values mainstream "ways with words" as the universal standard for schooling, the middle class children whose home literacy practices approximate those of the school have an advantage.

Current research being done with vocational high school students has primarily focused on the connection with the marketability of literacy skills in the workplace ( Hull, 1991; Grubbs & Stasz, 1992). This study will explore the school experiences of vocational high schools in relationship to their lives as readers and writers in the classrooms to see if the issue of class has affected their sense of success not in the workplace but in school.

#### E. Summary

This review of the literature suggests that classism is embedded within the hierarchical power structures of school and often goes unaddressed because it is so pervasive that it has become part of the foundation of that power structure. Even within the critical theory perspective that

promotes the concept of egalitarianism within public education, there appears to be a subtext of elitism. By examining the educational histories of vocational high school students, this study will address marginalization, voice/voicelessness and access to school literacy as components of the issue of empowerment and disempowerment. This analysis is informative not only about the participants' specific educational histories but also enriches understanding of how working class school participants are positioned within the power structures of schools.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### A. Introduction

This chapter is concerned with the research design of the study. First, the reasoning for the selection of the methodology is given. The use of in-depth phenomenological interviewing as qualitative research is presented in detail. Then the process and criteria for selecting the participants is discussed. There is an explanation of the rights and responsibilities of the participants and researcher. Next an introduction to the settings is given. Finally the approaches to managing and analyzing the data are explained.

#### B. Methodological Approach to the Problem

During a doctoral seminar on language David Bloome presented the concept of narrative as a way of knowing. Bloome explored the idea that stories have structure and in order to make sense of experiences, one has to listen closely to the stories told about those experiences. This premise led to my exploration of phenomenological interviewing as a methodological base for my research. Phenomenologists "study the ordinary life world: they are interested in the ways people experience their world, what it is like for them, how to best understand them" (Tesch, 1990, p.68). Van Manhen (1990) explains that the point of phenomenological research is to "borrow other people's

experiences and their reflections on their experiences in order to better be able to come to an understanding of the deeper significance of an aspect of human nature" (p.62). My acceptance of this point of view was the starting point for my work with Irving Seidman's model for the in-depth phenomenological interview process as the methodology for this study. At the basis of my decision to use this research method was my agreement with Seidman's (1991) assertion that "the individual's consciousness gives access to the most complicated social and educational issues because social and educational issues are abstractions based on the concrete experiences of people" (p.1).

### C. The In-Depth Interview Process

At the root of the in-depth interview is an interest in understanding the stories of others. The researcher who uses this process has to see the value in all stories. There needs to be a belief on the part of the researcher that one of the ways to understanding people is by understanding their actions. The interviewing process provides access to the context of people's behavior and leads to an understanding of the meaning of that behavior both in the individual's own life and in the broader social arena.

#### 1. The Interviews

In the in-depth interview process Seidman (1991) suggests that there be three ninety-minute interviews, but in other approaches to in-depth interviewing there are other



structures. For this study Seidman's model was followed with the exception of the time length of ninety minutes. I decided to adjust Seidman's model by accepting Cleary's (1991) suggestion that, when interviewing adolescents, sixty minute interviews are more effective. The interviews occurred approximately three days apart to allow for reflection on the part of the interviewer and the participant. During each interview the researcher took detailed and extensive notes and tape recorded the sessions after gaining permission from the participant. Each interview has a purpose both by itself and within the series.

#### a. The First Interview

The first interview is a focused life history. The participants were asked to reconstruct early life experiences. Seidman (1991) stresses that the key word is "reconstruct". The emphasis is on the participant reconstructing early experiences with family, among friends, in his or her neighborhood. Within this study the emphasis was on reconstructing experiences related to schooling. Seidman has suggested that using one open-ended question at the start of each interview is effective when interviewing adults. Cleary (1993) suggests that another approach would be to work out in advance certain areas that the researcher wishes to cover and to prepare a series of open-ended sub-questions that would insure coverage of those areas. The first interview during this study usually began with the

researcher asking: "What was school like for you in elementary school and in junior high?" During the first few sets of interviews I prepared a list of sub-questions in advance. A sample sub-question was: Would you talk about the role your parents or other adults play in your early life in school, especially where it involved reading and writing? During the first interviews that list was very rarely used because when responding to the first question, the sub-questions became part of the first answer. The interviewer's role was that of paraphrasing specific parts of the answer to clarify a specific point: "Are you saying (a paraphrasing of a previous statement)." The fact that sub-questions were not necessary supported Seidman's premise that one effective open-ended question will allow the participants to reconstruct the experiences in a meaningful way to the participant and to the researcher. Follow up questions came from the participants' stories rather than a prepared list of sub-questions.

#### b. The Second Interview

The purpose of the second interview is to concentrate on the participant's present experiences. Within this study the focus was on the present experiences within a vocational high school. In the second interview the emphasis is on the details of the actual experiences rather than the participant's opinions about those experiences. By asking for specific stories, concrete details of the experience are elicited. "The questions of when, where, how, for what, for

whom are all important to elicit the concrete details of experiences" (Cleary, 1993, p.239). Within this study the second interview usually began with the question: "Describe what a typical school day is like for you?" During this interview sub-questions were usually necessary. A sub-question that was used frequently was: "Describe a class in which you feel a sense of getting something done." The participant often decided to illustrate a present school experience with a story about how the present experience compared to previous school experiences. It became apparent after the first few participants were interviewed that the majority of the participants wanted to talk about what brought them to a vocational high school rather than what happened to them once they got there. In actuality they began to construct the direction of the second interview and the focus of the study.

### c. The Third Interview

In the third interview the participants are asked to reflect on the meaning of their experiences. Seidman (1991) stresses that the question of meaning is not one of satisfaction or reward but rather it addresses the intellectual and emotional connections between the participant's life and the experiences being studied. It offers the participant a chance to be reflective. "Making meaning requires that the participant look at how the factors in their lives interacted to bring them to their present situation. It also requires that they look at their

present in detail and within the context that it occurs" (Seidman, p.12). To the researcher who is a novice with this in-depth interviewing process, it would seem that this might be the most difficult interview in which to elicit responses, especially when dealing with participants who are children or adolescents. In reality the third interview during this study proved to be one of the easiest to initiate. Although a pre-conceived open-ended question was prepared by the researcher: "What meaning do you make out of your school experiences, especially those related to reading and writing?", the third interview usually began with the participant saying: "Remember when I told you about (an earlier story), I've been thinking a lot about that and . . .". This was the most challenging of the three interviews in that it did ask the participant to make meaning. Yet if the other two interviews were effective, the reflection that was at the heart of this interview did seem to flow from the participant with ease.

## 2. The Participants

A sample of twenty vocational high school students were interviewed. These students were either at the end of their junior year or in their senior year of high school. Limiting the study to students who had completed two years of vocational schooling was done so that vocational high school was the committed choice for secondary school.

The vocational high schools attended by the participants were located in suburban, urban, and rural



settings in New England. The three different demographic settings offered a diversity of backgrounds even though all of the participants are from the same geographic area. For the purposes of this study, a school in an urban setting refers to a school located within a city; a school in a suburban setting refers to a school located in a residential area outlying a city; and a school in a rural setting refers to a school located in a country setting where farmland may be an identifiable characteristic of the area.

a. Participants' Rights to Protection

Participants were given an information/consent form explaining the rights and responsibilities involved in participating in the study. Each participant who was eighteen years of age or older signed the consent form. For those under eighteen the form was signed by the participant and the parent or guardian. The participants were informed that they could withdraw from the interview process at any point. They also were informed and encouraged to read the transcripts and the profiles (if one was written about them). They were told that they could request the deletion of parts of the story that, upon reflection, they were uncomfortable sharing. Possible pseudonyms were discussed with the participants. Every attempt was made to offer anonymity and confidentiality by using pseudonyms and making every attempt not to identify the participants' schools.

## b. Gaining Access

The directors at three vocational high schools were approached to obtain permission to select participants for this study. At the first school the researcher was employed as a teacher. The director of the second school knew the researcher through her reputation as a vocational high school teacher. At the third school the researcher was not known to the administration. The director of each school was approached in person and in writing (an abbreviated research proposal and a copy of the information/consent form were given to each director) with the request for permission to conduct interviews with students interested in participating in the study. Each of the directors granted permission with varying degrees of enthusiasm. The issue of confidentiality was a concern of each director. One director was worried that his school would be presented in a less than flattering light. The director of the urban school was the most open about allowing access. The rural school director was equally open, but the liaison person whom he designated within his school community did not share his enthusiasm for the study, This made it impossible for me to have access to participants from that school. The third school was in a suburban setting and the site of the researcher's teaching experience. This director had some reservations at first about the dual roles of teacher and researcher being played out in the study. After a series of

long discussions with the researcher, his doubts were somewhat resolved.

### c. Establishing Contact with Participants

At the suburban site an announcement was made in the researcher's junior and senior English classes explaining that a research project was being done and participants were needed. Any student who was interested or who knew a student who might be interested in taking a part in the study was asked to speak to the teacher/researcher. Nine students who were in the teacher/researcher's classes took information/consent forms. Six students returned the forms signed by themselves and their parent or guardian. Five students who were not students of the teacher/researcher took information/consent forms. Of these four returned the forms signed.

At the urban school the director of the school designated the director of guidance as the liaison person who would inform the students that a study was being conducted and arrange a meeting between the researcher and the interested students. This person did more than was expected. He contacted students, explained the study, distributed and then collected the signed information/consent forms, set up the times for the interviews, and made arrangement for an office to be made available to the researcher so that the interviews could be conducted during school hours without interruptions.

At the rural school the school director also designated the director of guidance as the school's liaison person for the study. This liaison person expressed no interest in and some disdain for the study. She refused to assume what she saw as added duties to her already overwhelming job responsibilities. Since the school director felt that in her professional role she would be best suited to represent the school's and students' interests in the study, her refusal to cooperate made access to that school impossible. As an alternative the researcher spoke to vocational educators who knew of individual students from a variety of settings that were rural. Ten names were given to the researcher. Of those ten students four eventually did participate in the interview process.

#### d. Selection of Participants

Six of the participants had been students in the researcher's class. Four participants were students who attended the vocational high school where the teacher/researcher taught English. The reasons for selecting half of the total sample of participants from students known to the researcher were complex. These students knew the teacher/researcher and volunteered to participate in the study. Therefore it would appear that they were comfortable telling their school stories to an adult who shared some of their school experiences. This apparent comfort level may have been a result of a basic need to have an established level of trust before certain stories could be told.



The remaining ten students shared only a participant/researcher relationship with the teacher/researcher. Six of these students were from a vocational high school in an urban setting. These students were asked to participate in the study by the director of guidance at their school. The other four students were approached by the teacher/researcher through other vocational educators who knew students in rural vocational high schools. These four students were from different vocational high schools but the commonality was that the schools that they attended were in rural settings.

#### e. Participants' Reasons for Participating

When asked by the teacher/researcher why they decided to take part in the study, the ten participants who knew the teacher/researcher as a teacher responded that no one had ever asked them to talk in detail about what happened to them at school and they wanted to talk about it. They claimed that it was easier to get started talking because they knew the teacher/researcher before starting the interview process. When the ten students who did not know the teacher/researcher in any role other than researcher were asked to explain why they agreed to participate, they also said that it was the first time anyone had asked them to talk about school.

#### f. The Issue of Gender in Selecting Participants

No specific stipulations about gender were made when asking students to participate. What is interesting to note

is that although the traditional vocational high school student is male (Haynes, 1989), there is a new emphasis in vocational high school recruitment on female students. "Early vocational education efforts focused largely on males, who were widely viewed as the key to reducing poverty, unemployment and welfare benefits" (Zellman, 1992, p.9). The 1984 Perkins Act codified concerns about equal access to vocational education for women. The gender make up of this study is reflective of the growing number of women selecting vocational education as their option for secondary schooling. Eleven males participated in the interview process and nine females. At the school in a suburban setting six males and four females participated. This closely reflected the male/female ratio in the student population at the school: sixty-seven percent of the student population is male. At the urban school more female students than male students participated in the study: four females participated and two males. This was not reflective of the gender makeup of the school's student population: seventy percent of the student population was male. The director of guidance who approached students about participating in the study said that he asked seven males and five females who he felt would be interested in and responsible about participation in the study. The students who returned the consent form became the participants. He credited the larger number of females to the fact that "girls have an easier time talking about their lives than

boys do." The four participants from schools in rural settings were two males and two females. At the various schools that these students attended the ratio was three males to one female. Once more the gender make up represented the willingness of students to participate as opposed to being reflective of the gender make up of the schools. The issue of my gender may also have influenced the decisions to participate by the male and female students.

#### g. The Issue of Race in Selecting Participants

The racial makeup of the participants is not fully representative of the racial make-up of the participating schools. In the suburban school ninety-two percent of the student population was white. One hundred percent of the study participants from the school were white. Although the teacher/researcher approached five students of color individually and asked them to participate in the interview process, all refused. Three stated that they could not participate for religious reasons. One said that she did not have the time and the other student gave no reason for refusing. In the urban school sixty-seven percent of the student population was Latino. Within the study two of the six participants were of Latino heritage. At the urban school the director of guidance who made the initial contact with students approached a total of five Latino students and two agreed to participate and both were females. He felt that the apparent disinterest on the part of Latino males

was reflective of their culture. "Our Hispanic boys don't like to talk to anyone, except their close friends, about their lives. It's a cultural thing." All four participants from rural settings were white. This is reflective of the communities in which they attended school. People of color comprised less than four percent of the total population of those schools.

#### h. The Issue of Social Class in Selecting Participants

One hundred percent of the participants were from families of working class status as defined in this study. Seven of the families had heads of household who were female. Two of these female providers were secretaries; one was a factory worker; one was a waitress; one was collecting unemployment benefits; and one was receiving Social Security benefits. Thirteen of the families had male heads of household: one drove an ambulance; one delivered mail; another worked as a landscaper; two were machinists; three were construction workers; three worked on family farms; and two drove long distance trucks.

### 3. The Setting

The vocational high schools used in the study were in New England. Ten of the participants attended McGrath Vocational High School (a pseudonym). Six were from Walters Technical High School (a pseudonym). Four of the participants were from four different rural vocational high schools.



a. McGrath Vocational High School

McGrath Vocational High School is located in the affluent middle class community of North Farms (a pseudonym) whose primary employer is a prestigious women's college. The vocational high school is regional and the student population comes from the city of North Farms, smaller farming communities and one neighboring factory town. Although the school has a strong reputation in the state for the quality of its vocational education, there is a sense within North Farms that it is a school for students who could not succeed in a traditional academic high school.

Only a small percentage of the student population is from the town of North Farms. Of the 473 students only 150 are from North Farms and the remaining students are from other school districts and have to pay a tuition of \$5,613 annually to attend the school. Ninety-two percent of the student population is white. Males make up sixty-seven percent of the student body. Students from families who fit the study's definition of working class make up ninety-eight percent of the student population.

b. Walters Technical High School

Walters Technical High School is located in the city of Hillford (a pseudonym), an industrial city in New England. The city's school system is in financial difficulty. As with many cities, there has been a change in the demographics of the city which is reflected in the racial and ethnic makeup of the schools' student population.

Twenty years ago the predominate ethnic groups were Irish Americans and Polish Americans. Today the predominant ethnic group is Latino.

Many middle class families have moved from the urban area leaving a shrinking tax base. In recent attempts to increase school funding, the vote was a resounding no. A need to meet the educational requirements of bilingual students has been a point of contention within the city. In this negative atmosphere Walters Technical High School is seen as a model of effective and productive vocational education.

The majority of the student body is from the city of Hillford. There is a small number of out of district students (less than ten percent of the total student population) who pay a tuition of approximately \$5,000 to the school. Seventy percent of the student population is male. Sixty-seven percent of the student population is Latino. Ninety per cent of the student population come from families who are in the working class.

#### c. Rural Schools

The four participants who attended rural schools each attended a different school. Although the teacher/researcher did not visit the schools, the four participants described their schools as being regional vocational high schools servicing small rural communities. All four experienced bus rides to and from school ranging in time from twenty-five minutes to forty minutes. Each

participant expressed the feeling of being isolated from the school social life and extra curricular activities because the distance from their homes prohibited them from staying after school. Each said that they felt that the school they attended was respected in their hometown. Each town paid tuition for the four students to attend the vocational high school. Tuition ranged from \$4,800 to \$5,200 annually per student.

All four students said that they had never seen a person of color until they went to the vocational high school and that "there weren't many there." All four also said that there were more males than females at their schools. They felt that all the students were "like them" when they were asked about the social class status of the student bodies of their schools.

#### 4. Data Management and Analysis

In the analysis of the data I decided to accept Seidman's (1991) recommendation and to complete the interviews for all of the participants before beginning the analysis. This allowed me to focus on the story of each individual as unique and important within itself and not to see it primarily as a part of the emerging analysis of twenty stories. The individual story is the heart of the study. Once all stories were heard the analysis began.

##### a. Audiotaping and Transcription

The interviews were recorded on audiotapes and those tapes were transcribed in their entirety. Extensive notes

were taken during the interview process. The audiotapes, transcriptions and notes became the raw data for the analysis.

Immediately after each interview I listened to the audiotapes and reviewed my written notes. This led to the first highlighting of salient points in the written notes and/or the identification of other salient points from the auditory review that were not originally identified in writing. I repeated this process three times before having the tapes transcribed. Using these initial points of interest taken from audio tapes, I made a comparison with points that were noted in writing during the interview process. On the computer I listed as notable those that were repeated more than once during the auditory review and/or within the written notes. I then organized them under potential labels. Once the transcriptions were completed, I recorded the exact words of the participants under the potential labels. Each of the twenty participants' interviews went through the label identification process. It became clear early in the process that there were commonalities among the twenty participants' stories.

#### b. Identification of Themes

At the first stages of the analysis the labels were broad. At the initial stage of analysis the three broad labels were: home stories; school stories; and literacy stories. In the later stages of analysis the themes became



more specific. The home stories label became the home/school disconnection label. Within that general label specific themes became identifiable. Those themes were: working class status; intergenerational transference of attitudes about school; alcoholism within the family structure; and the decision to attend a vocational high school. The school stories label was separated into two sections. The first section became classroom stories. Themes that became identifiable under that section were: The administration of special services to nontraditional learners; the arbitrary administration of discipline; and interaction between peers. The second section of the school stories became literacy acquisition stories. This section had the following themes: home/school literacy practices; The schools' treatment of the students who have difficulty adjusting to the expectations of school literacy; and literacy and social identity. It became clear as the themes began to emerge that three issues were also emerging as the focal points for specific sets of themes. The home/school disconnection highlighted the issue of marginalization. The classroom stories pointed clearly to the issue of voice/voicelessness. The connection between the home/school literacy practices and the issue of Access to School Literacy was obvious.

The data became manageable as the themes became clear. The organization became clearer as the three issues began to emerge. The words that the participants shared now had

patterns and those patterns were forming a clear framework for discussion of educational issues.

### c. Profiles

Profiles are used to introduce each issue. The purpose of the profile is to give the reader the participant's perceptions in the immediacy of the first person narrative. In the profile the researcher recreates for the reader the drama of the participant's story as it was told during the interviews. In a sense the profile becomes both the participant's and the researcher's story. The profile is the experience and the words of the participant that have been organized by the researcher into a cohesive narrative structure. In discussions with Professor Seidman he suggested to me that I might want to think of the structure of a profile as having a beginning, a middle and an ending and that there might be a sense of conflict and at times resolution within the profile.

The profiles were prepared in the participants' own words. Minor grammatical changes were done whenever necessary and obscenities are removed. The objective in the editing process was to protect the dignity of the participants. Repetitions that were idiosyncratic of oral speech were deleted. The changes in oral speech were done in order to make a smooth transition from oral story to written story. Nothing was removed from the stories that altered the intended meaning.

The participants whose stories became the profiles were selected because their words clearly articulated the issues that were being addressed within the themes. In selecting the stories to use for profiles, the only criteria used was the connection between the participant's experiences and the theme being analyzed.

#### d. Data Use in Thematic Chapters

The interview material is used in the thematic chapters by making connections among the experiences of the twenty participants in order to find commonalities and explainable differences in their school experiences, especially as they relate to the three components of empowerment and disempowerment. Those components are: marginalization, voice and voicelessness and access to school literacy. The interview material is used in short sections and is either summarized or quoted.

#### D. Conclusion

The data for this study are the words of the participants as they were recorded and transcribed using the in-depth phenomenological interview process as outlined by Seidman (1991). The connections and patterns that developed within the stories of individual participants and then among the stories of the twenty participants have become the themes discussed in the following chapters. The conclusions and implications have been drawn based on the close inspection of the data. The evolution of meaning began with the participants telling their stories in the in-depth

interview process and I, as the researcher, actively listening and continued through the thematic analysis. The meaning making was cumulative. Each part of the process was a vital part of the final meaning.

Chapters IV, V and VI examine the thematic connections among the experiences of the twenty participants and the significance of those connections. Chapter VII explores the conclusions and implications of the connections made among the participants' stories in relationship to the three components of the issue of empowerment and disempowerment: marginalization, voice and voicelessness, and access to school literacy.



## CHAPTER IV

### MARGINALIZATION AND HOME EXPERIENCES

#### A. Introduction

This chapter will examine the thematic connections and contradictions among the twenty participants' educational histories. I will focus on the issue of marginalization as it affects the participants' sense of empowerment and disempowerment. Marginalization is not a simple or easily identifiable issue. Being marginalized implies being left out of the mainstream of school academically and socially, or being dealt with by school as a secondary concern. School participants who are marginalized have the sense that they are forced to fight for their place in school, while participants in the mainstream have a place within school that seems to be their birthright (Anyon, 1980; Aronowitz, 1983; Giroux, 1988; McLaren, 1989; Lightfoot, 1978; Page, 1991; Sinclair, 1987; Stuckey, 1991; Weis, 1990) Fighting for their places in school can become so energy consuming that often the marginalization does not disappear but increases.

If marginalization is experienced within the classroom because of an inability to access the mainstream knowledge/power structure, that marginalization is also played out between peers. Peer interaction is an aspect of marginalization that has not been a focal point of previous

research, but it is an important aspect of the examination of marginalization in this study. Peer interactions are reflective of the position the school participant occupies within the power structures of the classroom. Trying to find one's way out of the margins requires an understanding of the hierarchial power structure of school that most marginalized school participants do not possess. The distribution of power within schools represents a broader society that empowers some while disempowering others.

Marginalization is one of three components of the broader issue of empowerment and disempowerment about which the participants' educational histories inform us. The other two components, which will be discussed in Chapters V and VI, respectively, are voice/voicelessness and access to school literacy. These components are interconnected. They are examined separately as a means of managing the data into a structure that respected the richness of the stories told by the participants. When examining the issue of marginalization, a strong thematic connection was made to the participants' home experiences, therefore the home becomes the focus of the analysis of marginalization.

The discussion of the issue of marginalization is preceded by a profile of one participant whose experiences exemplify the issue. The profile was selected from the twenty participants because of the strong connection to the specific issue. The analysis of the issue is further developed by using excerpts and vignettes from some of the

other participants' stories to illustrate the thematic connections or contradictions among the stories.

Each of the participants in this study to some degree saw themselves as being in the margins of school prior to entering a vocational high school. Their decision to attend a vocational high school was influenced by that marginalization. For many of the participants a vocational high school offered a way out of being marginalized. The home/school disconnection emerged as a commonality among the stories that suggested it was one of the primary causes of marginalization. This is not to imply that the cause for marginalization rests solely with the parents. The parents in most of the stories appeared to be victims of the same sense of marginalization within school that was experienced by the participants, and they did not know how to address the issue for their children.

The parents in seventeen of the twenty stories did little to prepare their children for school. The message for the majority was not that the parents did not care but rather that they somehow didn't understand what school was all about. This lack of understanding on the part of the parents was transmitted to some of the participants as a disinterest in school and to others as a fear of school. For most of the participants the families' lack of connection with the school led to a sense of being out of step from the start of school. This disconnection does not make villains of the parents but on the contrary points to

the intergenerational cycle of the disconnection between home and school. The complexity of this disconnection is interwoven into the participants' stories.

### B. Profile of Stella

As Stella entered the room to begin her first interview, she had an apparently practiced affect of indifference and hostility. She was dressed completely in black and wore a silver swastika around her neck. Her guidance counselor had informed me that at the time of the interviews she was ranked number one in her junior class in the urban vocational high school she attended. He claimed that she seemed to take little pride in her appearance and he expressed surprise at that since she was in the Cosmetology Department. The only action that betrayed her outward coolness was that she continuously bit at the black nail polish that covered her fingernails.

Over the course of the three interviews Stella revealed her observations and insights about school with an openness and trust that was contradictory of her outward expression of indifference and even hostility to the interviews in particular and school in general.

I went to Catholic school for a few years when I was little. I didn't like it very much because of the way they taught. They really expected that everyone would have help with school work at home. Well I didn't. Every night I would go home and try to figure it all out for myself. I would have absolutely no idea what I was doing. They would show you one or two math problems, for example, and then you were suppose to take it home and do it. I bet they thought everyone lived like the Cosby Show. Well I hate to break the news to



those teachers but some of us didn't have a lot of help with school work at home.

The same thing is happening to my little sister now. She comes home with all this work and every night my parents yell at me to help her. I am not her teacher! It was the same way for me but I had no help. I had to figure it out for myself. My brother was one year older than me but he couldn't help because he had a lot of trouble with school. I ended up doing good in seventh and eighth grades but from sixth grade down I always got C's and D's. In the seventh grade I learned I could do better. But, listen I had to figure it out for myself. Nobody could help me.

Anyway, I fight with my mom every night. I am having enough trouble keeping ahead of the game for myself. How am I supposed to help my sister? The teacher should teach her the work in school. My sister thinks I am smart so I try to clue her in. I tell her what to do but I am not the teacher. I wish teachers could spend one night at my house and see how hard my sister is trying to do the work. Then they could figure out how to make it better for kids like me and my sister.

You know what bothers me the most about this is that the teacher shows you one or two examples in math and then they send the kid home to do it. Well they aren't teaching, are they? I am not the one who is supposed to be teaching her this math. The teacher should make sure she can do the work and then send her home with backup examples, That's how kids learn. All teachers think there is all this teaching going on at people's houses. Well I hate to tell you but that is not the way it is in most houses I've been in. I know I can help my sister. I clue her in but I also tell her that it's not my job to teach her math. It's the school's fault for not telling her how to do it.

The truth is it gets real uncomfortable in school if you don't have your homework done. Even now in high school, you know the day is going to be the pits if you don't have the homework. When you are little, you don't talk back to the teacher so you really feel like a loser when they dump on you for not doing your homework. In high school it's almost cool to be late with a homework assignment. In elementary school it feels awful not to have it done because it seems like everyone

knows there is something wrong with your family life if nobody checks your homework.

I would go home and say to my parents that I wasn't getting enough help. I don't think my mother ever really cared about school. She never went into school. I know there are parents that go in all the time. My parents never did. I guess I knew from the start that I would have to figure it out myself. Sometimes I get this urge to go into school for my sister. I'd like to talk to the teacher about the struggle my sister is having with the work but I'm not her mother. I wouldn't have any right to do that even if I had the time. In elementary school I would complain and complain to my mother. I'm not kidding I feel like going back to my sister's school and just telling them what I think. I keep telling my parents that they should go in and complain. I don't need to do their job! My mother doesn't even say anything when I say that. I personally think she just doesn't care. I think it's just my parents. I know other parents do it but mine don't. So what are you going to do? My parents never pushed me. They never once said to me: why don't you do this? or why not try this class? I would figure everything out for myself.

I was lucky I had a lot of friends in elementary school and I really talked to them. It's funny now when I think about these little kids sitting around the lunch table trying to make sense of school. I can remember asking them what I should do when a teacher was roughing me, you know, treating me unfair. My friends gave me the courage to talk to the teacher. I am not kidding. They told me to tell the teacher privately that I was unhappy. I learned to do that and it usually worked. The teacher usually was surprised but as long as I wasn't rude in the way I said it, the teacher usually heard me. So I learned how to cope with school without help from my parents. Maybe my sister will too. That sort of made me how I am now. If I feel like someone is putting me down. I go and talk to them privately and say that I don't like what they are doing to me. They usually respond. Now that I am in high school I even do that with teachers whenever I see a problem.

We had this student teacher in my history class this year. He worked hard and I respected him for that but he focused everything on Puerto



Rican history. That was okay with me because it was interesting. A lot of the kids in the class were Puerto Rican and it was nice for them. My favorite day was when they brought in Puerto Rican food and we ate. That was fun. Then it got kind of old. You see, I'm Polish and when he said we were all supposed to write a term paper on the history of Puerto Rico, I said to myself I have to talk to him. So I waited until everyone left the classroom and I told him that I thought it was nice what he was doing for the Spanish kids in the class but I was Polish and I wanted to write about my own heritage. To tell you the truth, I could tell he didn't know what to say to me. So I told him that he might want to set up an appointment for me and him and my regular history teacher, Mr. Hogan, and we'd talk about it. The next day we had the meeting and I wrote the term paper on my Polish heritage.

I was always in the second reading group. I remember always wanting to be in the first group. I was always asking the teacher if I could try for the first group. Finally one day she tested me for the top group. You can imagine how nervous I was. She made me read out loud from a book I had never seen before. I made one or two mistakes and she didn't say a word. She just raised her eyebrow. It was like she was saying, "I told you you weren't good enough for the top group." I'll never forget that if I live to be old. The teacher said, "Well, you know, Stella, both levels are the same. "What did she think, that I was stupid? I knew which group was smarter. I knew I could do better so I just always pushed myself.

There is so much of school that I just love. I absolutely love math. I love history. I want to read and read. When I was in elementary school I wanted to read books outside of the ones they had in school. So I figured out where the library was in Hillford and I walked there. The lady told me I'd have to prove I could read by reading this little card. I thought it was another level one test. I told her I wanted to read through it silently first and she'd have to give me a minute. I wasn't going to make any mistakes this time and I didn't. I got my library card. I used to take out about twenty books a week over the summers. They weren't fun books. They were books I could learn from. I wanted to get caught up with the kids who had a lot of help with school at home. I wanted to learn. I took out nonfiction. You know

what I loved? I loved books of records. You know, these were the books that listed people who excelled in some way. I loved reading those records.

When I read anything, I feel like I am improving myself. If I am at the doctor's office, I take all those pamphlets and read them. I learn things that I don't learn in school. So I continue to learn outside of school. I am like thirsty to learn. Do you want to know something, I never moved out of level two reading. The school never discovered I loved to read.

My parents weren't encouraging. I'm not criticizing them but reading and school weren't things that concerned them. I was doing things with learning that I wanted to do. No one else particularly cared but I did. I loved books and what I could get out of them. I did resent that my parents didn't help me with the extra stuff. All the kids were involved in sports or dancing or something like that but I didn't know how to get started. I didn't know like how to sign up. That is not an excuse. I really needed some help for those things. By the time I could do it for myself everyone was already good at it. So in that way I resented my parents for not helping me figure out that part of school.

It was like there was all this interesting information that I wanted and they just couldn't understand a kid like me. My parents didn't come into school on Parents' Nights. My homework wasn't done perfectly. I didn't look like the perfect little scholar so the school wrote me off. What matters is I didn't write myself off. I never gave up on learning.

In the seventh grade I did have a great teacher who helped me to realize that there were people at school who could see me as I really was. She had been an art major in college and I liked art. In every class (history, science, whatever), she'd bring art into the lesson. I loved it. She made school carefree. We did a lot of exploring. New ideas were always floating around that classroom. It gave me some hope for schools.

In the seventh grade I felt real good about myself in school. I was getting good grades and the teacher would always write these notes to me on the paper. She'd write things like keep up the



good work. My parents don't have a clue what school is like. They think they know but they don't have a clue. Maybe it's because they are old. I don't know but they never seemed to be able to even do the little things like say, good job. I know you think I sound angry but I'm not because that's the way it is. So what? I can't change it. Anyway, this seventh grade teacher was young and she majored in art in college so she was really creative. She was always doing this stuff with art in history and science. I loved that year in school. She had a little trouble controlling the noise and the principal was always dropping into the classroom but he didn't understand the difference between noise that meant trouble and noise that meant learning. I'm not saying she was perfect. She was making mistakes. I remember that she seemed real unsure of herself in science. She'd read us a paragraph out of the science book and then explain the paragraph. I used to dream about leaving her a note on her desk telling her it wasn't the way to teach us science. She got better at science as the year went by and when we were drawing cells and stuff, you could tell she was comfortable because she was doing something she knew a lot about. Anyway I liked her a lot and that was the year I finally moved into the highest level for English. It only took them seven years to figure out I was a good reader. It will probably take them seventeen years to figure out Miss Brown is a good teacher and that a lot of noise doesn't mean a lot of trouble.

Except for seventh grade before high school I always got C's and D's on my report card. Let's face it, I was in school with a lot of smart kids who almost automatically got A's. That was the way it was. I had made the decision that when I was old enough, I would not go to high school. I would get my GED. I didn't want to spend any more time sitting in a classroom. I knew I could learn on my own. The schools saw me as a C student. In my heart I knew I was smart but the school only saw a C student. I told my parents that when I was old enough I was getting my GED. They couldn't force me to go to school. I had always been in charge of my school life.

What stopped me was the memory of that seventh grade classroom. I could hear that teacher encouraging me. She told me often that I could do anything in life I wanted to do as long

as I was educated. She always said good things to me. I held on to those words. I also had an aunt who worked at the vocational school and she'd always be telling me how great it was. So I always had it in the back of my mind that I'd try it before I gave up on school all together.

I started high school at Hillford Catholic. My parents had to pay tuition but being Catholic is a big deal to them. I hated it. I told everybody there that I didn't like it. You had a dress code. Can you believe it? A dress code was not my thing. I did not own one good pair of slacks and they expected me to wear dresses or dress slacks everyday. What a nightmare that place was. The whole week I was there I had to borrow clothes from my friends. I had a cousin who was at Walters Tech and he said I'd fit right in there. My aunt who works in the lunch room also said I'd love it. At the very last minute I asked my aunt to get an application for Walters. I mailed it in just before the last day for applications. I got accepted.

Most of my friends from elementary school and junior high went to Hillford Catholic but we are still friends. I think if I dropped out those friendships would have ended because we wouldn't have anything to talk about but I'm in school and they are in school so we have a lot in common. When I get out of school now, I forget all about it and I think about the rest of my day. My best friend is my next door neighbor and she goes to Catholic. I hang around with her because she is my neighbor not because she goes to Catholic. Most of her friends think the vocational school is harder than a regular high school. I know for me it is easier.

This school (vocational) saved me. This may sound a little dumb but the first thing I liked about this school was it was so clean and open. When I am out working I will only work in a place that is comfortable to be in. That's what this school is. It is physically comfortable. I also liked the fact that I would only be in a classroom every other week. I liked the shop/classroom set up. As a cosmetologist I get to meet the public during shop week. I like that a lot.

Sometimes working in the shop on customers I have to learn not to open up my mouth like I usually do in school. I had this Puerto Rican

woman come in and she had beautiful black hair and she wanted it lightened to a nice golden brown. I asked her if she had lightened it before on her own. She said that she hadn't. Well I knew she had. What could I do? I colored it and the regrowth comes out a beautiful golden brown and the part that she had bleached was bright orange. My shop teacher took me into her office and yelled at me. I was ready to explode but I didn't. I explained to her that the customer lied to me about coloring her hair. My shop teacher calmed down and went out and saw I was telling the truth. She told the customer to come back after lunch and she'd fix it. I guess that is the way it always is in school. You've got to wait until the teacher calms down before you can tell them how it is.

I will say now that I have decided that I am going on to college, I wish I had more time in academics. I am missing a lot of college required courses but I'll be able to get caught up. The courses that I need to take are offered at Hillford Community College. I have always been doing catch up in school. When I came here I had no dreams of college. This school has made me believe in school. It's hard to explain this school is different because we are all the same here. I always knew I was smart. Now I believe school can make me smarter.

I was inducted into the National Honor Society during my sophomore year. I asked my father to come and he did. He never said he was proud of all I have done in school. I can tell from his eyes when something good happens, like the honors society or when I was made editor of the yearbook or when he heard I could be number one in my graduating class, that he is proud of me.

I did ask him to come into high school once when something bad happened. I was in shop and I was laughing and goofing around. Mrs. Helms thought I was stoned. I guess it was because I was usually so serious. That day I was just happy. I got sent to the office. The Guidance Counselor said I was stoned and I would be suspended for three days. I had never missed one day of school since I started the vocational school. I went home and asked my father to come out into the front yard with me. I didn't want my sister to hear about this. I told him that he had



to come to school with me the next day to fight the suspension and he had to be straight (alcohol free). He asked me if I was using drugs. I simply said no and walked back into the house.

He came with me the next day. He talked calmly with the guidance counselor. It was the only time I needed help with school from him and he came through for me. They didn't suspend me. My shop teacher apologized. She said if she didn't care about me, she wouldn't have sent me to the office. I believed her. The guidance counselor never said anything. I will always remember that incident and how those three adults treated me.

I want to learn as much as I can. I am learning that schools aren't perfect places but there are opportunities for kids like me to find our places in school. We just can't give up on ourselves.

In many ways Stella was atypical of the other participants in this study because she did not express a feeling of being defeated by the school's failure to recognize her desire to learn. She was, unlike the other participants, openly resentful toward her parents for their failure to provide support and direction in her search for her place in school. She was typical of the other participants in that although she achieved success both academically and socially at the vocational high school, she qualified that success by saying that the vocational high school was different from other schools because "everyone was the same." Stella explained that "being the same" meant that "most of the kids who go to my school (the vocational high school) came here because they hated their old school." She implied that the vocational high school was an escape



from the discomfort of being out of the mainstream in the traditional academic school setting.

Stella's story highlights the four themes that are embedded within the home/school disconnection as one of the primary causes of marginalization. Those themes are: the effect of working class status; the intergenerational transference of marginalization; the issue of alcoholism within the family structure; and vocational education as a means of escape from marginalization.

### C. The Effect of Working Class Status

All participants fit the definition used in the study for working class status. Working class refers to those people who are paid for their time (an hourly rate) and not necessarily for their skill (a salaried pay rate). Schools replicate the larger society in which they are located. That society attaches status to the professional middle class (Wexler, 1992). The working class is viewed by most as a place from which one should escape. Therefore the status of working class is seen as second class by the mainstream middle class culture of American society, in general, and schools, in particular.

When the participants in this study were asked if they saw themselves as working class, all of the twenty said that they were middle class. They saw people on welfare as lower class and "preppies" (those who were marked for college from the start of school) as upper class. The general agreement was that anyone who worked was middle class. In the

participants' minds the type of work on an abstract level did not have an effect on social class status. On a concrete level the stories told by the participants reflected a sense of pride in work that required physical labor. This was the type of work that they respected yet their unwillingness to identify themselves with that work by calling themselves working class reflects the contradictions embedded in the working class status.

The respect for physical work over intellectual work was something that was modeled in the actions of the parents of some of the participants and at times in their words. For most of the participants the parents did not overtly state that physical work was more valuable, but they did imply it by allowing their working class jobs to take priority over the education of their children. This is obviously an issue in most American families in the 1990's regardless of class status, but what made this a working class issue was that the work being done by the parents was work that was the antithesis of the work being done in school. The dichotomy was between physical and intellectual work.

Rita, a senior at a suburban vocational high school, showed a strong sense of anger about what she perceived as the disconnection between her life at school and her home life. From Rita's perspective much of the disconnection was tied to her parents' working class status. She claimed to see the situation clearly and she didn't especially like it.

She felt that she had no direct support in school from her parents. Her father spoke often about calling the school to question her poor grades but he never did it. She seemed to be resigned to the fact that he would talk about it but not do anything for her in school. Often over the three interviews she excused her father's lack of involvement in her school experiences due to his commitment to his job as a landscaper. She claimed to have inherited her deep respect for physical labor from her father. She also seemed aware of the fact that the school did not value the kind of work that she saw as being valuable.

I have no patience with ignorance at all. I don't strive in my academics. I know I am a lot smarter than what I do. I don't like to think that I am short changing myself. My father said he was going to call that school and find out why my grades aren't showing how smart I am. I know he won't really do it but he's always telling me he is going to do it. School has always been relatively easy for me, except for math. Do you know what I am proud of? I am proud of working on the farm. Some people would say that wasn't important work. Well those people are ignorant. You shouldn't have a job unless you are half way decent at it and you enjoy doing it. That's why I feel a little bad that I don't work that hard in academics. I've always been a hard worker and I respect people like my father who are hard workers. So I guess what I am saying is at times I have a hard time thinking of school work as real work because school people don't seem to think that farm work is valuable and I think it's a sign that most school people are ignorant.

Rita verbalized her working class status most clearly when discussing her respect for physical labor; yet she clearly denied her status as working class stating that she viewed her family as upper middle class since they owned a



home and had money in the bank. Working class was not a status that she saw as desirable and yet she spoke passionately about the value of physical work and the lack of respect she felt for the school's focus on intellectual work. The contradictions within the concept of working class became clear in Rita's story. She didn't seem able to use the term working class to identify her social class status because on some level she had accepted the negative connotations associated with it. Rita's refusal to identify herself and her family as working class supports Hall and Jefferson's (1976) concept of "embourgeoisement" which identifies the blending of class lines in the minds of working class people in the United States after World War II. This was explained by Hall and Jefferson as the result of an increase in the hourly wage for manual labor jobs. The manual workers were now able to buy the material possessions that denoted middle class. Yet the elitism about the value of intellectual work over manual work made acceptance into the middle class incomplete.

Jack's story had the clearest examples of working class values causing conflict and possible exclusion from the mainstream of school. Jack, a senior in a suburban vocational high school, came from a family that placed strong emphasis on the importance of physical labor. "Book smarts" were often ridiculed by Jack's father. There was the suggestion that the strong work ethic in his working class family interfered with his life at school. His



parents believed that hard work meant physical work and that was what was valued by his family. Intellectual work, like homework, was something that could be put aside.

I have down home values. I've always believed that I would have to work for whatever I got. That's a belief that was always just passed down in my family. Nothing would be given to me. I had to work for what I wanted. No one owed me a living. I had to earn it. For as long as I can remember I have worked with my dad in his (machine) shop. I would always sweep it when I was too little to do anything else. My family works all the time. We work Saturdays, Sundays and Sunday nights. I keep saying to myself that when I get older I am not working like this. I am going to work like a normal person from 8 to 5 or 8 to 6. I am always going to sit down to a family supper. My father always worked one day job. Then he'd come home and pick me up after school and I'd have to go to his machine shop with him. We'd work until 9 or sometimes even 10 o'clock. All the time I was there I'd be thinking about all the school work I was supposed to be doing and I'd know the next day would be hell in school because I wouldn't have my homework done. It was a never ending circle for me. I was pretty good at sports but I couldn't play. One time the gym teacher came to see my dad. He told him that I was one of the best soccer players he had ever seen at my school. He asked my dad to let me try out for the team. My dad told him to mind his own business. My father only understood two things drinking and work.

Jack's father was atypical in the study because he seemed to be intentionally throwing obstacles in the way of his son entering the mainstream of school. One of the ways to gain social acceptance for students in school is through sports. Although Jack was athletically talented and that talent was recognized by the school, his father stopped him from participating. He also filled Jack's hours after school with physical jobs and left no time and offered no

support for the intellectual work of homework. He seemed to sabotage any chance Jack may have had of entering the mainstream. This may come from a comfort level about his own status as working class or it may result from a desire not to be left behind in the working class by his son. Whatever the motivation, the result was the same. Jack was marginalized in school because of a home/school disconnection closely related to his working class status.

In Leroy's story the parent's work was rejected not necessarily because of its working class status but because it did not meet the obvious moral values the town equated with meaningful work. This resulted in a sense of marginalization from the community, in general, and school, specifically. Leroy, a senior in a rural vocational high school, had struggled with reading and writing throughout his school experiences. Leroy's working class family was ostracized in the small town in which he lived because the town did not like the work his mother did. She was a bartender and in their community this was not seen as respectable work. Leroy believed that this was the reason his early difficulties with school were not addressed. He was the most open of participants when talking about the family/home disconnection.

He took great pride in telling the stories of his mother's efforts to get him the help he needed. Although her efforts were in vain, he seemed to take great solace in the fact that she was not afraid of coming into school. He

saw his mother's interventions as courageous because she had experienced great difficulties within her own school experiences. She left school after the ninth grade and had always felt a sense of failure because of that.

School has always meant working your way around things. I learned early to try to always go with the flow. I was picked on a lot as a little kid and when my mom and I talked about it, she convinced me that the best way to look at it was to think that if they are picking on me at least they are leaving some other poor sap alone. I knew I could take it and some kids couldn't so in a sense I was protecting weaker kids.

We lived in a small town and they didn't approve of my family. In a small town it is one big clique. Everyone knows everyone else's business. In my town they didn't think my family was worth much so in those early years in school I always felt pushed aside. I was someone who they could ignore.

Leroy's family did not meet the accepted social norms of the community. In Leroy's case the rejection was more clearly identifiable and therefore easier for Leroy and his mother to attempt to resist. Objections to the type of work based on moral judgements are often made overtly. The objection to work because it is of a lower social status is often more difficult to address because of its covert nature.

Most working class Americans have been taught that education should be transformational. The hope is that school will produce what it seems to promise: "the means to a different life-a better life-a life in which you can be somebody" (Rockhill, 1987, p.28). It would seem then that



those who remain in the working class may be there because they have not been transformed by school.

Jacob's story about his parents' disconnection from school is representative of the contradiction between faith and fear that faces many working class parents. Jacob was a senior in a suburban vocational high school. His parents were consumed by the work of running the family farm and were unable to pay attention to Jacob's school experiences. He was able to articulate the fact that his parents were too busy trying to run a farm for them to be able to run interference for him at school. He seemed to accept singular blame for any early school failures. He felt that if he was in the margins of school, it was his own fault.

I started school okay, I guess. I had to stay back in kindergarten. I guess I was a little young and there was overcrowding in the class. I was a little young and I had a little trouble at first. I didn't listen. I guess I was immature.

I am the baby in my family. My brothers are a lot older than I am. My family was always busy working on the farm so I did a lot of stuff by myself. I remember it was the summer after kindergarten and my mother and I had to walk over to the school. We sat in this room and they told us, I'd have to repeat kindergarten. My mother seemed to accept it pretty good. The teacher never said anything to me but I remember her looking at me and I remember she was frowning. The second year in kindergarten was easier because I learned to be quiet.

Sometimes I felt comfortable about being in school but not always. I always tried real hard to do the right thing. I've always been shy, very shy actually. I'd always wait at the bus stop with my mother. I remember one time there were these children from school walking by and I couldn't really say hi. I just couldn't say anything. So I just looked down the road.



Both of Jacob's parents left school after the eighth grade which made high school a foreign experience to them. They were facing an institution that they were not able to access and they must now have faith that their child will be accepted into the mainstream. Work can offer an escape from having to face their children's school difficulties, difficulties that may be similar to those that resulted in their not completing school. The excuse (real or invented) was that work responsibilities kept them from intervening in the school problems facing their son.

The parents of all the participants had working class status and most of the participants did not perceive their parents' school experiences as being successful. These two elements added to a sense of disconnection for most of the participants between their home and school experiences and increased a sense of being marginalized within school. The feeling of being out of the mainstream of school seems to be passed from one generation to the next.

Pivotal to this position within the margins of the mainstream is the conflict that existed for many of the participants between the value of physical and mental work. The work that was valued in school was intellectual work. Even within the vocational school where the focus is physical work, there is the subtextual message that intellectual work is not the primary focus because it is too difficult for the vocational student to access. The work that was respected at home was physical work. The conflicts

that this dichotomy produced increased many of the participants' sense of isolation within school.

#### D. The Intergenerational Transference of Marginalization

Many of the participants said that their parents expressed regrets that they had not been able to be successful students. So school had not fulfilled its promise for those parents who maintained working class status. John, a bright and goal oriented student who felt vocational education offered him a chance to achieve his educational goal, was told by his father that "vocational high schools were for dummies." His father said that he had gone to a vocational school because he wasn't smart. His inability to graduate from what he clearly saw as a second rate school solidified his self image as a school failure and his entrapment into a permanent working class status. His father told John that "he had spent his whole life under cars because he wasn't smart enough to do anything else."

Miller, Nemoianu, and Dejong (1986) stressed the desire of working class mothers for their children to have a better education than they had, the hope that the children would somehow be good enough to succeed scholastically and that the mothers would be capable enough to help. The mothers' fears of school reflected their own troubles in school. This tension is a subtext in the stories of the participants in this study. The stories told by the participants were classified into two categories: those stories that reflected a verbalization of intergenerational transference

of marginalization and those that did not reflect direct parental reference to their own marginalization.

#### 1. Stories with Parental References to Their Own Marginalization

There was an intergenerational aspect to the sense of marginalization for some of the participants. The parents did not feel successful or part of the mainstream in school. In many of the participants' stories, the parents transmitted the sense that school was inaccessible to their children. This was transmitted indirectly to most of the participants. This intergenerational transmission of marginalization is evident in the sense of failure that most of the parents experienced within school. Nine of the twenty mothers in the study did not graduate from high school and ten of the twenty fathers did not receive a high school diploma. None of the parents graduated from college. Two mothers took some college courses at a local community college but neither graduated.

Jack's story is of particular interest in relationship to this theme because Jack's surrogate parents were his older sisters who quit high school. His role models for his school decisions were his sisters. None of his sisters had graduated from high school. All had quit school and he felt that each of them was smarter than he. If they couldn't make it in school, he felt that he certainly had to question if he could make it.



My four sisters all quit high school. I'm not as smart as any one of them. I plan to graduate and the school I am going to graduate from is McGrath Vocational. When I told my father I knew he wanted to smack me but I wasn't a little boy anymore and like any bully, he was afraid of anyone who could fight back. My mother said nothing as usual. My sister, Rose, was there and she said, "Jackie, you are doing the right thing." Rose was the one who always took care of my school stuff so I felt good when she said that.

Jeanne offers the clearest example of the intergenerational transmission of marginalization and the complex way that it is given to the next generation. Her mother was determined to have school be better for Jeanne than it was for her. She even verbalized that desire to Jeanne repeatedly. Yet she was unable to give concrete support to Jeanne when obstacles to that success became evident in Jeanne's school life. Her ultimate solution was to remove her from the school where her own experiences were the most painful and to place her in the only available alternative that she had. It wasn't that she saw vocational education as a better system but it was a different system than the one that she found personally intolerable.

Jeanne talked about pretending to be in the mainstream but never really being able to figure out how to get help in school. She sensed that her school problems were probably intergenerational. Both of her parents had experienced unsatisfactory school lives. Jeanne surmised that from what they didn't say more than from what they did say about their school experiences.



She would ask her parents to help her with school problems but they depended on the school to provide the help she needed. It was ironic that they were giving Jeanne two such contradictory messages about school. They were indirectly telling her that school was a place where they felt frustrated and had experienced a sense of failure and at the same time it was a place where she should be able to get her needs met.

My mom never liked school either. She's never told me that directly but I can tell from little things she has said to me. She told me that in high school she couldn't wait to get out. I just have the feeling my mom wasn't too happy with schools when she was a kid.

When I was home and I was trying to do my homework, I'd say to my parents, 'I'm having a hard time with this work,' they would tell me to go to my guidance counselor and tell him I was having a hard time. God, I was just a little kid. I didn't have the nerve on a lot of days to even ask to go to the bathroom. How was I going to get the nerve to ask to go to the guidance office. I didn't even know where it was.

My mother forced me to come here (vocational high school). She told me she wanted me to have a better life than she had. She knew a lot of the same teachers she had in high school were still there. She felt it was a dump. I came here to please my mother. I know she just wanted the best for me. My father always said he didn't care where I went to high school as long as I went. He never talked about his high school years. I never thought he graduated until my mother showed me his class ring.

## 2. Stories without Direct Parental References to Their Own Marginalization

In the story of Linda, a senior at a suburban vocational high school, her initial sense of being

marginalized resulted indirectly from her mother's effort to avoid having her experience the same distress as her older brother had, when he started school. Her mother had taken two courses at a community college and felt that she might have control over her children's school destiny. Her mother had assumed that the school would help her first child to find his place in school. When that did not happen and school became a painful place for her son, Linda's mother became determined to make it better for Linda. Linda's mother's hard work resulted in a form of marginalization that none of the other participants experienced. Linda felt her mother had worked too hard to break the pattern of marginalization and that resulted in being marginalized because school was too easy. Linda's mother felt that she might be able to control Linda's chances for success, but in so doing she achieved the same result that occurred in the other participants whose parents did not intervene. Linda felt as if she was in the margins at school.

My mom worked harder getting me ready for school than she did for my brother, Matt. The first few years in school were hard for Matt. He got teased a lot because he couldn't do the reading and writing too well. So I guess my mom learned her lesson and she started the ABC junk with me very early.

Well I was the smartest kid in the class so I didn't get to color, I did work (first grade). I didn't feel special I felt different. When I took the test to get into Catholic School I placed very high. They thought if they let you color, they'd be cheating you.

My best friend used to tease me about what they got to color when I was in the other room doing

work. She knew I didn't like not being there to color. I'll tell you it's no fun being too good to color when all you want to do is color. If I had the choice I probably would have colored.

Linda carried this sense of not being in the mainstream throughout her school years. As a senior in a vocational high school her attitude toward school was one of disdain. She was the most negative of the participants about school. She repeatedly said that "she hated school" and even though she always knew she was smart, she felt she was more like her father who "knew that being book smart didn't even get you a cup of coffee." She felt that being smart in school had no value to her in the world outside of school. Her mother's involvement with her early school experiences did not make school comfortable for Linda. Her father, who never graduated from high school, was openly disdainful of school success and Linda accepted his judgement.

Linda's story appears to raise important questions about marginalization. Linda's marginalization has similarities and also differences from the other participants who didn't meet the schools' standards for achievement. Linda met those standards and yet shared the sense of being an outsider in school. This suggests that there may be different forms of marginalization as well as different sources of marginalization in schools. Schools may in fact be set up so that all students feel some degree of marginalization.



The stories of Bianca and Maria were different from those of the other participants in relationship to their reactions to family patterns in school being passed on to the next generation. Both young Latina women were juniors in an urban vocational high school. They were both parenting teens who did not live with their families of origin at the times of their interviews. Although within their stories there was evidence that an intergenerational history of school failure and marginalization did exist, that was not passed onto them. The reason for this nontransference may be reflective of the fact that the mothers of these two young women were not involved to any degree in their children's school lives. This complete lack of involvement or interest in their daughters' education meant that no messages were given by the mothers about school. This is not to suggest that the answer to the issue of the intergenerational transmission of marginalization is to ignore one's child's schooling. In the specific cases of these two young woman, they were able to develop a sense of being part of the mainstream at school without any attempt at parental support of their school experiences.

As a Latina woman who was married and had a child before her seventeenth birthday, Bianca faced the most obvious barriers to becoming part of the mainstream of school because of the family/school disconnection and yet there was an optimism about her willingness to embrace



school as a safe place. She did not express a clear sense of being in the margins at school.

In her early years she had to fight to go to school because of her mother's apparent indifference to getting her there. Bianca would not talk directly about specific family issues. She did make reference to the language barrier that faced her as a Spanish speaking child in a school where English was the only language spoken. Even this barrier did not stop Bianca from wanting to be at school. She seemed to refuse to embrace a sense of failure or marginalization about school. The obviously dysfunctional nature of her family of origin did not include any transference of a sense of marginalization from one generation to the next. The only message she did receive from her mother about school was one of disinterest. She had to form her own opinions and this proved to be a positive for Bianca.

I'm seventeen and I'm married and I have a baby daughter, Carmen, who is three and a half months old. I'm still in school. My husband is fifteen and he is still in school too. We want to make it to graduation.

My first school experience was in Springdale. I was born in Springdale but I never heard anything but Spanish in my home. So when I went to school, they put me in classes where they only spoke Spanish. Only one class a day did they speak English to me and that was my favorite class because I wanted to be like the teachers and other kids. My mother used to tell me that I was the only one of her kids that used to like to go to school. My sisters and brothers hated to go to school. Me, I loved it. I even wanted to play school when I was home. I use to hate it when my mother would keep me out of school. I was always

shy in school. I didn't want to make mistakes. I just liked being there. I felt safe. I still do.

My mother wanted me in the half English and half Spanish class but she never told anyone at the elementary school. I once told my teacher that I'd like to be in the class where they mixed Spanish and English but nothing ever happened. I guess she didn't get what I meant. My mother spoke Spanish totally so she couldn't really talk for me. I wonder where I learned any English before school? You see Spanish was the only language said in my house and church was all in Spanish. I must have learned my English from playing on the street. I just don't know how I learned it before school but I guess it wasn't good enough to get me into the half English classes.

I really hated it when my mother couldn't get up to get me ready for school. I just didn't want to stay home. I'd be doing nothing at home and I'd be thinking about things I'd be doing at school like learning stuff and being with the kids. I really wanted to be there when I was little.

When I was about to the end of the fifth grade I went to a foster home. Well, I went to my first foster home. I've had a couple before I married my husband. My baby and I live with him now and his mother and his grandmother and his greatgrandmother in the same house. Before I lived in a lot of different houses and went to five different schools for grades five, six, seven and eight but at least they were here and not back in Puerto Rico.

They took us from my mother for personal reasons. I'll tell you that part of it was because she wasn't making my brother and sister go to school. They moved my brother first. He is a year younger than me and he wasn't ever in school. Then I got placed (into foster care). I was still going to school. My sister didn't get placed. She had a baby and so she got to live where she wanted to. She's nineteen and she has three daughters. She wants me and them to graduate from high school real bad.

I tried to explain to the social worker that I'd go to school no matter what and I wanted to stay at my school but she didn't really understand how important it was for me to stay at that school

where I knew the people. She moved me to a foster home where I had to go to a different school.

Bianca's story is difficult to explain since there was a history of school failure in her family. There was also the added language barrier to deal with in fighting marginalization that the majority of the other participants did not face. Yet she saw school as a place that she was determined to enter. For her, unlike the majority of the participants, school was a safe place. This may be explained by the fact that her mother's total disinterest in school carried with it none of the contradictions felt by the participants whose parents were trying to gain access for their children while they still had not resolved their own senses of failure concerning their personal school experiences. When Bianca said that her favorite class was the one class in which English was spoken, she is making an important statement. Although Bianca refused to speak directly about her family situation, her story suggests that the intergenerational transference may depend on the child identifying with and having a bond with the parent. When that is missing, teachers may become the role models.

Maria shared Bianca's determination to succeed within school. She was seventeen and was pregnant. She saw school not as a place where she was on the outside trying to get in but rather as a place where she felt safe and included. Like Bianca's mother, her mother stayed out of school affairs and Maria seemed comfortable with this arrangement.



Unlike Bianca, there seemed to be an unspoken support for success in school from Maria's mother.

Although as a Latina woman, Maria had language and ethnic issues to face that the non Latina participants did not, she also had an asset that the other participants were lacking in their home/school connection. She had a role model of school success within her family. Her older brother, whom she idolized, had completed high school and had attended a local community college. Her three older sisters had all quit high school before graduation but she identified with her brother's success and believed that she could repeat it.

I am seventeen and I am going to have a baby in September. I am planning to come back to school right after the baby is born. I live with my boyfriend and his mom. They all support me and want me to graduate.

I have never been to Puerto Rico. I was born in Springdale and I have always gone to school in Hillford. I don't know why I am proud of that but I am. At home we always spoke Spanish and English. So I spoke English good when I got to school. I don't know if I am smart but I feel smart sometimes.

Most of the time my home and my school were separated for me. My mom never talked to me about school. When I was little the bigger kids ran the school and picked on the Puerto Rican little kids. They never picked on me because I wasn't afraid of them and they knew it. I always took good care of myself. I knew my mother couldn't help me with school so I did it by myself.

My mother stayed out of my school business. She never got caught up in any part of school but I always thought she cared if we graduated. I am the youngest. None of my three sisters graduated. I've gone the farthest of the girls in my family.



My brother is twenty-seven and he is a policeman in Hillford. He graduated from high school and even has some college. He was always good in sports and real smart in school. He is always saying, "Hang in there." I know he was disappointed in me when I got pregnant but he told me it didn't mean I had to give up. I'm not giving anything up. My brother and me are alike. We are proud people. No one can stop us.

### 3. Summary

Many of the parents left high school before graduation and expressed regret about that decision to their children. Unfortunately that failure resulted in an apparent fear of school that for some of the parents prevented them from intervening on behalf of their children when school difficulties arose. Often the messages about school that the parents gave to their children were contradictory. Many verbalized repeatedly that they wanted school to be better for their children than it was for them. Yet they offered little concrete support to insure that it would be better. Others demonstrated little interest in their children's lives at school. Still others attempted to intervene for their children but that intervention was ineffectual and often increased the participants' sense of marginalization. The participants repeatedly said that they felt they were on their own in school. The disconnection between the home and school worlds of most of the participants was clearly evident.

#### E. Alcoholism within the Family Structure

In some of the stories the issue of the parents' alcoholism became a subtext in causing the sense of

disconnection between school and home. There is a wealth of research literature (Bailey, 1961; Ablon, 1982; Lawson, 1983; Bennett, 1985; Steinglass, 1987) that examines the effects of alcoholism on the family structure. Although the issue of alcoholism is not focal to this study, to avoid this theme would result in editing that would not be beneficial to presenting the experiences of the participants.

"The Alcoholic Families are behavioral systems in which alcoholism and alcohol-related behaviors have become central organizing principles around which family life is structured" (Steinglass, 1987, p.47). The effect of alcoholism on the quality of family life became obvious in six of the participants' stories. Each of these participants told the story of the parental alcoholism in a subtextual manner. They recognized it as an issue in their family life but with the exception of Charles, they did not want to talk about its connection to their own difficulties within school. Linda refused to identify her father's alcoholism, but her frequent references to his drinking suggested that it was a serious problem in her family life. In each of the stories about alcoholic behavior, it became evident that the alcoholism did influence the home/school disconnection.

The dysfunctional aspect of family life in two (Maureen and Charles) of the six participants resulted in their actively rebellious school behavior. These were the only

participants in the study who resisted school through overtly rebellious behavior. In the case of Charles, he was able to verbalize the connection between his antisocial behavior and his parents' alcoholism.

It's funny but I can remember rebelling against school starting in kindergarten. I never wanted to conform to anyone's standards. The rebellion started when I started school. I guess it was because both of my parents were alcoholics. There was always fighting and confusion in my house. So when I stirred things up at school, I sort of felt at home. You know what is funny, I always sort of knew that I was smart but no one in school knew I was.

Maureen was a senior at a suburban high school whose affect during the interviews was one of self-assurance and defiance. She clearly stated at the start of the interviews that she would not talk about anything that she considered "none of your (the interviewer's) business." She did not want to discuss the connection or disconnection between her family life and her school life. When she mentioned her father's absences from the family due to his alcoholism, she did so in a matter of fact manner and did not respond to follow up questions concerning the effect his alcoholism had on her life at school.

My dad was in and out of the picture when I was young because of his drinking so he didn't get involved with school. My mom must have come in for parent conferences but I just don't remember any time in particular. I remember my father disappearing for a time when I was in the first grade until I was in the third grade maybe. You know when you are that age, time doesn't mean much. Obviously my mom had big time worries so school was something I dealt with alone.



The issue of Jack's father's alcoholism caused obvious conflicts between Jack's life at home and his life at school. Jack spoke with anger when he discussed his father's drinking and its effect on his life at home. He recognized that the drinking episodes influenced his ability to concentrate on school work when he was at home.

The only time he wouldn't get me to go to work was when he went out drinking and on those nights I knew all hell would break loose when he got home so I'd be so nervous I couldn't concentrate on my homework.

In John's story, as in the stories of Charles and Maureen and Jack, there was the subtext of alcoholism and its effect on the school life of the participant. John, unlike Maureen and Charles who became rebels in school, became an overachiever. He was always anticipating what he was supposed to be doing. Even with his active desire to please the adults at school, he talked about a sense of isolation from the mainstream of school. His mother did not have time to notice his school experiences since her energies were spent trying to cope with an alcoholic husband.

I don't ever remember getting into trouble in school. I guess I was just always quiet. I had a few friends. I never had a lot of friends. I'd have to say most of my friendships started at the vocational high school. I never thought of myself as a loner because I did have a few friends. I just was never the type of kid who had people sleep over his house and I'd never wanted to sleep over anyone else's house. You know I just always stayed home. Maybe that was because my parents argued so much. When my mom and my stepdad got together right after my dad left, they used to fight all the time. My stepdad was an alcoholic.



I was always worried something bad was going on at home so I stayed home a lot to make sure I was there to help if something happened. I always thought that if I was there at least I could pick up the phone if things got out of hand. I spent a lot of nights sitting in the attic stairs, my room was in the attic, listening to the fights.

I remember one time when I was in the fifth grade, I started to cry when I got to school and I asked to use the phone in the office. I told the secretary that I was sick but I just wanted to make sure everything was okay because they (his parents) were still fighting when I left. My mom basically assured me everything was okay. So I just went to my class. No one in school asked me anything about why I was crying and I'm glad because it was really none of their business.

This is going to sound strange to you but I never remember playing on the playground. I can remember sitting on the cement steps and watching the kids play but I never played with them. I never even thought friends and socializing were important until I got to high school. I guess I was just too busy holding everything together.

The only time I can remember feeling bad in elementary or junior high school was on Parents' Nights. My mom would try to come but she didn't always make it. I wanted her to know how hard I was working and that my papers were always the ones hung up around the room. I think she just always trusted me to do good and I did.

Linda never acknowledged that alcoholism was the cause of her father's physical abuse but the evidence was strong within her story that her father was frequently drunk and abusive to her. Linda strongly identified with her father and often during the interviews justified her father's strong disconnection from her school experiences.

I am more like my dad than my mom. He has always been friendly to strangers. We'd be at the Kielbasa Festival and he'd be making friends with strangers. He's mechanic smart not book smart but he is smart. My mom is more book smart. I'm smart like both of them. It's funny my father

said he went to school to get away from his father and I went to school to get away from my father. In the seventh grade my father kind of wasn't nice to me. I remember going to school with a black eye. My dad was mad when the school got involved. He wasn't mad at me for telling. He was mad at the school for sticking their noses into our business.

A connection was made in some of the participants' stories between the disconnection between home and school and the issue of alcoholism within the family structure. For six of the twenty participants alcoholism defined their families' focus. The alcoholic parent or parents required the families' attention and prevented any meaningful connections from being made between the home and the school. These participants projected a sense of shame and a need for secrecy when discussing their parents' disease of alcoholism. The most openly rebellious within school and the most openly angry about their places in school of the twenty participants were Charles, Maureen, and Linda. They were three of the six participants who came from alcoholic families. Resistance to the inequalities they perceived in school may have been connected to the chaos they experienced at home.

#### F. Vocational Education as a Means of Escape

In the participants' stories about their decisions to attend vocational school, there was evidence that the sense of being marginalized influenced their choice of secondary education. The marginalization was from the academic mainstream that is overseen by the teacher and it was also

from the social mainstream regulated by their peers. Both types of marginalization intersected in complex ways. The participants usually saw vocational high schools as an option out of a system that they found discomfoting and excluding both academically and socially.

When it came to their children's choice to attend a vocational high school, there was active resistance on the part of some of the parents to having their children attend a vocational school. The parents' resistance was based on their belief that vocational education could lead only to working class status. The school guidance counselors who discouraged many of the participants from attending a vocational high school because the participants were "too smart" were indirectly giving the message that the vocational school was a second rate educational option. If one was smart, one did not go to a vocational high school. Some parents did encourage their children to attend a vocational high school but even that encouragement was couched in the message that vocational education was an escape from academic failures that the participants had experienced in school. The message was that vocational education was an escape for students who couldn't make it in an academic high school. The conclusion would have to be that those who do go to vocational schools must not be smart enough for the academic high school. By giving this message of educational elitism, the parents and the school guidance counselors were keeping the status quo in place. The



subtext of the parents' and the guidance counselors' message was that those who decide to become skilled tradespersons do so because they are not capable of other types of educational training.

The majority of the students were able to articulate that vocational education was a way out of a school system that made them feel like an outsider. The complexity of their reasons for opting out of the mainstream of secondary education ranged from a realization that family finances apparently made college inaccessible to them to a desire to learn a trade that would lead to meaningful work immediately after high school. The participants' stories about their decisions to attend a vocational high school are organized into three sections: those participants who went to a vocational high school despite discouragement from significant adults in their lives; those who attended a vocational high school after receiving encouragement from significant adults in their lives; and those who made decisions apparently independent of any direct influences from significant adults.

#### 1. Decisions Made Despite Discouragement from Adults

Jack knew he wanted out of the school system as he knew it. Jack was determined to attend a vocational high school. His guidance counselor told him that he was "too smart" for a vocational school. He remained silent but followed his own direction and ignored the school's representative's advice.



The day the kids signed up to go to McGrath Vocational I was out sick. The next day I went to the guidance counselor to get the paper work done. Mr. Rice, the guidance counselor, tells me I am too smart for a voke school. I just listen to him and I don't say anything. When he's done talking, I ask for the papers again. He just shook his head and gave me the papers.

That night I gave the paper to my father to sign. He looks at it and tells me he wants me to go to college. He said I could be more than he was. I listened to him. I could smell booze on his breath. He always talked sappy when he had a couple. I just listened to him and didn't say a word.

Jacob's guidance counselor tried to discourage him from going to a vocational high school because he saw Jacob as being "too smart." There was the underlying message to Jacob in that comment that the vocational school was for the dumb students. Jacob resisted the school's voice of authority by remaining silent. This time he coupled the silence with doing what he felt was right for him.

He did not ask his parents for advice but instead looked to the school experiences of his two older brothers. One attended the vocational high school and graduated. The other stayed at the local academic high school and quit school before graduating. With these family school experiences in mind, he decided to attend the vocational high school.

I talked to my brother, Ivan, about McGrath Vocational because he graduated from there. He said it was the best move he ever made. He said he wouldn't have graduated from high school if he stayed in Hilltown High School. My other brother, Germaine, did stay at Hilltown High and he did quit school. So I learned from their experiences as well as my own. I was going. The funny thing

was Mr. Burns, the guidance counselor at Hilltown, tried to talk me out of going because I was too smart. I listened to his speech but nobody was going to make me stay there. I was getting out.

Charles acknowledged his awareness that the vocational high school was in the opinion of many people the ultimate marginalization. Yet even with that realization, he still intended to attend a vocational school. Once more his decisions regarding school were couched in rebellion. His mother did not want him to attend so he went in order to break her rules.

My friend use to tell me that going to a voke school meant I was a loser like the teachers were always saying about us. He said a voke school was the way the teachers got rid of the rebels. In a way I agreed with him. You know why I came to a voke school? My mother didn't want me to come. My parents wouldn't let either my brother or sister go to a voke school and they wanted to. It was sort of the rebel thing. My mother never took much interest in school and all of a sudden she is telling me I'm too good for a voke school. I remember her saying something about wanting me to have a better life than she and my father did. When she was saying it, I was tempted to tell her as long as I didn't drink I'd be better than the two of them. She was so determined to keep me out of the voke school. Give me a break.

John carefully thought out his decision to attend a vocational high school. He, like Jack and Jacob, received the message from his guidance counselor that he was too smart to go to a vocational school. He also, like Jack and Charles, was told by his parent that he deserved more than a vocational high school could offer him. He was not influenced by any of this.

I visited my father in New York every summer. He was never very heavy into school. He never talked

about school except when I told him I was going to a vocational high school. He went through the roof. You see he went to a vocational high school and he quit after his second year. He said that guys who went to vocational schools were dummies like him. He told me if you couldn't get anything higher than a D, you went to a voke school. I don't even know how he knew I was smart.

What my father didn't know is that I had it all figured out. I wasn't exactly sure what I wanted for a job in life but I was pretty sure I wanted to do something with electronics. I knew the voke school had an electronics department. I found out that most of the kids in that department went on to college so I knew it was for me. I'd have a trade when I graduated. I could be on the cooperative work program starting in my junior year, and that would give me some good money for college. I knew what I was doing. My mom let me make my own decision. She trusted my judgement.

## 2. Decisions Made with Encouragement from Adults

When it was time for Jeanne to attend high school, her mother made the decision for her. Jeanne would go to the vocational high school. Jeanne accepted her mother's first attempt to intervene in Jeanne's education. Her mother's decision was a reaction to her own negative high school experiences and not necessarily a response to Jeanne's educational needs.

I never liked school. I like it now but I really hated it before high school. I am an A/B student now in high school but before high school I never got anything higher than a C- except like on a teacher's whim. I never liked school because of the pressure. When I was younger, I couldn't understand words so reading was very hard for me. No teacher seemed to want to help me with it. They'd say things to me like, 'Well try doing it your own way then.' I don't know, it's hard for me to explain. An example I could give you would be test taking. They always seemed to be timed. I hated that. Since I had trouble reading, it took me longer than it was supposed to take me. I was always failing those SAT test they give to little



kids. I would have to take them over and over again. It was humiliating. I kept trying to tell the teachers that I needed more time but no one really listened to me. I hated school.

Rita did not resist her parents' decision that she would attend a vocational school. The strong focus on physical work seemed to be at the core of the decision. Even though there was discouragement from her guidance counselor, her parents' opinions were the ones that mattered. She knew where she was going to go for high school.

There was never any question that I would come to a vocational high school. It is a family tradition and I will make sure my children come to a vocational high school too. That's the way it has been and will always be for my family.

The funny thing is the administrators at Gulfway School didn't want me to come to this high school. They really tried to discourage me. They said I was much too smart. My parents said that in our family you run your own world until you start going the wrong way and then you get yanked back. They wanted me to go the right way as far as success and morals were concerned. They said the decision was mine to make. The boys in my family would have to go to a trade school. I hate it when people, even in my family, call vocational schools trade schools because they are so much more than that. Because I was a girl I got to make a choice. That was a switch!

My mother was mad as hell when she heard I wanted to go into the forestry/agricultural shop. She almost didn't sign my papers. A lot of people tried to discourage me. My dad remained neutral. It really didn't matter what anyone said. I was drawn to the work.

I am knowledgeable about farming and I am proud of what I know. I feel bad about what I don't know about other things but the way I see it is that those things will always be there for me to learn about. I will always be a learner especially about farming.



Linda was atypical in this study because in both her early school experiences and in the decision-making process about attending a vocational school, her parents were actively involved in her school life. Their involvement did not leave her feeling part of the mainstream. It seemed to result in her experiencing a sense of being powerless over her life at school. When she talked about deciding to come to a vocational school, she said that the decision was made for her.

I didn't decide to come to a voke school. My father told me I was coming to one.

Jared was clear in explaining his reasons for attending a vocational school. He came to a vocational school because his parents did not think he was smart enough to succeed in an academic high school. So although he felt that his parents were not able to help him resolve his difficulties in entering the mainstream of school, he did accept their assessment that he was not smart enough to be anywhere but in a vocational high school.

My parents really let me know that they thought vocational education was the best thing for me. I really think that they always knew I wasn't smart enough to do well in a regular high school. I can remember them getting a sort of worried look last year when I told them I was thinking about taking classes at a community college after high school. They even went into school to talk to my English teacher to see if she thought it was stupid for me to be thinking about going to college even part time. They never talked to me about the meeting. I thought it was best for me not to ask too many questions.

Bianca's decision to attend a vocational high school was tied to her optimistic attitude that school was a place where she wanted to be. Ironically when she talked about how well the Latino students were treated at the vocational school, there seemed to be a hidden agenda of racism. She said that the vocational school was a place where white and Latino students got along. The implication was that this would not be the case at the academic high school in her city.

In making her decision to attend the vocational school, she used as her role model an adult friend who had attended the vocational high school but left because of a pregnancy. That friend loved going to school there. She also stressed that she knew that she wanted to be a hairdresser and the vocational school would make that goal attainable for her.

I always knew I'd go to a vocational high school. I had a friend who went to Walters and had to drop out because she had a baby. She'd always be telling me what a great place it was. I just knew it was the place for me. I knew they could teach me hairdressing and from what my friend said it was real clean and safe and the white and Puerto Rican kids get along real well. It's where I wanted to be.

### 3. Decisions without Adult Influence

Maria had a strong role model of a successful student in her older brother. She talked with great admiration about her brother's academic success. He was someone in her life who had become successful. She looked to him for approval. It is interesting to note that her brother did not enthusiastically support her decision to attend the

vocational school. All of her siblings had gone to the academic high school, so Maria was venturing into an untested school situation.

Although she claimed that her guidance counselor was neutral and did not push her in the direction of vocational education, she did feel pressured by time. In the end her decision, like Bianca's, was based on the fact that vocational education would lead to an attainable career goal. She would be able to become a hairdresser.

My boyfriend graduated from Walters High last year and he's always saying to me, 'you've got to graduate. You've got to graduate.' What he doesn't understand is I've always intended to graduate no matter what. School has always been the only safe place I've had. At home my mother didn't like us to go outside a lot because so many bad things could happen. At school it was different. Nobody came to school to hurt you. School was safe.

At the end of junior high the guidance counselor explained the difference between high school and the vocational school. The vocational school would get you a job quicker is the way I understood it. He didn't push me either way. He said it was totally up to me. I had a week to decide.

My brother and my sisters all went to Hillford High. He graduated and they all dropped out. My brother told me to think carefully about it. My sisters are too busy with their kids to worry about me. My mother didn't say anything. It wasn't a hard decision for me to make because I have always known I wanted to be in cosmetology.

Maureen's decision to go to a vocational school was a conscious decision to get away from school as she knew it. She felt her reputation was set and she needed a fresh start.



At the end of eighth grade I made the decision to go to a different school. I couldn't stay in that school. My reputation was set. I remember an English teacher calling me a tramp. I didn't even know what the word meant. I knew I could not stay there through twelfth grade. I had to get out and start over.

Leroy's decision to attend a vocational high school was based on the fact that he wanted meaningful work and he knew his family could not afford college.

When I was in the fourth grade I went to an open house at a vocational school and right then I knew that was where I fit into school. I knew I wasn't good enough at reading to ever make it to the point where I could get a scholarship to college and I also knew that my family didn't have any money to spend on school after high school. I knew if I stayed in a regular school I'd always be a dishwasher. I started working as a dishwasher at an inn in my town when I was in junior high school and I kept saying to myself that if I went to a vocational school and learned a trade that job would not be a life sentence.

Matt, senior at a rural vocational high school, demonstrated the most self confidence of all of the participants and he expressed the belief that his marginalization was his own choice. He felt that he had looked at the mainstream of school and didn't like what he saw and so he decided to enter the margins. This bravado could be explained in part as an overcompensation for adolescent insecurities. Some of it could be attributed to his self reflection. He seemed to be able to analyze not only his own place in school but the schools' role in placing students in specific positions within school. He also had received



a message from his parents that he was supposed to be himself in all situations and not to try to be what others wanted him to be.

He, like Jared and Jacob, failed in his first school experience. Unlike the other two participants, he did not see it as his failure but he blamed the institution for "screwing up." When it came time for him to decide which high school he was going to attend, he, like Maureen, expressed the wish for a fresh start. His guidance counselor was atypical in that he stressed that the decision was an open one. Matt knew he could return if he decided that a vocational education was not for him.

I was kept back in kindergarten because they told my mom I was socially incapable of going into first grade. My mom wanted them to be specific and they said I wasn't sharing. The truth is they made a mountain out of a mole hill. The school screwed up and I know that they knew it. When I was in the fifth grade I was sent to the office for some offense and the principal said that he had watched me over the last five years because he always felt that a mistake was made keeping me back that year. He basically told me that I got screwed. I accepted the fact that the school made a mistake and I wasn't upset about it because the principal admitted it was their mistake.

My pop always told me that I wasn't supposed to be anyone but who I wanted to be. My parents always trusted me to know who I was. One of the reasons they are so smart is because I am the third son and my brothers sort of blazed the trails for me. My parents were proud of the way my brothers turned out so they knew I'd be okay too.

In school I tell them what they want to hear. I try to create the image that I am bad (tough). I will show who I really am to people in power (teachers, principal, school director). I want these guys to know I am noble. I am focused on one thing and that is getting on top. I know that who I really am would please those people in school. You know what I mean, the people can make decisions that affect my future. Everyone else can think whatever they want about me. The reputation of being a party boy or a crazy man is created from a small event that kids build on. Reputation is all public hype. I only worry about it if it will have an effect on how the people in power view me and the fact is the people in power in schools never hear what kids think about each other because kids do not trust the people in power.

I wanted to go to a vocational high school because my brothers went to a vocational school. They always told me it was the place that they really started to like school. I knew I would go there. The guidance counselor at my junior high told me there was always an open door policy. It was a chance for me because it was a place where I could be myself or as much of myself as I wanted to be.

My parents supported my decision. I knew they wanted me to go there because my brothers had been so successful there but there really wasn't any pressure. They always encouraged me to make my own decisions and I did.

#### 4. Summary

The decision to attend a vocational high school was a result of experiencing a sense of marginalization within the school experiences prior to high school. The majority of the participants saw the vocational high school as a way to separate from schools that left them feeling excluded from the mainstream. This

exclusion started for most of the participants from their earliest school experiences.

The majority of the participants did not receive support for their decision from their parents. Some of the parents' vocal displeasure about their children's decision to attend a vocational high school was reflective of their own acceptance of the working class as being a place from which one needed to escape. They viewed vocational education as a second rate educational track. The participants found their parents' strong opposition to vocational education to be ironic since these same parents had shown no active involvement in school prior to their vocal opposition to vocational education.

The classism that is evident in the parents' reactions to vocational education points to the complexity of the issue of social class in this society. The participants were getting mixed messages from their parents. They were told either directly or indirectly that the intellectual work of school was not valuable. Yet when the time came for these same participants to enter a school that would focus on developing skills that required physical labor, the parents tried to stop the participants from making that choice. This classism was also evident in the responses of some of the guidance counselors who told the participants that they were "too smart" for a

vocational high school. The subtext to these statements was that only dumb students would select vocational education because the knowledge being acquired there would lead to working class and therefore inferior jobs.

The majority of the participants clearly articulated that vocational education offered them a way out of schools that disempowered them. They were practicing resistance that some might argue led to reproduction of their working class status. I would suggest that their resistance to the marginalization of the mainstream system of public education was productive. Prior to their decisions to attend a vocational high school, some of the participants had become silent and passive. These participants hoped they could become invisible within their classrooms, and thus avoid the negative attention they had become accustomed to receiving. Other participants resisted their marginalization by acting in an anti-social manner similar to the behavior of the "lads" in Willis' study (1977) that was discussed in Chapter II. Both forms of resistance were reproductive. If these behaviors continued throughout high school, I believe that reproduction would have occurred within each of the participants' school lives. Vocational education offered the opportunity for the "fresh start" that many of the participants were looking for in school.



### G. Summary of the Findings on Marginalization

The findings suggest that a clear correlation exists between the home/school disconnection for working class school participants and the issue of marginalization. The participants' stories suggest that their parents had experienced their own senses of failure in meeting the standards of the mainstream middle class discourse of school. This failure was embedded in the classism that was part of school experiences of the participants and their parents. The home experiences of most of the participants did not correspond with the experiences that were valued in school. This is particularly evident when the distinction between the value of physical and intellectual work is discussed.

The decision to attend a vocational high was reflective of this sense of being marginalized. For the majority of the participants the vocational high school represented a way out of school as they understood it. They did not feel like they were part of the mainstream and the sense of being an outsider made the decision to seek an alternative type of secondary education desirable. The critical perspective discussed in Chapter II recognized that obstacles exist that prevent certain groups from gaining access to schooling. The research reviewed for this study pointed out the disempowerment of working

class students within schools, and this disempowerment was reflected in the participants' sense of being marginalized.

The participants' stories also point to the complexity of the issue of marginalization. The school participant who is experiencing marginalization in school needs help in order to find a place within school. This study points to the intergenerational aspect of marginalization. If the parents feel that they never found their places within school, they usually are not able, and sometimes not willing, to intervene in the school struggles of their children. The participants in this study repeatedly expressed the sense that they stood alone in trying to deal with school.

Most of the participants made a conscious decision to take charge of their school life. Most did not give up on school. They stopped passively accepting or resisting in an anti-social manner their places within the margins when they moved into an alternative choice for schooling that was available to them. They saw vocational education as the educational choice for their secondary schooling. Most of them did this with little support and some active resistance from their parents and school guidance counselors.

The participants understood that they needed a way out of school as they knew it. They had learned at an

early age that they were on their own in school. Most of the participants knew that as well meaning as their parents might be, they did not know how to help the participants find their ways within school. School had always been a struggle for most of the participants but they were not willing to give up on school. They found an alternative that was acceptable to them. That alternative was vocational education. It is a separatist school system whose history was discussed in Chapter II. The fact that the focus of vocational education is trade related work has placed it in a lowly position in the hierarchical power structure of schooling. This position is related to the classism that is evident in the review of previous research conducted in Chapter II. Sadly the successes most of the participants experienced at the vocational high schools were often diminished because of the pervasive classism that was part of the fiber of their school experiences. Yet even that classism did not result in a sense of defeat for the majority of the participants. Most of them had learned to resist their marginalization in ways that were productive.

Chapter V will examine the second component of issue of empowerment/disempowerment within the participants' stories. That component is a sense of voice/voicelessness within classrooms.

## CHAPTER V

### VOICE AND VOICELESSNESS IN THE CLASSROOM

#### A. Introduction

The issue of marginalization is connected to the issue of voice and voicelessness within the classrooms because the two issues are interconnected components of the concept of empowerment and disempowerment within school. Having voice is one of the steps out of the margins and into the mainstream of classrooms. Seidman (1991) discussed George Steiner's (1978) concept of inner and outer voice. Seidman saw the outer voice as the public voice which is reflective of an awareness of the audience. The outer voice is guarded. The inner voice is a personal voice that is used to explore the meanings of experiences. Cleary (1991) writes about the "outer voices" and the "inner voices" used by the participants in her study on students' writings. She found that the participants used an outer voice when they were trying to figure out what she wanted or when they were trying to entertain her. The inner voice was used when the participants were trying to understand their experiences and when one of the participants and she were relating to each other. I will use the terms "inner" and "outer" voices when discussing data from vignettes and excerpts of the participants' interviews which will highlight identified themes.



There are two theoretical points that are pivotal to this chapter. The first is that within school certain voices are validated while others are silenced (Apple, 1982). The silence can be self imposed resistance against the dominant discourse of schools. This resistance is self defeating because the silence becomes the voicelessness that is disempowering. If the message received by the student is that the inner voice is not appropriate for school, then that voice never becomes part of the classroom discourse. The second theoretical point is that there is not a singular voice for all school participants. Not only do different participants have different voices, but any one participant has many voices. If the student is voiceless, there is the strong possibility that the place that student will occupy within school is in the margins.

Within this chapter the issue of voice/voicelessness will be dealt with primarily at the levels of administration (how students are grouped for instruction) and discipline and not on the level of curriculum and instruction. On the surface this may appear to be a serious omission since Giroux's and other critical theorists' (Aronowitz, 1981; McLaren, 1987; Apple, 1987) discussions of voice have to do with what happens in the classrooms, especially in examining if there is a place for students' experiences and meaning to be examined and valued. The participants' stories did not focus on what was taught or on any discussion of curricular issues. This supported Weis' (1990) observation that what

is stressed in school is the "forms of schooling rather than the substance of learning...the treatment of knowledge and the enacted ritual of control serve to contain any real struggle to the surface" (p.81). The participants' stories suggested that before what was taught could be empowering, basic issues of classroom management needed to be examined. What they wanted to talk about were issues related directly to how they were treated rather than what or how they were taught. I followed the direction that the participants' stories were suggesting because it was an area that had not been explored in great detail by critical theory and therefore needed closer examination. To introduce the analysis of voice and voicelessness within the stories, two profiles are used. Heather's profile explores the concept of voice and Jim's profile examines the concept of voicelessness.

#### B. Profile of Heather

Heather was a senior at a rural vocational high school who was strikingly pretty and who appeared to be very comfortable and open during the interview process. She came to the interviews directly from her cooperative work job as a machinist in a small factory. Her heavy work boots and green factory uniform were incongruent with her stylish blond hair and skillfully applied makeup.

She displayed a pleasant disposition and seemed to be concerned that she was "doing it right" when she was participating in the interview process. She was open with

her school stories but was not as willing to share family stories until late in the second interview.

My mom and dad both went to a vocational school. I have two older brothers. Ted went to a vocational school and Sam didn't. I feel like when my parents talked about school to me that they always painted a positive picture. They never put a lot of pressure on me about going to a vocational school. They always left it up to me. The only given was that my brothers and I would graduate from high school.

My father is a mold maker and he owns his own machine shop. He has always been busy with his work. My mom is a homemaker. She is the one who always went to school for me. I remember when I was little my mom would read me Dr. Seuss books. I remember her always reading the same ones over and over.

In school reading was a real struggle for me right from the start. I always went out for extra help in reading. In elementary school it worked for me because it was one on one. I used to go out with one other girl. I got used to doing it. I got use to having to stop my classroom projects and go out to the extra help room. I didn't mind doing it as long as I knew it was going to help. I kind of felt a little different but it was worth it to me if it was going to help.

I always gave 110% in school. I knew that because of the reading problem I had school was going to take extra work on my part and I was willing to do it. My father had a saying that I always used in school. He would say, "people shine in different places." I knew that I was good in math right from the start of school so I could deal with the fact that I had to work hard in reading. I didn't feel smart in school but I was always willing to struggle to make myself as successful as I could be.

My mom and I are very open with each other. She had a terrible time with reading when she was in school. She still does. She didn't graduate from high school because she married my father and he is always putting her down for not being smart. She has told me that school was especially hard for her because her family was poor and she was a goody goody. So besides the problem with reading,



she had to face the other stuff in school. Even though school was hard for her, she did everything she could to make it easy for me. She always came to every school event. She didn't get her driver's license until three years ago so she always had to find a ride to school and she always did.

My mom wanted to get her driver's license and my father didn't think she could do it. So she had my sister-in-law read the test book into a tape recorder and then my mom listened to that tape over and over until she was ready to take the test. She got her license. She figured out how to do it on her own. I guess that tells you how smart she is.

I was lucky to have my family's support in school. My brother, Ted, was in the sixth grade when I was starting school and he made sure that I met someone on my first bus ride to school. He wanted to make sure I would have a friend. What is funny is that same girl he introduced me to on my first school bus ride is still my best friend today. Ted also gave me good advice about playing sports. When I got to junior high, Ted was the one who told me that he regretted never trying out for sports. He said that I should try out for any team I wanted to be on. It was okay not to make the team if you gave it your best shot. It wasn't okay to never try. I guess that's been my attitude about sports and school. I was always willing to try.

When I got to junior high school I was still going out for extra help and I would have been willing to continue if it had helped me but it didn't. I would be sent to the Special Education room two periods a day. The other kids started to make fun of me. I learned to be quiet and not say too much about it. My best friend was in the advanced classes and we would meet each day in study hall. They actually made fun of her for hanging around with me just because I had to go to the SPED room. She just ignored it like I did. I remember one day telling her that I didn't think I needed the extra help any more. She said that the test scores showed I needed the extra help, so I must have needed it.

The problem with that thinking was I knew I just didn't do well on those kinds of test. I guess I got nervous. So finally it hit me that



the extra help was actually making me fall farther and farther behind. It wasn't like elementary school where I got one on one help. There were six of us in there and only one teacher. She just didn't have the time to spend with you. On the days that she did spend the whole period with me, I'd feel guilty because I knew that she was ignoring the other kids. On the other days when I was the one being ignored, I resented the wasted time. I finally decided that I was in a no-win situation. I was spending most of my time waiting for her attention or playing stupid computer games. It was stupid because I was sent in there to get help with my reading so I could get caught up with the rest of the kids in my class. What was happening was that each day I went out for extra help, I was getting more and more behind. I had to do something about it and I had to do it fast before it was too late for me.

I went down to the guidance office and I was mad. I cussed and everything. I told Ms. Martin that she had to take me out of that extra help class because I wasn't learning anything and my reading was not going to improve. I could tell Ms. Martin had been having a bad day and wasn't in any mood to listen to me. She tried to remain calm and said that all my test scores showed that I needed the extra help. I said that may be true but I wasn't getting extra help. I was wasting my time waiting for help or playing games. She said that until my scores on the tests were higher, I'd have to stay in that class. That's what she thought, I had other ideas.

That night I went home and had a meeting with my parents. As I said before, my mom was the one who always came to school when I needed her. This time I needed both of them. I explained the situation. They listened. Then my father gave me the newspaper and told me to read it to him. I did. Then he asked me to tell him what I just read. I did that too. He then told my mother that they were going to school the next day. He was mad and he was going to do something to make sure that I got into the right class. I guess you could say that I brought in my big guns. Schools always listen to parents, especially when they are mad.

So the next day there is this big meeting in the guidance office. The school brought their big guns too. The principal was there. The extra

help teacher was there. The English teacher whose class I wanted to be placed in was there. The guidance counselor and the adjustment counselor were also sitting at this table when my parents and I came into the office. It's funny but I can remember that not one of those school people looked at me or said one direct word to me. They kept saying her test scores are low. I wanted to say call me by my name.

As I was sitting there, it hit me that this was the first time my father had come to school for me. It actually was the first time I could remember him standing up for me. He listened to what they had to say and then he told them that he had me read the newspaper to him last night. He said that I was also able to explain what I read. He said that he knew I could do the work in the English class. He told them that he wanted them to give me the chance. He said he wasn't asking that they place me in the advanced class. He wanted them to place me in the lower ability group where he knew I could do the work. He said that I deserved the chance to try. They told him that it wasn't as easy as that because of scheduling problems. He had done his homework and he informed them that Lotti Smith had my exact schedule except she went to the English class I wanted when I went to the extra help room. They got real quiet. Then the principal said, "Well, if it's that important to her, let her try it." You could tell he was upset about the way the meeting went.

Now I was hoping my new English teacher would give me the book and I could have had one night to look it over before going into her class but no such luck. I went into the class the next day and I was scared. I sat way in the back and I was scared but determined. The book was hard but I worked hard on it. It's funny but I don't remember the name of the book but I worked on it every night. I struggled but I didn't fail. I was a C student in that class but I was learning and that was all I wanted.

When it came time for high school I started taking stock of myself. I knew that I probably wanted to go to college. In the old days a high school diploma was enough to have if you wanted to be a success but I knew I'd need more than that in my world. If I stayed at Hilltown High School, I'd have to go to a community college before I

could get into a four year college. I thought it over and I decided that if I went to the vocational school, I could learn a trade. Then I would be able to support myself while I went to a community college. I knew a lot of kids who had graduated from vocational schools and then went to community colleges so I decided that was the place for me.

When I got to the vocational school, I was placed in the extra help room again. It started all over but I knew what to do. I didn't even need my parents help this time. First I went to the English teacher whose class I wanted to be in. I told her the story about my experience with extra help. She gave me the book they were reading. She said take it home and see if you can understand it. I did just what she said. I came back and told her that the book was easy for me. She said, "Then as far as I am concerned you can be in this class." I went to guidance and made the change. We read Romeo and Juliet and I loved it. I always played Juliet. I would take it home and read it to myself in my room to make sure I could do it in front of the class. Mrs. Collins always called me her Juliet after that.

I have always been a struggler in school but I always knew the struggle was worth it. I was lucky because my father was my guiding light and my mother was my molder. They each knew who I was and they were proud of me. I guess even though it's hard for me to actually say it, I am a school success story. I am graduating in the top one-fourth of my class and I have learned that I am blessed with strong math skills and weak reading skills. I guess that what I learned in school is that we are all strugglers in some ways and we need to be able to tell people at school what we need.

Heather had a determination to get her inner voice heard in school. Her concerns about "doing the interviews right" seemed to be at odds with her apparent success in achieving voice in school. She apparently was willing to edit her story to meet my requirements. This editing was a lesson that was taught in schools and that she had resisted.



She exhibited none of the fears that many of the participants had about facing the school's authority figures in order to get her needs met. She was willing to accept extra help for her reading problems when the help was meaningful to her and she saw it as productive. Once the work became less productive and ultimately useless and degrading in junior high school, she was willing to take risks to change that. When the school would not hear her voice as she expressed her needs, she got her "big guns" by bringing in her parents who were able to help her get what her mother had never gotten in school, a sense that she was heard.

The growing strength of Heather's inner voice was seen when her school experience with special needs services was being repeated in the vocational high school. This time she did not use her parent's intervention but took care of the matter herself. It was not clear from her story whether or not she used her inner voice within the classes. Her concern about "getting it right" may have been the mode she used to insure achievement and success in classes.

Within the classrooms she was able to look at her strengths and weaknesses and to assess what she needed to do to find her place within those classrooms. Even when her best friend told her that she was placed in the lower group because that was where the test score said she belonged, she refused to accept that she was powerless to make changes. She was able to move into a group that the school said was



too difficult for her and despite the barriers placed in her way (not giving her the book or offering her any assistance in accessing the mainstream English classroom), she was able to succeed.

Her decision to attend a vocational high school was an example of her understanding what she needed from school and her ability to get her needs met within school where she could easily have become silent. She wanted to attend college to pursue an engineering career. She recognized that her reading problems would pose problems for her so she thought about her options and decided that a community college would offer the best opportunity for success in college. The vocational school would help her find a way of financing her post secondary education by preparing her as a skilled machinist. She felt she could be self supporting while attending college. The stories that she emphasized in her interviews were the stories of her struggles to be heard in school.

From a critical theory perspective when she found her voice in facing school authority figures who decided her placement in classes, she was able to practice production by asserting her own experiences and resisting the status quo. She would not let the schools reproduce the status quo and keep the social order in place. It is not clear from her story if she was able to continue to use her inner voice once in those classes. Her story suggests that within the

classes she learned to "do it right" by learning to adapt her inner voice to meet the requirements of inclusion.

She was a working class student. Her father's machine shop was a small business that he ran from his home. Her mother had experienced failure during her own school experiences because of severe reading problems. The importance of the home/school connection within the discussion of marginalization in Chapter IV is evident in Heather's story and points to the interconnections between the issues of marginalization and voice/voicelessness. What makes Heather's story different from those told in the discussion of this theme in Chapter IV was that Heather's parents did connect with the school when their daughter needed support. There was an effective connection not a disempowering disconnection. Heather had some of her mother's same difficulties with reading but with help from her parents she refused to allow the school to push her aside. Special education help was valuable when it was being given in an effective manner. It became a hinderance to Heather entering the mainstream of education when it was ineffectively administered. How schools treat the nontraditional learner can render the student voiceless. Heather did not allow that to happen to her. In Jim's story the opposite was true.

#### C. Profile of Jim

Jim was an extremely large young man. He was 6 feet 4 inches tall and weighed 250 pounds. His arms were covered

with tatoos and he wore tee shirts with drug messages to each of the three interviews. Jim was slow moving and soft spoken but there was an undercurrent of anger in him that was easily recognizable. His affect during the interviews was one of serious contemplation. He wanted to participate and told his story with much thought. It was obvious that parts of the story were painful for him to tell and the interviews were punctuated with long periods of silence.

Jim was the only participant within the study who did not graduate from high school with his class. His attendance during his senior year was sporadic. He explained that often times "sleep overtook him and he couldn't break its spell." Jim was poetic and philosophical when he spoke. The only time that he smiled and talked with animation was when he was talking about smoking marijuana and drinking alcohol. It was so obvious that telling his story was painful for him. By the end of the interview process, I viewed his willingness to tell the story as an act of courage.

I live with my dad. Up until I was five years old, I lived with both my mom and dad. Then they got divorced and I lived with my mom until I was about twelve years old. The reason I moved in with my dad was because my mom remarried this man. I really didn't like my stepfather at all and my brother had become annoying. So I just left one day and went to my dad's. That basically is my family story.

In grammar school I was a terror. I guess I'd call myself a geek back then. I was always saying stupid things trying to be cool. I stopped because I learned pretty fast that it didn't work. It's always been hard for me to learn. Ever since



day one it has been me behind the whole day. I was never in any special ed class but I was in the lowest of the normal classes.

I only got extra help because I talked to my mother about it. It was one night when I was studying stuff. I can remember I was having a hard time. I went into the living room and I told her I just couldn't get it. I knew there were kids going out of class for extra help and I thought I needed to go with them. That was in the fourth grade I think. The funny thing was when I was in those extra help classes, the teachers kept telling me I didn't need the help. They said my only problem was I didn't like doing the work. That shows you how stupid they were. They thought I'd asked for extra work in order to avoid work. Does that make sense to you? They thought it was laziness. Maybe the laziness was on their part. They didn't seem to be fighting over who was going to help me.

You know what I think? I think schools work hard at convincing you that you aren't smart. Before I got to school I loved books. I remember my mom reading me dinosaur books all the time. I couldn't get enough of them. Then school starts and not one dinosaur book. They are all these SEE JANE RUN. SEE DICK RUN. SEE SPOT RUN. I remember always praying I could go to the school library where they had dinosaur books. You can't tell me that they can't teach a kid to read with dinosaurs.

In the first grade I had Ms. Ryan for a teacher and she was the meanest woman a kid could ever meet. I will never understand how a school could hire a mean woman to teach little kids who don't know what mean is until they meet someone like Ms. Ryan. She would single out a certain amount of us to humiliate. I remember me and my two friends were figuring out the work together. We were all having trouble so we were helping each other. She stopped the whole class from working and called us up to the chalkboard. She told the whole class that they could rip up their papers because we had ruined all of their hard work by cheating. All we were doing was helping each other. She kept calling us King Jim and King Pat and King Jason. She kept telling the class how we thought we were better than everyone else. All we were doing was helping each other figure out the work. I hated that woman.



Every year in school I wanted to pass to the next grade. I was always afraid of staying back. I worked so hard to pass. I didn't want to end up in a class with younger kids. I didn't want my friends in my class looking down on me saying, "Ha, ha you stayed back."

My best friend when I was little was this dude who was in the seventh grade. He was like my babysitter but he was really my best friend. He was a lot older than me but we liked doing the same stuff. We loved comic books and we'd go play war in the cornfield. I loved learning stuff about history that could help me in playing war. School could have been fun if they understood what was interesting to learn about.

In the third grade I had this great teacher, Ms. Lord. She let us have an egg incubator in our class and we hatched baby chicks. It was pretty cool. When I was little I always wanted a man teacher. When I was little I thought my dad was really cool so I figured a man teacher would understand about dinosaur books and war games. So I get to the fourth grade and I have Mr. Morin. He was a total jerk. I always thought he was related to Ms. Ryan. He was always yelling. I guess he is the one who taught me to tune out teachers.

Do you know what my strongest memory of those early years is? I'm sitting in those uncomfortable wooden desks with the chair attached and the teacher is passing out the tests. They're being passed out from the highest grade to the lowest. I'd be sitting there saying to myself something like, "Boy, I hope I did good." Then I'd get like a zero. I stopped hoping. Don't you think that is a miserable way to pass back papers?

I never thought I was smart back then. I cared about looking good to my friends. I wanted to brag about a good grade just once. Then the disappointment of getting all those zeroes set in and I started saying, "Who cares?" Then I started to believe there must be other stuff I was good at. My mom would tell me that I wasn't going to be able to go to college if I didn't do good in school. I always figured I'd be better off working on construction or something like that. I don't think I'd have wanted to just sit behind a

desk all day even if I was good enough for college.

I took an IQ test in the seventh grade and it said I'd be good in construction and stuff like that. They didn't say I could become something impressive like a banker or teacher. They were putting me in a certain place. The funny thing is now I think I could do good in college because I could pick my courses and I'd only take things that I was interested in. Back in seventh grade I just bought it that I wasn't good enough. All the popular kids, the rich kids, were the ones who were told they could do the impressive stuff.

I wasn't one of the popular guys. That was tied to things like test scores and having the right clothes. We weren't poor but we weren't able to have the latest in things. So what do you think I did? I played football. I did it because everyone said I should because I was so big. I was good at it but when I moved to Wellford, they didn't have a football team. The crazy thing is I wore my old Northfarms football shirt to school one day and got hassled unbelievable. It's crazy, isn't it? The same shirt that made me a winner in Northfarms made me a loser in Wellford. That's when I decided to get out of the rat race and go to a vocational school.

The guidance counselor at my junior high encouraged me to go to a voke school. I knew it couldn't be worse for me than school had been so far. My father didn't care where I went to high school as long as I went. I never wanted to be a doctor or a lawyer so the voke school would meet my needs. I went into the paint shop because at first I thought I would do some art type work and I liked art. It turned out to be nothing like I expected. It really isn't art work at all. It has been just plain painting but I could deal with it. I really liked my teacher. He was cool and knew what life was all about. Then at the end of my junior year, he gets fired. The school said it was because of low enrollment. It made me sick. I'm now in carpentry shop and I hate it. You never realize how much you like something until it's gone.

Sometimes I get mad in classes here when the guys just won't shut up and listen. I've been in the group (ability group) that is the screw off group. I could have moved out but it was easier

to just stay there. I wish sometimes I had paid more attention in class so I could have learned more about things I'm interested in but I made my own choices. I wasn't gypped by school. I've had teachers here who cared about the students. They let the students know they were here for more than the pay check.

I've never expected much from teachers. I guess I learned that from my father. Praise wasn't something my father gave. It wasn't in his personality to praise my work. I share a woodworking shop with my father. I made this walking stick that really was a work of art. He looked at it and said, "This cut here could have been cleaner." I accepted that lack of praise at home and in school. To be honest with you I don't like to have a teacher telling me I'm doing great at something. It makes me uncomfortable.

I'll admit that I smoke dope just about every day. It takes the rough edges off for me. I can relax and not think about the stuff that gets to me. I know you don't like me telling you that but don't knock it if you've never done it.

To my way of thinking school never changed much from the first day I started. I've tried to make it through without calling a lot of attention to myself. In that way I've been a success in school. I only wish it had been a little more interesting.

Jim's story was filled with subtexts of defeats within the classrooms of his school life. The defeats were often the result of disciplinary actions taken by apparently well meaning teachers. It would seem that Ms. Ryan's disciplinary actions were taken in order to insure her classroom was quiet during testing. The severity of the discipline left Jim feeling humiliated and angry. Those emotions were still recognizable when Jim told the story eleven years after the event occurred. Ironically Jim was disciplined for what educators today would applaud as an



example of cooperative learning. Later in his school experiences when he was at the vocational high school, the lack of disciplinary action resulted in his ability group becoming the "goof off" group.

Jim's voice was silenced by the treatment he received not only surrounding discipline but also relating to the way special needs services were administered. Jim attempted to have his inner voice heard by requesting extra help when the school work became overwhelming. The extra help room was made available but the price was the message that his real problem was his own laziness.

The aptitude testing that Jim received was reproductive. He was told that as a result of the testing, it was obvious that he was capable of doing lower status (by the school's standard) jobs. He did not aspire to "impressive jobs like being a banker or teacher" because the tests said he wasn't capable of that work. He knew those were the jobs for the "preppies." The testing resulted in keeping Jim in his place. This judgement was the script for his outer voice. His inner voice was angry and non-accepting of the test results. His inner voice said, "I knew I could do good in college", but he rarely, if ever, spoke with his inner voice in school.

The vocational school became his option for secondary education because he wasn't "good enough" for college. His reasons for entering a vocational high school appear to be less empowering than those discussed in Chapter IV by other



participants who saw vocational education as their way out of a disempowering educational system. Jim's story suggests that he saw vocational education as a place he was put and not clearly as a place he selected. Vocational education was further marginalization for Jim and increased his sense of voicelessness. He went into the paint shop because he thought that he could use his artistic talents. He learned once he was in the shop that he would be painting houses and not creating art work. He was not satisfied with the shop but he made the best of the situation since his inner voice seemed to say that he didn't deserve more from school. As a teacher at the vocational high school that Jim attended I was aware that the choice was removed from his power when the paint shop was merged with the carpentry shop during his senior year. This merger left him feeling totally out of the mainstream since he had not mastered any of the carpentry skills that were now second nature to the others in the shop.

As is often the case with working class students, Jim's best friend was much older than he was. This occurs frequently with working class children because older children are used as after school child care providers (Steinberg, 1993). His social experiences were not shared with his classmates but with a friend who was already in junior high school when Jim was still a third and fourth grader. This increased Jim's isolation on the playground as well as in the classroom. The fact that his friend was not

in Jim's age group in school made his voicelessness also part of his social identity in school. Once more the connections between school experiences and experiences in the world outside of school becomes evident in the examination of voice/voicelessness. Within school Jim experienced a sense of voicelessness and that voicelessness was carried over to a certain degree to his peer relationships. The cause and effect between the academic and social voicelessness was not clear in Jim's story, but the existence of the two forms of voicelessness was evident.

In both Heather's and Jim's stories a sense of voice or voicelessness could be found in their school experiences. The specific issues are: the administration of special services to nontraditional learners; the arbitrary administration of discipline; and interaction with peers.

#### D. Administration of Special Services

The manner in which special needs were addressed had an effect on the participants' sense of voice or voicelessness. The majority of the participants in this study had received special needs services at some point in their academic career. The way that those services were initiated rendered many of the participants voiceless.

Jared's story highlighted the lack of concrete explanation about basic details concerning the length of time that the services would be given.

I remember in grade school a lady coming into my classroom. She asked to see me for a minute. I went into this room that was filled with books. It was the extra help room. That was the start of a nine-year minute.

Jared felt that he was voiceless. He went out of the room believing that it would be for a brief period of time and in reality, it was the start of a special needs program that would last throughout his elementary and junior high school years. When he was in the special needs room, he learned to remain silent because he didn't want to believe he was as "bad off as the others in the room." He wanted to feel like he was part of the mainstream. By placing him in the separate room for special services, he felt that he was being told he was different. He was afraid that the school was right so he remained silent. His inner voice told him that the students in the special needs room were "retarded." He didn't want anyone to think he too was "retarded" so he "never made any waves." He never allowed his inner voice to be heard because he was afraid that the school might be right and he wasn't "smart enough" to be in the mainstream.

In junior high school when it was obvious to him that the special services had become a place where he "wasted time by playing computer games", he continued his silence. His parents felt that the school knew what it was doing and Jared accepted that opinion on the surface by his silence. Jared never used his inner voice in school but he never lost his ability to use it. This became evident within the study when he expressed his observations about schools and the way

they administered special services. He saw that "schools made it easier to move down (in ability groupings) than to move up." He helped his younger sister to avoid the trap of the lower ability track by convincing his parents to have her remain in the higher ability group. Jared was able to have his inner voice heard at home and that helped his sister to not repeat his school history. He had made observations about school experiences that could be expressed outside of school but those observations were never used to change his position within school.

He demonstrated his resistance by silence within the classroom. He was resisting (fighting the status quo) by refusing to participate. This was a passive aggressive form of resistance and was often misunderstood by school authorities. He appeared to be cooperating and accommodating, but he was consciously refusing to participate. He understood that his silence was self-defeating. This is reflected in the fact that he viewed his school failures as his own fault and not the fault of the schools. "If I went back to those classrooms, those teachers won't even know I had ever been there. I guess it's my fault because I never said anything." Jared's resistance to the way the special services were administered was silence and that silence resulted in the reproduction of his status as a student who was outside the mainstream of the classrooms' activities.



In Charles' story his experiences with special services were similar to Jared's in that he felt no one within school was willing to explain to him the reasons why he needed special services. Like Jared, Charles feared that he would be labeled "retarded" because he was being taken to the special services room. This fear suggested the power of labels within the school communities. Charles' and Jared's inner voices translated the label of Special Needs Services into the label of retarded. The label of retarded was the ultimate voicelessness in the views of these participants. There was no place for the "retarded" student in the view of school that these two participants held.

There was one teacher in elementary school who referred me to special services. So for one week I sat in a little room and cut out butterflies and played with blocks. They'd tell me to put the small blocks on the big one. They were trying to see if I was with it. That made me so angry. I was really with it and they didn't have a clue.

(At the start of junior high school his mother was hospitalized for a nervous breakdown and he was living temporarily with his older sister.) My sister referred me to special services. This time I told them I was angry about being in that room. I told them I wasn't like those other kids in there. They were retarded. I really knew I was smart. It was just that no one else in my life had figured it out yet. I was not retarded. I was just having some hard times but no one cared about that.

Charles was insulted by what he saw as the lack of appropriate questions in his first experience with Special Needs Services. He became angry because of the fact that they "didn't have a clue." Like Jared, he did not want to be seen as being like the others in the room who he labeled

as "retarded." When Charles got to junior high school, his anger was too close to the surface to be pushed into silence. He let them know that he thought he didn't belong there but he did it with such hostility that he felt his new label within school was "rebel" and schools have no place for rebels. The special needs services continued and he realized that he could do nothing to stop it.

Like Jared, Charles does not lose his inner voice about school outside of the classrooms.

Each week my teachers would send a written report on me (to special services). To this day I don't know who read those reports. My sister didn't have time to read them and my mother was in no shape to read any thing. You know I just got those reports. I am eighteen and I went and asked to see my records. I signed something and the school sent them to me. I had to laugh. You'd think they'd show them to you when it is happening. Schools are so screwed up. You know if the teachers and the butterfly people (special services) had sat down with me and someone had just asked me directly what was wrong. Oh who knows I probably would have told them all to mind their own business. Who knows, not me!

Charles knew what was wrong with the way special services were administered to him but he was powerless to change anything. His inner voice had never been validated in school and his outer voice was so angry and antisocial that it was silenced.

Jeanne was a participant in the study who wanted to receive Special Needs Services but did not know how to ask for them. Like Jim's teachers, her teachers viewed her difficulties in the classroom as being the results of her laziness. She knew that assessment was not accurate but she

did not know how to talk about what her learning problems were. She learned to pretend to be successful.

Sometimes going to school is like being in a play. If you act smart, teachers think you are. If you don't do homework or pay attention, they assume you are dumb. It's like being in a play.

Unlike Jared and Charles, Jeanne did have intervention from a teacher who helped her to receive the special services that she wanted. That teacher gave Jeanne an opportunity to have her inner voice heard and therefore have her school needs met. Within the walls of that teacher's classroom, Jeanne was able to use her inner voice and tell the teacher what she felt she needed. The teacher seemed to ask the questions that unlocked the inner voice.

I liked junior high because I was able to go into the reading room to get extra help. During the first week of seventh grade the English teacher asked me to stay after class to talk with her. She told me that it looked to her like reading wasn't much fun for me. I told her it wasn't supposed to be fun. It was just hard work. She sort of laughed and said that maybe she could make it a little fun for me. She got me into the reading room. I was so happy. See if I had asked for the extra help in a way I'd be saying that I was so dumb. By her suggesting the help, it seemed like it was okay to ask for extra help. She was saying I wasn't some hopeless case. I had a problem learning and the school could help. Even my friends would understand me going for extra help. I actually felt important because this teacher cared about me. It is hard for me to explain it. Before seventh grade I felt cheated.

Jeanne felt empowered by the teacher's simple acknowledgement of a problem. The teacher spoke to Jeanne before going to the educational specialists within the school. She listened to Jeanne's inner voice. Jeanne was



given the message that Jared and Charles did not receive. The message was that the special services could make school a better place. The student's voice is often ignored when decisions about special services are made. Jeanne always knew she had a difficulty with reading and this teacher was willing to talk to her about it. It was not something to be ashamed of and she was not a "hopeless case." Something could be done. Special services were being offered not as a place to separate people who had no place in a mainstream classroom but a place where special needs could be addressed so that the mainstream classroom could become a comfortable place for all students. Jeanne felt there was no shame attached to going there because of the simple and straightforward way the services were offered.

There were six of us in that class (the special needs classroom) and my friend and I were the only girls. We were all in the same boat so we didn't need to worry about anything except learning to read. I loved that class.

Jeanne's silence in the classroom was very similar to Jared's classroom behavior. She was ashamed of the fact that she could not read as well as the others. She was in constant fear that someone would find out about her reading problems and that they would make fun of her. The strong connection between social identity and academic success is reflected in Jeanne's story. Academic failures, either real or perceived, position school participants into the margins of the mainstream of schools and result in a sense of voicelessness. Jeanne never lost her inner voice but she



did not find a place in school to use it. Then in the seventh grade, when her needs were recognized and addressed by a teacher, she felt finally that she had a place in school and her voice was validated.

The majority of the participants did receive some kind of special services to address an academic and/or social issue that the school saw as interfering with the participants' school performances. The participants felt that the reasons for the special services, the length of time that the special services would be given, or the goals that were to be attained by the special services were never clearly identified. How these services were introduced to the participants and how they were administered had an effect on the majority of the participants' sense of voicelessness.

Most of the participants said that they were never told clearly why the services were being rendered. Apparently the school personnel (teachers and administrators) made the assumption that the participants understood the reasons for the special services. This failure to explain left most of the participants feeling that special services were for people who were "retarded" and in the eyes of the participants this was the group that was at the bottom of the social ladder in schools.

The fact that the majority of the special services were conducted by taking the participants out of their classrooms and putting them in separate settings away from their peers

increased the participants' feelings that they were different. Most of the participants talked about becoming silent in order not to be noticed as part of this special service group. The majority of them did not interact with the other special service recipients because they did not want to be part of this group. The special services had resulted in their increasing silence and voicelessness within school.

Jeanne and Jim felt that they needed extra help, but it was not offered to either of them. They were told that they were lazy and that was why they were having academic difficulties. They resisted what they perceived as the unfair administration of special services. Jim asked his mother to intervene in order to get him the help. Jeanne was helped by a teacher who recognized her needs. Both felt their special services experiences were positive. This would suggest that if the special services were viewed as necessary by the participant and/or the school representative took the time to clearly explain the purpose of the services than those services might become empowering instead of disempowering.

As the participants grew older, the special services became increasingly meaningless to the participants. Many said that in the younger grades they did receive one on one attention with reading which was an area of concern for most of them. Once they entered junior high school, the services became wasted time, even for the participants who had faith

that the services might offer help. They said that many hours in junior high special services rooms were spent killing time. Most of the participants who received special services felt that those services increased their isolation from the mainstream and resulted in a deeper sense of voicelessness.

#### E. Arbitrary Administration of Discipline

Many of the participants had learned to be silent as a form of resistance. This silence resulted in a sense that they were overlooked while in the classroom and later easily forgotten by the teacher. This silence was not a sign that the participant had lost their inner voice because during the interviews the participants were able to talk with their inner voices about the voicelessness that occurred for them in most classrooms.

In some of the participants' stories the resistance took the form of rebellion. They did not feel that their inner voice had a place in school and they either did not want to or did not know how to use an outer voice that would reflect their inner voice and at the same time be acceptable within the dominant discourse in school. Some of the participants, as in the profile of Jim, talked about their school experiences with a sense of recognition that they had no inner voice in school and that was the way it was. That resignation was often expressed with a sense of anger and bewilderment. Other participants acted out in school in the vain hope that this rebellion might lead to acknowledgement

of their presence in the room. Not being heard within the classrooms for these participants was connected to being marginalized. For them it was better to be calling negative attention to themselves than to be ignored. Charles spoke most openly about this when he said:

I know that most of the teachers were a little afraid of us. In math we (he and his best friend) failed every test and still got a D for the year. What would you think if that happened to you? It was clear to me. They wanted us out of their classes. It was okay with me. I knew I was in control of the situation.

Unfortunately for these participants the resistance by rebellion against rules led to further isolation and disconnection from the mainstream of the classroom and a deeper sense of being voiceless because the disciplinary actions that were taken were often public humiliations for the participants.

Kevin felt voiceless and marginalized within school. He talked without affect about the fact that school had no value to him at all. He said that he was not a part of school. He claimed that he went to school because he had nothing else to do. He repeatedly said that he was bored with school. He claimed that he broke the cycle of boredom by "getting in trouble for being noisy."

I don't remember anything about those teachers (the ones in elementary school or junior high). They were all the same. I just remember being bored and getting into trouble for being noisy.

Kevin was very resistant to the interview process. Although he did come to each of the three interviews on



time, he presented himself as bored and uninterested when telling his story. He often claimed he had nothing to say about school. When I asked why he agreed to the participate in the interviews, he said it was because it got him out of class (The interviews were conducted during school hours at the urban school). This affect of disinterest and boredom was firmly in place but did not correspond with the substance of the stories he told.

People thought I was a troublemaker when I was young. I was always in trouble because I was always bored. Nothing big time just small "get sent to the office" stuff. One day I got into a fist fight. This kid in fourth grade asked the teacher for permission to hit me and the teacher said, "go for it." I fought back. It was stupid. I never told my parents the teacher gave permission. At least that day went by fast.

Kevin used being bored as an acceptable excuse for resisting school and it may have been boredom that was the catalyst for his acting out in the classroom. Whatever the cause was, it is obvious from this story that the acting out behavior had reached a point of extreme agitation for his peers and the teacher. There apparently was little intervention done to find the cause of the disruptive behavior. The teacher told his classmate to "go for it" which rendered Kevin totally voiceless. He told no one about the injustice of this disciplinary action. Yet his inner voice was able to say that the episode was "stupid." His hopelessness about school came across in his final comment that "at least that day went by fast."

This hopelessness resulted in a total voicelessness by the time Kevin was in the vocational high school. The boredom excuse became the theme of every story. The reasons for his school failures became "missing homework." He did not look at his school experiences with the same insights that most of the other participants had. As was the case with the majority of the participants who were voiceless within school or who felt marginalized, Kevin learned "to go with the flow" in order to avoid disciplinary actions.

There is a computer shop here at school (the vocational high school) and I wanted to get into it. I wasn't doing too well with drafting and wanted to go into computer shop but there wasn't any room. To tell you the truth I didn't tell a lot of people here I'm interested in computers. It's really none of their business. I'm not successful in school because of the homework thing. I don't do homework. I just always forget to do it. I forget I have it to do actually. I was just thinking if they just gave me the computer shop book, I could learn it on my own. I wanted to learn a trade I'd like to work at but so far it isn't working out that way. Here I just go with the flow because I know it's going to be boring and I'm never wrong.

Maureen, who was one of the self-proclaimed "rebels" in the study, told of two separate incidents where her resistance to school caused disciplinary actions to be taken that rendered her inner voice silent within school. Unlike Kevin she was able to articulate that her resistance was part of the pattern of "escalating trouble" in school.

In the seventh grade the history teacher had a flunking row and I was a member of the flunking row. He would call our names at the start of each class and introduce us as the flunkies. Of course it was all my friends in the flunking row. That made it a little easier because we'd laugh about

it. To tell you the truth none of us thought it was funny. We couldn't let the others in the class know we cared so we laughed. My driving force after that flunking row was to make trouble and boy did I. I felt like I had no power to change anything. You know when I get mad about that time is when I realize no one put any effort into me. No one seemed to think I was worth any effort.

I didn't go to the guidance office because no one ever listened to me at any other time. Why would they have listened to me then? I was always accused of being a liar. If a girl was in trouble I was the girl who got called to the office. I mean there were plenty of times when it wasn't me who did something when the teacher turned her back but I was the one blamed. I wouldn't even exert the energy to complain about it because no one would have believed me. One time I had gelatin pills because it would make my fingernails grow. The rumor got out that I had drugs in my locker. I got sent to the office and was questioned for two hours. I'm talking about gelatin pills! It was crazy and no one believed me. My name was blacklisted at that school. I never had a chance.

Let's face it I didn't have control over my own anger how could I have control over any of the insanity that was happening. I know I was defiant and that was caused by my anger. By making my teachers angry I was in a sense controlling them. You know, making them feel what I was feeling. The trouble in the junior high classrooms was an escalating thing. It simply kept getting worse and my attitude got worse and worse. I just had to get out of there.

Maureen spoke with her inner voice about the web of disciplinary actions in which she was caught. Her voicelessness was personified by her rebellion. Her ability to "make her teachers angry" gave her a sense of "being in control" within classrooms. In reality she was increasing her voicelessness. She knew that no one in the school would listen to her about "the flunking row" because she was always in trouble. It's interesting to note that no one



else who was placed in that row was able to stop that abusive practice. This became apparent when Maureen later said that her younger brother had that same teacher and the "flunking row" was continuing as a form of disciplinary action. An interesting question to ponder is: Did the flunking row render all the students who were in it voiceless or were only voiceless students placed in it? Either way this abuse of power resulted in Maureen's increased anger which led to more trouble within school.

In Jacob's story he wanted to get through the day in school without calling any attention to himself. His silence like the "rebels'" disruptive behavior, caused him to become the focus of disciplinary action that resulted in intensifying his sense of being voiceless.

Mr. Smith was my fifth grade teacher. He told wonderful stories. If you messed up he'd scream at you. There were even rumors that he hit kids. I never saw him do it, but one morning I thought he was going to hit me. We were correcting our homework and let's see, I guess it was because I didn't ask questions about homework assignments or something. He took me out of the room and had my paper and he slammed it into my chest. I guess he was trying to prove he wasn't messing around. I was just shy that's why I didn't ask questions but I couldn't tell him that. I just stayed quiet and he started screaming at me about being a wise guy. I was terrified and he thought I was trying to look tough. I was just scared.

He said from that point on he was going to be watching me like a hawk and I'd better come up with some questions to ask about the homework. It made him nuts that I didn't ask questions when I didn't understand something. I was just trying to hide the fact I didn't understand. I didn't want him to watch me like a hawk. All I learned that year after that was how to hide my fear by pretending nothing mattered.



Mr. Smith succeeded in intimidating Jacob and that intimidation taught Jacob never to show his true feelings in Mr. Smith's class. Jack told a similar story about the same teacher.

When I was in the fifth grade I had this teacher, Mr. Smith, who had a reputation for beating kids up. If you didn't have your homework done you had to stand in front of the blackboard and he'd call you lazy and worthless. Well I already told you I usually didn't have my homework done. I was up at that stupid blackboard just about every day. Well finally I decided I had it. He said to get up to the blackboard and I said NO. He went after me like he was going to hit me. He took me by the neck of my shirt and threw me in the hall. That night at work with my father I told him what happened. The next day he drove me to school and was waiting for Mr. Smith when he came into the school parking lot. My father got out of his truck and went over to Mr. Smith and said, "You touch my kid again and I'll kill you." I guess my father thought he was the only one who had a right to hit me. I looked at the two of them and I thought that they were both bullies. I was still glad my father came into school because Mr. Smith never had me stand by the blackboard again. He just never called on me again for the rest of the year. I am not kidding you, he never called on me ever during the rest of the year.

The incident resulted in an intentional silencing of Jack within that classroom. The silence was more acceptable to Jack than the abusive discipline.

Linda told a story of her third grade teacher who was the antithesis of Mr. Smith.

Miss Swan was my third grade teacher. I didn't want her when I was assigned to her because I heard all this stuff about her. That she was mean. That she wasn't nice. I didn't want her and my mom called to see if they would change me but they wouldn't. My mom called because I was crying and saying I didn't want her. I'd cry every day at first but then it got better. She got less mean. She bought us this hamster named Olga. If

we asked her, we got to take it home on weekends. I took it home and spilled gas on it and killed it. I was scared to tell but she just replaced it and didn't tell anyone. I came to school without it. She asked me what was wrong and I started to cry and told her. She said like don't worry about it. I'll take care of it. She brought one in the next day. She pretended the new one was Olga.

Miss Swan was big. She was physically just a real big person. She frightened me but it's funny because she turned out to be really nice. She never pointed out what you did wrong. She just helped you with it. She never made you feel like you were dumb.

Miss Swan used kindness to address a situation that could have become traumatic for Linda. Miss Swam did not attempt to intimidate or humiliate Linda when she killed the class pet. Instead she quietly took care of the matter. There was no public flaunting of a student's mistake as the examples of the "flunking row" and Mr. Smith's "blackboard bullying" demonstrated. The matter was handled with a respect for Linda's dignity. As Linda so eloquently said, "she never made you feel dumb." Linda was free to tell Miss Swan about Olga's death because she knew her voice would be heard. Miss Swan did not silence Linda; she heard her and so helped her find her voice in the classroom. She made that classroom a safe place for Linda.

Linda told a second story about another teacher who acknowledged Linda's voice within her classroom. It was the story of Ms. Black. Even when Linda intentionally acted out, Linda saw Ms. Black's reaction as being appropriate and kind. When the school's intervention into a family situation became uncomfortable for Linda, she continued to

trust Ms. Black even though the teacher initiated the intervention. Linda recognized Ms. Black's caring as being unconditional. Any disciplinary action was tempered by her caring for Linda.

In the seventh grade I had a teacher, Ms. Black, who I just plain liked. She was like always happy, even when I knew she was in a bad mood, she was like happy in front of the class. So the day I came to school with the black eye she saw it but she didn't make a big embarrassing deal out of it. She had these stuffed animals in the class and she just went and got one for me. She gave it to me to cheer me up. I basically wasn't talking. That was unusual.

I remember one day I decided I was going to do everything possible to get into trouble. I'd talk when she was talking. I wouldn't move my seat when she told me to. I was just bad but she knew what I was doing and didn't give in to me. She just asked me what was wrong and I laughed at her. I think she knew it (the behavior) was tied to the stuff going on at home. She took me out into the hall and asked me what was wrong. I wouldn't tell her so she asked me to go to the guidance office to talk about things. I told her that I wouldn't go. She had the guidance counselor come and get me.

I made a mistake talking to that guidance counselor because they got DSS (Department of Social Services) involved. They came to my house and all hell broke loose. I felt the people at school were just being nosey. I didn't want their help. After that my grades didn't change but I felt different about school. The teachers seemed to have gotten in the way.

My mom and dad were suppose to come to meetings at the school but only my mom would go. My dad never came to school after all that trouble they caused. I stopped trusting people at school except Ms. Black. I never blamed her for this mess. I blamed the stupid guy in the guidance office. He should have minded his own business. All I need from school is an education from books: nothing else.

I still go back to see Ms. Black. We talk. Sometimes we just gossip about stupid things.



She's someone I like to be around even if she is part of school.

Although Linda had two positive experiences with having her voice heard in classrooms which allowed her not to fear disciplinary actions, this sense of having voice did not transfer to other places in school. Of all the participants she was the most negative about what had happened to her in school. She resented the way the school tried to intervene into her troubled family life. This intervention was not intended to be disciplinary action; but it did start because of disruptive behavior in the classroom and Linda did view it as a form of punishment. She felt once the process of intervention started, there was no way to stop it. She was clear in stating what she wanted from school: "I want an education. Nothing else." The school felt their responsibility included Linda's physical well being at home. Linda did not share this belief and felt voiceless once the intervention began. Ms. Black never lost her credibility in Linda's eyes because she had so clearly given the message that she cared about Linda.

For Bianca school represented a safe place and she loved being there. Her story reflected a need for attention from her teacher. When an incident occurred between Bianca and a peer, the teacher did not notice it and Bianca took care of it to the best of her ability. This resulted in disciplinary action that left Bianca feeling puzzled and voiceless.



In the second grade I used to talk to the teacher at her desk a lot. I liked her a lot. Well when I got back to my seat, this kid, I think his name was Tim, was crunching all my papers. I told him to stop. I kept saying stop. The teacher was reading, I think. I can't remember why she didn't help me. He wouldn't stop and he kept messing my papers and I had worked hard on them. So I got real mad. I didn't mean to do it but I beat him up. Right there in the classroom. They sent me home. They let my mother deal with the problem. No one knew how important those papers were to me but me.

Bianca uses her inner voice when she explained that "no one in school knew how important those papers were to me but me." She knew she was alone in school.

In each of the participants' stories about disciplinary action, there was the strong suggestion that the participants wanted the punishment to make sense and not to be a public humiliation. Once the participant was embarrassed by a public disciplinary action that the participant saw as meaningless and hurtful, their sense of being voiceless was increased.

In the cases of some of the participants the resistance to feeling silenced in school resulted in anti-social behavior similar to the rebellion discussed in previous research (Willis, 1977; Brantlinger, 1993; Weis, 1990). Often within the participants' stories was the acknowledgement that they hoped their rebellion would call attention to them because they usually felt invisible in school. The rebellion was an anti-social resistance to voicelessness which usually resulted in disciplinary actions that were public humiliations. Many of the participants

told stories of teachers calling the attention of their peers within the class to the participants' misbehavior, or even worse their academic shortcomings. When the opposite occurred and the participant received an act of caring from a specific teacher, that memory was held onto as if it was a lifeline.

#### F. Interactions with Peers

Schooling is a social activity and the school experiences of the participants suggest that one's sense of voice or voicelessness can influence one's social status within the community of learners. Being voiceless in school meant being isolated for many of these participants. Friends were few for participants who were labeled as "rebels" and for those whose silence made them feel invisible in the classroom. The sense of being voiceless resulted in a sense of being powerless at school. This powerlessness was evident in many of the participants' stories about friendships in school. If the participant was voiceless in the classroom and reacted to that by becoming a "rebel" or silent, those same roles were evident in the social interactions with peers and resulted in a deeper sense of being isolated.

Maureen's rebellious behavior resulted not only in trouble within her school life but also within her life outside of school.

In junior high I sort of lost my edge. My friend and I started smoking marijuana and drinking and stealing. The ball started rolling and things

just got worse and worse. I'll tell you I am not ashamed of anything I've done because I've learned from it all. My school work during that time was really suffering and that doesn't mean I didn't learn a lot. I remember during those junior high years, I hated the world but I still came to school everyday. I wasn't always straight but I came because I still loved it in a strange way.

My main friend's new stepfather forbade her to see me. I couldn't understand why he wouldn't allow her to see me because it was the second time in my life that this had happened. It happened in the fifth grade too. My best friend, Andrea, wasn't allowed to be my friend. Her parents said I had more boyfriends than girlfriends and that was a sign that there was something wrong with me. I guess adults at times have grown up bodies and the minds of mean children.

Maureen's rebellion accelerated in junior high school when peer relationships in the views of the participants became the focus of their school lives. Maureen's reference to her fifth grade experience of being told that she was not an appropriate friend for Andrea and her assessment that adults had the "minds of mean children" suggest that she had probably experienced isolation from peers long before junior high school. Her inability to have her voice heard added to her image as a rebel and a bad choice for friendship in the opinions of her peers' parents. No one apparently was able to hear her inner voice that expressed her love of school and her determination to never give up her struggle to find her place within it. Her outer voice was so antisocial that it made the adults in her life attempt to isolate her even more than she already was. Her rebellion resulted in an increased voicelessness and isolation from her peers.



For the participants who wanted to "make no waves" and selected silence as their resistance against voicelessness, the struggle was no less difficult in relationship to peer interactions. Jacob's school experiences were filled with stories about trying to go unnoticed. When he talked about peer relationships, he talked about the painful recognition that he was different and so he was isolated.

I don't know why the trouble started but I was just growing older and cliques started forming. There were a lot of popular kids and I guess they just liked to pick on the lower class. It was difficult. It got really difficult after a while. Sometimes if you tried to participate or to say something they would put you down. It wasn't much fun. It actually was a hell of a two years. It hurt me the most. They picked on me because I was probably just so different from everyone else. I had flannel shirts and stuff. Most of it was older styles, hand me downs and all. The other kids were really getting into fashion and well, I just didn't have the money for that. I found myself getting much more quiet and more secluded to myself, more on my own for a while. That's when I decided I was leaving to go to McGrath Vocational when it was time for me to go to high school.

Jacob's inner voice said that his peers "picked on the lower class." After reviewing the tape transcriptions, I went back to see him and asked what he meant by "lower class." He looked at me as if he was surprised I had asked such a stupid question and responded that it simply meant kids who were "too poor to buy the right sneakers." Jacob didn't look like he belonged and that added to his sense of voicelessness. His story points to the complexity of the interaction between academic voicelessness and social class. He simply stated the complexity of voicelessness and



isolation when he said, "I got more quiet and more secluded to myself." Embedded in that statement is the interconnection of voicelessness and marginalization. He was not part of school. A social institution had isolated him. The causes were multiple but the effect was a sense of marginalization and voicelessness. He felt he had no place in school and his voice was silenced. Before coming to the vocational school, his school experiences were disempowering to him.

Bianca and Maria, the two Latina participants, had the additional issues of language and racism that complicated their attempts to have their voices heard among their peers. Bianca talked about the bilingual issue as being marginalizing when she said:

We went back to Puerto Rico a couple of times for vacations and I went to school there. It was confusing. I think I was always thinking in Spanish but I wanted to think in English. I couldn't do that in Puerto Rico as easy. I'm not sure I'm making too much sense but I know what I mean.

Maria never used the word racism, but it was obvious from her story that her social identity as a Latina woman did have an impact on her sense of voicelessness among her peers.

Ignorant people who don't know anything about you look at you and decide because you look a certain way that you are no good. They judge you and don't even know you.

As in the case of Jacob, I went back to see Maria after analyzing the transcripts of her interviews and asked her

what she meant by "looking a certain way." Just as Jacob did, she seemed surprised that I was asking so obvious a question. "It's because I am Puerto Rican," she replied in a mildly disdainful tone. Racism was something that she assumed everyone naturally recognized as an issue in peer relationships between Latina students and non-Latina students. For Maria race was a contributing factor in voicelessness and marginalization in school that were components of disempowerment.

Jared's school experiences were made more painful by what he perceived as his inability to make friends. From his earliest experiences Jared felt a sense of isolation from his peers. He felt that he was responsible for that isolation. He saw all of his shortcomings as the causes for his inability to make school friendships. He showed his interpretation of social rules in school when he said that if you weren't good at schoolwork, it helped if you were good at sports. Since he was good at neither, he was isolated from the community of learners.

His sense of frustration with his status as an outsider was captured when he talked about his weekends spent with a neighbor who was also a classmate. The weekend was spent doing "Huck Finn kind of stuff" and then school started and the neighborhood friend "didn't know" him. Jared instinctively knew this was unfair and yet felt powerless to fight it. His social status seemed to be sealed. He was

not part of the mainstream in his ability to learn and that influenced his social status with his peers.

Jared, like Jacob, coped with this by becoming silent. He talked about one of his best school experiences being when he went "the quiet way" in junior high school. He and another boy who was also quiet and apparently shared Jared's status as an outsider, found a hallway in their large and crowded junior high school that they used to get from one class to another. In this empty hallway they would shout and throw their bookbags. It was the only time in school that Jared was not trying to figure out what he was supposed to do. He did what he wanted in that empty hallway with his quiet friend during those five minutes between classes.

Although Jared did enjoy academic success at the vocational high school, he was still feeling like an outsider among his peers. In the school years prior to high school, Jared had learned that teasing was painful. He never shared his out of school experiences, in order to protect his dignity. Even an honor, like being made an Eagle Scout, was not talked about in school because Jared did not want to risk ridicule.

Joel shared much of Jared's sense of voicelessness when it concerned peer interaction. Joel felt he was "funny looking" and this resulted in the teasing that lasted all thorough his elementary and junior high school experiences. Ironically when Joel walked into the room for his first interview, I was struck by how physically attractive he was.



Unlike Jared, he was academically successful in school but that did not help him to find a voice among his peers.

I wouldn't come right out and say to my mom, "look, mom, school is hell". Instead I'd say, "Oh, we had a test and I got an A or B." I used to hint to her that kids were picking on me and she'd tell me to go tell someone at school and I'd say, "well maybe I will." I always knew I had to handle it by myself because my mother was busy. My mother would always say that it was just a phase the kids were going through and it would pass.

I never really talked to any adults about this trouble (the teasing). If I said something directly to some adult at school or in my family and they didn't do anything, I'd be upset. So I never talked about it to anyone.

I never told anyone about the teasing at school because I wanted to handle it myself. Everybody has like a temper. You know everybody has a point that's like their breaking point. Well I use to think I didn't have a right to a temper. If someone came up and said something to me, I'd laugh, like it didn't bother me.

When I was in the third grade the teacher heard the kids at recess making fun of me. I just was ignoring them and I was kicking a soccer ball like I couldn't hear them. Miss Kelley came up in back of me and asked me if I wanted to kick the ball to her. I felt like a big shot. At reading group that day she read a Berenstein Bears story about kids being mean. I knew it was because she knew what they were saying to me at recess. She was so cool because she didn't embarrass me by talking about me. Instead she used the book to show them what it felt like to be called names. It didn't work because they were too stupid to get it but it felt good that she tried. Every day after that when she had recess duty she'd look for me and we'd play some kind of sports game. She was very athletic for a woman teacher (He laughs).

Joel laughed and pretended the teasing wasn't painful.

He didn't feel he had "a right to have a temper". He learned to "pretend he didn't hear them". Jared thought the



answer to the voicelessness was to be good at either sports or school. Joel was good at both but that did not help him to achieve a sense of voice. Even Miss Kelley's intervention did not help. Joel felt that his peers were "too stupid" to get the connection between the teasing in the book and the teasing they were doing to him. Miss Kelley sought him out on the playground and attempted to alleviate his isolation by playing sports with him. Her kindness did not go unnoticed by Joel but it did not help him to become part of the community of learners who make up the social aspect of school.

Rita was atypical of the other participants in relationship to the theme of interaction with peers. At first glance it would appear that her school stories suggested the same sense of voicelessness when interacting with her peers, but this was not the case with Rita. It was true that her devotion to farming did make her different from her peers but she did not see that difference as isolating. She did not feel voiceless. Rita knew who she was and if her peers didn't accept her that was their loss.

I have always loved farming. Even when I was younger and the other kids who looked at me sort of funny because I'd talk about taking care of my cows the way they'd talk about playing dolls or being on a baseball team, I didn't care. If I listened to them about their Barbie dolls, they'd better listen to me about my cow calving. I remember being called cow kid once but I beat the crap out of the boy who said it to me and then I made him shake hands with me. After that it was cool. Now you have to remember I grew up in a real small town and went to small schools before high school and we all had the same background.

We were all farm kids. The difference between them and me was that I wanted to stay a farm kid and for the most part, they wanted to forget they were farmers' children.

I don't want you to misunderstand me, I don't want to be a nobody. I've always been determined to be noticed. I am willing to fight to find my place in a crowd. The others don't have to like me but they do have to notice I am there.

I don't want to be one of the numbers. I want to stand out. I don't just want to scrape barns and milk cows, I want to do actual paper work. I want to set up programs so that I know and understand what happens to a particular cow. I want to be able to inform farms. I want to really study farming and make improvements. I want people to be talking about me because of my work.

I need school for that and the other kids make school fun so I need friends and I made sure I had some.

I am not offended by people who say a woman should be home with her kids but I don't want to be known for my sex life I want to be known for my work. I get confused sometimes. I want to have a husband who loves me and a marriage that will last. I want to be able to raise successful kids. My dad warned me about coming to this vocational school because it was filled with liberal thinking teachers. He and I hate liberalism. I said to my dad one day that he was right that these teachers are so gung ho on liberal issues like Greenpeace that they can't see the other side of issues. He said I was safe as long as I didn't lose my values. I haven't lost my values but I do want more than what I thought I wanted from life. I want the husband, the kids, and the farm but I also want to do important work. I want to be a woman and a farmer not the wife of a farmer.

It would appear from the stories told by these participants that they had not experienced a sense of community among the learners in school. Instead what occurred for them was the hierarchical power structure that is described in Chapter II. Within that structure some were

empowered and others were disempowered. The suggestion made by these participants' experiences of peer interactions is that peers who had achieved status within the power structure of school were not going to risk that status by associating with disempowered peers. If the participants were voiceless, they were disempowered. The way that they resisted voicelessness was silence or rebellion. Both of these resistances resulted in a further sense of disempowerment.

#### G. Summary of the Findings about Voice/Voicelessness

The sense of voicelessness that the majority of the participants experienced within school prior to coming to a vocational high school, and that did not always disappear once they achieved academic and/or social success at a vocational school, was connected to the places most occupied within the margins of schools. The way they were treated in school had a significant impact on their senses of voicelessness and marginalization. From the perspectives of the participants, the issues of classroom management were as important, if not more important, than curricula issues in empowering students. Most of the participants felt disempowered by the way special services were administered to them. The extra help was suppose to bring them into the mainstream. What the extra help accomplished in most cases was an increase in the participants' sense of being outsiders in school. The ways that disciplinary actions were administered often left most of the participants with the

feeling that they were stripped of their dignity. What became clear in the analysis of the stories about peer interactions was that the voicelessness and marginalization experienced within the classrooms were replicated in peer relationships. Often the participants were teased and isolated by peers. One of the causes of these painful peer interactions was the fact that the participants were outsiders in school. The interconnection between a sense of academic failure and isolation from peers leads to the third component of the issue of empowerment/disempowerment within school. That issue is access to school literacy and its role in positioning school participants within the margins of school and leaving participants with a sense of voicelessness within classrooms. An examination of access to school literacy in relationship to marginalization and voice/voicelessness as components of empowerment will be conducted in Chapter VI.



## CHAPTER VI

### ACCESS TO SCHOOL LITERACY

#### A. Introduction

In an examination of empowerment and disempowerment within the hierarchical power structure of schools, literacy has to be one of the components of that examination. Literacy within this study is examined from a social construction perspective which views literacy as encompassing the interwoven learning modes of reading, writing, speaking and listening (Gnatek, 1992). From this perspective literacy can be seen as the community's ways of using written language to serve social purposes (Solsken, 1993). School literacy is the written and social language that is sanctioned in school. How school participants are able to adjust to school literacy practices identifies the participants as academic successes or failures within school and is one of the factors in positioning school participants within the power structures of school.

This positioning actually begins even before the participants' first experiences with school literacy within classrooms. The home experiences with literacy prior to entering school can have a direct influence on the participant's success or failure with school literacy. Participants who experienced literacy practices at home that mirrored school literacy practices usually had an easier

time accessing school literacy. Schools seem still to be operating from a theoretical reference of "reading readiness." Traditionally beginning reading in the United States has focused on decoding (the ability to recognize and use phonemes to identify words). Reading and writing in school often has been reduced to sets of component skills falling into clear categories (linguistic, cognitive). There appears to be a gap between the public literate traditions of the schools and the private oral traditions of many of the participants and their families. If the participants have been introduced to school literacy practices at home, they are ready to be successful with school literacy practices. Those participants whose home literacy practices are different from the practices that are valued by the dominant middle class culture are seen as not ready for school literacy. They are marginalized from the mainstream at the start of their school experiences.

The school literacy experiences of many of this study's participants were influenced by the fact that their home literacy practices often were reflective of the parents' lack of success in accessing school literacy. The home literacy practices of the participants were riddled with contradictory messages. Their preschool experiences with books were minimal for the majority of the participants. Their parents' personal struggles with reading were apparently unintentionally passed on to the children. Reading in the minds of most of the participants was a

process that seemed at best to be difficult to access, at least as reading was practiced within classrooms.

When talking about home and school literacy practices, all of the twenty participants talked about reading. Few mentioned writing as an important issue for them when they were trying to find their place within the classrooms. During the interviews when they were asked if they thought of themselves as writers, most of the participants talked about penmanship. Jayne, a bright but very defensive young woman who told her literacy story with passion, said:

Everyone knows in the first few weeks of school who's going to make it and who isn't. They know by the way you act around books. If you act like you've used books a lot, then you're in. If you aren't comfortable around reading and books, people can tell right away and you are out. You can fake being a writer. A lot of smart kids even sort of brag about not being a good writer but nobody, and I mean nobody, brags about not being a good reader. I'm telling you that is the way it is.

Realistically the ability to meet the standards set by school literacy for reading, writing and talking within a classroom environment has an effect on one's social status and identity within that classroom and beyond it. There is evidence in these participants' stories of the concept of literacy as social identity and status. The literacy as social identity and status perspective examines literacy practices within the classroom as reflections of social status and order in the society outside schools. Certainly how these participants accessed school literacy positioned them as outsiders or "pretend" insiders within the school

community. Within this discussion of literacy practices, the concentration will be on the use of written language, specifically reading. The reason for this focus is that the participants talked about reading almost exclusively when they discussed their experiences with literacy.

How the participants read had a deep and lasting effect on how they viewed their positions within school both socially and academically. Each participant told vivid stories about early experiences with reading. Many of the participants were disempowered by the difficulties they faced learning to communicate both orally and in writing within the classrooms. The participants' abilities or inabilities in accessing school literacy had a notable effect on their sense of marginalization and voice/voicelessness.

#### B. Profile of Walter

Walter walked into the first interview with an air of self confidence and quiet good humor. He was the only participant who seemed to be totally at ease with the interview process from the start. He was a physically large young man who dressed for each of the interviews in a flannel shirt, jeans and a cap with "John Deere" written on it. He spoke slowly and often stopped to contemplate his words before speaking. He had enjoyed academic success during high school and graduated in the top half of his class. He served as president of the Student Government during his senior year and was instrumental in increasing



the power that the organization had in school policy-making decisions.

I have a step brother. My mom was married before she married my father. My stepbrother's name is Stan and he came to McGrath Vocational too. I really grew up at my great grandparents' house along with all my cousins. That was just the way it was in my family. My mother really grew up in that house also. All my relatives seemed to live on the same street and everyone just watched out for each other. I grew up playing with my cousins.

My mother worked at the college (a nearby university) and she would drop me and my stepbrother off at my great grandparents' house in the morning and pick us up at night. We'd be there all day with my cousins and everybody. We'd eat lunch there and sometimes dinner when my mother had to work late. There were always five or six of us there at a time.

My great grandfather used to read to me a lot. For some reason he liked to read and he spent time with me that way. Dr. Seuss was the big favorite but there were a lot of Disney books and nursery rhymes. My great grandfather brought all of us to preschool. I remember him telling us he wanted us to get a head start at school. He'd drive us over to the school and I used to believe he waited in his car in front of the school until our two hours of school were over because he was always sitting there waiting for us when we were done.

I usually got along with the other kids in school during those early years. My great grandfather always said, "kids will be kids," and that sort of became my motto. My great grandfather really painted a real positive picture of school. He sort of gave me a picture of what school would be like by always reading to me and talking to me about how kids who weren't my cousins were just kids like me.

When I hit first grade there were fifty kids in my class. I know you probably think I'm exaggerating but I'm not. I remember Mrs. Nelson, my first grade teacher giving me workbooks and they'd start with A is for Apple. I thought it was baby stuff because my great grandfather and I

had finished that stuff a long time before I started school but I went along with it because Mrs. Nelson was so scary. I was almost afraid of her. She had an attitude.

I remember being in Mrs. Nelson's class and I'd be reading and I'd get stuck on a word. I'd look up at her for some help and she'd say, "Do you think I've got the word tattooed to my forehead?" That was a creepy thing to say to a little kid. She could have helped me along. I really expected her to help me along like my great grandfather always did. School turned out not to be as comfortable as I thought it would be. I was afraid to read for her. I just wouldn't try. I was afraid of her. I would sneak the books home and read them to my great grandfather so I wouldn't forget how to read but I never read out loud to her. I don't think she thought I could do it.

It's funny but I loved everything about reading at home and I hated everything about reading in school. I was really having a hard time with actually doing the reading in school. The teacher called my parents and told them to get my eyes checked. I think instead of worrying about my eye sight the teacher should have been worrying about scaring little kids into thinking they couldn't learn. My parents took me to the eye doctor. There was a slight problem with the way my eye traveled across the page. I had to train my eye to do it right. I never really told anyone that the real problem with my reading was the teacher spent so much time scolding us that I was afraid to make a mistake. I think my great grandfather sensed it but I never said it to him.

I ended up being one of the slower readers in my class and when I got to junior high that meant I couldn't take certain classes. I was in the lower ability level and so I wasn't able to take a foreign language. Don't get me wrong I wasn't dying to take a foreign language, it was just that I didn't even have the chance to tell them I didn't want to take it. They told me I couldn't.

I always thought of myself as being right in the middle of the kids. I wasn't the best student and I wasn't the worst. I was just an average kid. I did get extra help for reading. I would go out of my class for one period and just read

for this teacher. It didn't bother me none. I knew I had that eye problem and if they could help me get caught up on the reading, I might get caught up on everything. I needed help so I could read better. Reading was never fun once I started school.

During the summer my cousin who was a teacher would come over to my house and read with me every Wednesday. It was at my great grandparents' house and she'd come over with books at my grade level and we'd read together. We did it all summer. I loved it but I'm not sure I ever saw the results in school. All through elementary school I stayed in the lowest reading groups.

When I hit junior high the focus really turned to friends. I think it had a lot to do with boys and girls getting interested in each other. There was this yuppie thing. The kids from the south side of town thought they were a little better. It didn't bother me except for class elections. I ran for class president in seventh and eighth grades. It was a popularity contest. They knew who I was but they didn't know what I could do so I wasn't voted in. The kid who won both times was a jock and a good reader.

My best friend was Jacob. I was over at his farm all the time. He was real smart and he got the perfect attendance award in seventh and eighth grade. Even when his parents went on a vacation, Jacob stayed home so he could go to school. He and I talked about school a lot. We both wanted to get out of Hilltown High School.

To be totally honest with you in seventh and eighth grade I hated every single day I went to that school. Two of my cousins had come to McGrath High School and I wanted to come here too. Jacob and I went to see the guidance counselor. He tried to talk Jacob out of going because he kept saying he was too smart to go to a voke school. He told me it was a good choice for me. My older brother was smart. He was a good student. He wasn't the smartest in his class but he was way above average. He stayed at Hillside High and then came to McGrath as a postgraduate. I didn't want to repeat his mistake. I was just counting the days until I could go to the voke school. It was where I wanted to be.



My father supported my decision. He said he has kicked himself all his life for not going to a vocational high school. He wasn't the school type and he was always skipping school to work when he was in high school. He said back then McGrath was just a trashy school. The high schools sent all their garbage to a voke school. He said he bought all the stories about how only losers went to a voke school. He said when he thinks about it now he knows he would have been better off if he had gone to a voke school no matter what other people thought because he would have known more when he graduated.

My mother was a different story. We had a big argument. She wants me to be what she wanted herself to be. She always wanted to become a math teacher and she didn't. She wants me to make up for her mistakes. We've had some strong arguments about what I think is in my future. My father and I won and I came here.

I am in the Forestry Department and I've really enjoyed it. My parents did let me make this choice on my own. I had to find the trade that was right for me and Forestry was it. My mother started talking to me about becoming a forestry teacher. I guess she never really gave up on her dreams being lived out in my life.

One of the many reasons I came here was I didn't want to sit in classes every day. Now the way it is with one week of shop and one week of academics, I actually look forward to going to my classes. When I am in shop everyday is fun. I feel good about the work and how I do it. That feeling carries over into my class work.

I've started to think about my mind as a big tool box. I read information that I store in this toolbox and I may not use it today or tomorrow but five years from now I'll have it and it will be one of the tools I have to make myself successful in life. I think I just made a metaphor. See I'm using the stuff I'm learning in English.

I've actually started to like reading again. Do you want to know why? It makes sense to me to read things I want to know about. Let's say it's a textbook on pesticides. Well that information is important to me. Even if the book is hard, I can understand why it's important for me to work at reading it. Reading makes sense to me now.



When I first heard I had to take two English classes during academic week, I wasn't too happy. Some one took the time to explain to me that we needed the hours in English to qualify for a high school diploma. I didn't rebel because someone explained the logic behind the order.

The attitude among the teachers at the voke school seems to be one that says: If you can do it, do it. If you can't do it, come to my desk and I'll show you how to do it. I work well with that attitude. I don't feel the same pressure that I did at Hilltown. There I could always hear the teachers saying: you should be doing better. I could hear those words even when their lips weren't moving. Remember at the voke school I've had the same teacher for English two years in a row and the same for math and history. I love that because they know what I can do and I can understand their reactions to me.

I've become a leader here. In one of my English classes the teacher said one day that she always thought of me as a student leader. I had to think about it for a while but I guess she was right. I always voice my opinion. In Hilltown they always said they were training us to become community leaders. It seemed to me like they were training the jocks, the kids from the south side, and the good readers to be the leaders. The rest of us were supposed to just listen. Here at the voke school we are all the kids who were the listeners at our old schools. We know what it feels like not to be able to talk because our opinions weren't valuable. Here we learn to talk. We knew how to listen when we came here. Now we are learning how to talk.

Coming here has been the best thing I could have done for myself. I am glad that I am who I am. I like myself. I am a regular Joe and that is exactly who I want to be. I am planning to go to a community college next year and my mother is all excited because she is still on that teacher thing. I want to go to college to learn business skills so I can move up in my trade area. This school has been great for me because it has made me comfortable with school. I started learning about learning from my great grandfather and it was fun. For a while there it got to be horrible but believe it or not, it has become fun again. I still need more tools for my toolbox so community college here I come.

Walter's home literacy story was atypical in the study because he had an early and positive introduction to reading. His great grandfather read to him and introduced reading as something fun. Once Walter got to school, reading lost its pleasurable aspect. His fear of his first grade teacher and her approach to teaching resulted in Walter "having a hard time with reading in school." This difficulty was treated as an eye problem by the school and the home. His family never questioned the teacher's role in Walter's reading difficulty. The parents accepted the fact that there must be something wrong with Walter.

The classroom focus was on reading readiness. The students in Walter's first classrooms needed to be able to meet the standards set by school literacy. Those standards apparently kill the pleasure principal in reading for Walter. From the start of school Walter was labeled slow. Because he was "slow" in the view of school, he had limited choices about classes later in his school experiences. He was not able to take a foreign language in junior high school. The early school judgments about his inabilities to read lead to positioning Walter in school.

Eventually Walter was taken from the classroom to receive extra help in reading. He said that he was willing to do this because by that time he had accepted the eye problem explanation for his reading difficulty. He now saw himself as one of the slower readers in his class. Walter's family did provide help for Walter. This type of

intervention was not evident in any of the other participants' stories. His cousin who was a teacher worked with him over the summer but he could not see any connection between that reading and his ability to succeed at the reading he did in school. Walter's experiences reading with his cousin was apparently simply reading. The narrowness of the school's notion of reading was not a part of this summer reading. There were no rituals of workbooks or tests. He seemed to know that reading should make sense. School literacy practices had little connect to what Walter wanted to get from reading.

His "difficulty" with reading had an effect on his social identity. He claimed that he was an "average kid." His story had subtextual references to his struggles to find his social identity in school. These struggles suggest the status of average was difficult to attain before high school. That difficulty in part was connected to his lack of success with school literacy. He apparently related social acceptance with academic success. He said that the boy who beat him in two elections for class president was a "jock and a good reader." When he talked about school to his best friend, he said they talked basically about how much they wanted to get out. For a boy who was introduced to school gently by a caring great grandfather, by seventh grade school had become a place from which he wanted to escape. Vocational education offered him that escape.



The vocational high school was not held in high esteem by his mother and yet Walter felt it was where he wanted to be. When the guidance counselor encouraged Walter to go to the vocational high school while discouraging his friend, Jacob, because he was "too smart," he was giving Walter the clear message that he was not smart enough for the academic high school.

When talking about his experiences at the vocational high school, he talked about the way the teachers made it clear that if you didn't understand, you should tell them. This was not the message he had been given earlier in school. Because of his perceived difficulty with reading he was labeled "slow." That label resulted in a position within school that left him feeling powerless. He felt the message he was given by teachers was that he could be doing better. Unfortunately he never felt he was told how to do better.

At the vocational school Walter said that he "liked himself" and that he saw himself as "a regular Joe." Somehow the message that he was not good enough had been stopped. That place was a school where "regular Joes" were apparently accepted into the mainstream. When he got to high school he started to like reading again because he was reading about things he "wanted to know about." There was a connection between what he was learning in school and who he was outside of school: "Let's say it's a textbook on



pesticide. Well that information is important to me."

School literacy finally made sense to Walter.

Walter's story highlights the themes associated with accessing school literacy: the connection or disconnection between the home literacy practices and school literacy; the schools' treatment of the students who have difficulty adjusting to the expectations set by the mainstream standards of school literacy and the effect success or failure accessing school literacy has on social identity and status within school.

### C. The Connection and Disconnection between Home and School Literacy Practices

The ways children learn about language and books are deeply embedded in the family communication patterns (Heath, 1983; Lightfoot, 1978; Snow, 1991; Page, 1991; Stuckey, 1991).

Among children in a working class white community, there are not extensive parent-child literacy events. Parents make less use of literacy sources and are more likely to direct the child what to do than to explain how to do something. They expect the child to learn by watching rather than through verbal interaction. Books and other print materials may be listened to but not used for creation of stories (Mason, 1986, p.15).

Leroy's story suggested that the lack of parent-child literacy events that resembled school literacy practices was reflective of the intergenerational failure to master those practices in school.

I had a hard time with reading from the start of school. My mom would always try to read to me at night but she had a terrible time with reading

too. She only made it through the eighth grade. She once changed schools twelve times in two years. Her family was always moving so how was she supposed to teach me about reading when no one ever taught her?

Reading was hard for me from day one in school. My mom came into school to get me extra help but they just looked down their noses at her. They thought she didn't matter because she was this lowly bartender. They seemed to be ready to push me aside right from the start but my mom just wouldn't let them do it. The problem was she didn't know how to get for me what I needed. I feel more sorry for her than I do for me when I think about her coming into school when I was little.

I think because they knew my mom wasn't going to leave them alone, I got to get extra help for my reading. It didn't help a lot because I still had to stay back in first grade. That made it even a little harder for me. I was always a big kid and now I was a year older than everyone else so I was like this giant. On the playground it was good because everyone wanted me on their team but in the classroom when I couldn't read so good the kids were always saying I was dumb.

Leroy spoke clearly about the close connection between his own reading problems and his mother's reading difficulty. He did not blame his mother but saw her family situation as being the cause for the schools' failure to teach her to read. He points out the intergenerational aspect of the problem when he said, "How is she supposed to teach me about reading when no one ever taught her?" He also talked clearly about how his failure to access school literacy resulted in social difficulties among his peers. The difficulties in reading were interwoven with the sense of marginalization and voicelessness in Leroy's educational

history. School was disempowering to Leroy and yet he continued to fight for his place in school.

In Kevin's case the reading and writing he found enjoyable at home did not result in success with school literacy. Like Walter he could not see a connection between the literacy practices within his life at home and the ones in school.

I never did any school work. I told you before I hate reading and writing. The only thing I ever read are comic books. I read them all the time. I had a big collection. I started writing my own comic books but nobody in school knew or cared about it. In junior high I had a computer science class. I liked that and fooled around with writing on my dad's and his friend's computer. I wrote letters and made up newsletters about my comics on my dad's computer when I visited him and his friend on weekends. Nobody except my dad's friend knew I was doing it. He helped me but I didn't like him reading what I was writing because it was none of his business.

Kevin was doing extensive reading and writing outside of school and yet he claimed to be on the verge of failing English throughout his school career. When his father's friend showed an interest in the home literacy practices, Kevin saw it as an invasion of his privacy. Reading and writing at home were private and solitary experiences. Kevin's school literacy experiences had earned him the label of nonreader. He apparently wasn't going to risk the pleasure he derived from his home literacy practices by letting an adult or anyone else know about them.

In Maria's interviews she talked passionately about her love of reading in a way that none of the other participants



had done. Ironically there were no books in Maria's home, except for her brother's hidden sports magazines. Her brother hid the books in order to protect them, and that may be where Maria got the message that reading was something valuable.

I've always loved reading. There weren't any books in my house but when I was real little I found the place where my brother hid his magazines. They were all sports magazines and he hid them under his bed so no one would mess with them. When he was at school and my mother was out, I'd sneak into his bedroom and sit and look at those magazines. I was always very careful that nothing happened to them because my brother would have killed me. I can remember thinking that someday I'll read all of the words.

When I got to school I was in a hurry to learn to read. I always loved reading aloud. Miss Newey my third grade teacher said that I must like the sound of my own voice because I was always asking her if I could read to the class. It wasn't that I wanted to show off really. It was just that I loved being able to read.

When Maria entered school, her love affair with reading was misunderstood by the teacher who thought it was a way of calling attention to herself. Maria knew that wasn't true and she continued to want to share her reading ability with her peers. This seems to suggest that even "good readers" don't always get positive reinforcement in school for their interests in literacy.

Maria's experiences with writing were as powerful and yet she did not have the same confidence in herself as a writer that she had in herself as a reader.

I started writing rhymes at home. They weren't good enough to be poems. They're just rhymes that I make up and write down. I have a book of them.



There are about four hundred of them. I've been writing them since seventh grade. I am going to show them to my baby. No one else has ever seen them. I write them because I want to write not because I want someone to read them.

Maria would not call her writing, "poetry." She felt that her rhymes "weren't good enough to be poems." She had a collection of four hundred pieces of writing in a book and yet she apparently could not validate that writing with a name from her school literacy experiences. This was a home literacy practice that she could not connect to the literacy practices of school by calling it poetry.

Bianca shared with Marie that almost intuitive love of reading.

Like I said I liked school right from the start. I loved reading. I don't think there were ever books in my house but it didn't matter because there were a lot at school. I loved to read out loud. I always put a lot of enthusiasm into it. My teacher once told me I made the words come to life. I first learned reading in English so it wasn't as confusing as speaking.

Bianca explains that learning to read in English was easier for her than learning to speak in English because she had not learned to read in Spanish first as she had learned to speak in Spanish before speaking in English. Her teacher celebrated her ability to read aloud. This seemed to soften Bianca's struggles with mastering English orally.

John was one of the other participants who did talk about a difficulty with writing and he blamed it on the fact that his mother did not use proper English at home.

The grammar part of writing was a little hard for me. I guess I'd have to say my mom doesn't speak

perfect English. So wrong English always sounds right to me. I really had to think hard about correct speaking and writing.

I only got one C in my life and that was in junior high school in English. I was so mad. It was in English and it had to do with usage. I'm not kidding when I tell you it drove me crazy to get that C.

The participants' focus on reading instead of writing may reflect the fact that reading is much more central to school achievement in general. The participants' stories suggest that writing in school for them meant penmanship or standard English.

For Maureen, her early school experiences with reading left her with a determination never to read aloud in class.

I remember reading in my first or second grade class and I loved to read out loud. Well, I read the wrong word. It was mosquito and I read it very wrong. The teacher laughed at me. I won't read after that at all. I never read out loud in a class again until I was a junior in high school. I was very adamant about it. I just didn't do it. I've always focused on math after that and I was always behind in my reading. I just accepted the fact that I wasn't as good a reader as everyone else. I hated reading. I hated it until I was in high school. Reading was never stressed in my house. My mom tells me she read to us but I don't remember. My dad just started reading recreationally during the past five years. His life is calmer now and that is what he does for fun.

When Maureen got to high school, her school experience with literacy changed. She had an English teacher who introduced her to dramatic readings and she said that freed her because she was really reading in "someone else's voice." It is interesting to note that during this same period of time, her father began "reading recreationally."

Reading was being done by her father as something "fun to do" at the same time that reading became fun for her in school.

Jack articulated most clearly the connection he saw between his success in reading in school and the help he received from his sisters at home.

Reading always came easy for me because my sisters were always playing school with me. They'd be the teacher and I'd be the student. It was the only school with three teachers and one student. There were always books around. My mother always was buying books for me. The only problem was she was always too tired to read them to me. I was always in the top reading group but that was thanks to my sisters.

Rita saw a clear connection between her home and school literacy practices. The reading she did in the school library was done with books that might not be valued within the classroom. This was never an issue for Rita. She read what she wanted to read. What Rita apparently received from her mother, that the other participants did not, was the acknowledgement that she had mastered school literacy. Her mother wanted her to become a professional writer. She was impressed with Rita's literacy skills and that was empowering to Rita.

I used the school library a lot in junior high. I've read all of Stephen King's books. I've also read all of Danielle Steele's books. I just read trash, I know but I love it. I've always excelled in literature. My mother always said I should be a writer but I don't want to do that.

Maybe it's a hill town thing but during junior high we all got into music and lyrics very seriously. We'd study the covers of the albums and learn the words. A lot of us loved Country



but some of us were into the Heavy Metal stuff. We respected each others' taste and we were always studying the words to figure out the meaning. I guess that was sort of like studying literature.

The home literacy practices of most of the participants reflected the parents' lack of success accessing school literacy. This lack of successful access was passed to the next generation for many of the participants. The participants spoke about reading as the school literacy skill that was the most difficult for them to access. This difficulty resulted in a strong sense of disempowerment. If a participant was designated a slow or poor reader within the classroom, that label resulted in a sense of voicelessness and marginalization.

Most of the participants said that they had little if any contact with books and reading within their family lives. The majority of the participants said that they started school feeling like they were already behind because of their limited exposure to books at home. Even in the cases of participants who successfully accessed reading (Stella, Maria and Bianca), there was little if any connection with reading in their home life and at least in the case of Stella, this left the feeling that she had to catch up to everyone else.

In many of the participants' stories there were subtexts about what was valued in school literacy. What was valued about literacy in school confused many of the participants because it never seemed to connect to their



home literacy practices. One of the skills that was valued in school was the ability to read aloud without making errors with standard pronunciation. Another skill that was referred to by many of the participants was reading at a set speed. Both of these skills were elusive to many of the participants and felt them feeling disempowered. There was little if any emphasis on making meaning or making connections between the world of the classroom and the world outside of the classroom. The pleasure that some of the participants found in literacy practices outside of school was killed by the emphasis of school literacy practices.

Walter's great-grandfather introduced him lovingly to books and reading but this love of books ended when school reading started. Walter read slowly. It was eventually discovered that he had a physical problem with his eye muscle. Unfortunately the teacher equated reading slowly with reading poorly. Reading became a struggle because he was not meeting the standards set by the school. The reading he did with pleasure at home had no connection in his mind with the reading he learned to hate in school. The speed at which reading was done was an issue in the school experiences of many of the participants. It would appear from these participants' experiences that the speed at which they read was used as a variable for determining success in reading.

Bianca's poetry and Kevin's comics had no place in a lesson on writing. Jayne's romance novels were of no value

in a literature class. Jim summed up the frustration of many of the participants when he talked about the way he was introduced to school literacy.

You know what I think? I think schools work hard at convincing you that you aren't smart. Before I got to school I loved books. I remember my mom reading me dinosaur books all the time. I couldn't get enough of them. Then school starts and not one dinosaur book. There are all these SEE JANE RUN. SEE DICK RUN. I remember always praying I could go to the school library where they had dinosaur books. You can't tell me that they can't teach a kid to read with dinosaurs.

The home/school literacy disconnection that occurred in all but two families of this study's participants enabled the schools to practice social reproduction. The children of parents who had difficulties accessing school literacy also had difficulty. The disconnection and the social reproduction were intertwined and became intergenerational.

#### D. Meeting Standards for School Literacy

Seventeen of the twenty participants were taken from their classrooms in elementary school to receive special help. In all seventeen the initial cause for the extra help was reading difficulties. No other subject was mentioned by the participants as the focus of the extra help. Often time the extra help was given in such a way that the participant felt isolated and ashamed. Jared talked about not wanting to know why the other students were in the extra help room because he didn't want to believe he was like them. He commented that "this was sixth grade and some of them still couldn't write." That was more shocking to him than that

they had reading problems. Writing was something everyone just somehow did. You apparently didn't struggle with it like reading. Jared never talked about his own writing experiences but saw his difficulty with reading as the defining event in his school experiences.

It was difficult because I was out of class (getting extra help) and in grade school, you don't change classes so it was noticed by the other kids. I was never caught up to everybody. You know what I think, I think it was because I was out of class so much. I got even further behind, especially in reading.

The "rebels" in the study who had to get help for reading difficulties saw that removal to the extra help room as a form of punishment. Charles resisted the school's treatment by becoming a secret reader. When he was given detentions, which were frequent occurrences for him, he used that time to read books he wanted to read and to talk about books to one of his fellow "rebels" who was also a secret reader.

I had this friend who was just like me. In English class he and I read two books in two years but we loved both the books. One was Where the Red Fern Grows. The other one was called Alas, Babylon. The teachers never knew we read them but we used to talk about them. I can't even remember what they were about but I remember sitting in detention hall with my friend and we'd be talking about these books. Isn't it funny that the teacher would scream at us to shut up and we were doing school work. What a joke.

None of the "rebels" talked about writing experiences and the majority talked about penmanship issues when they were asked about experiences with writing within school. Writing



was a natural occurrence and did not seem to be as important to the participants as reading was.

Meeting the speed requirement for reading in school was an issue for some of the participants. Jacob talked about the fact that he read too slowly and so he was perceived as not being smart.

In elementary school I knew I was smart but I read slow so I didn't always seem smart. Reading took me a little longer so I was never in the top reading group but I always understood what I read. So it didn't matter to me if I read slow. It did matter to the teachers and that's why I wasn't in the top reading groups.

Ironically the speed at which Jacob read was apparently more important to his teachers than his comprehension. The time it took him to read influenced the teachers' view of his intelligence. He became a slow reader not just in terms of time but also in terms of ability in the eyes of his teachers.

In John's story, he told about his early love of reading that was deadened because he read too quickly. His second grade teacher had assigned a certain period of time for silent reading and for SAT card completions. This was the reading format each day. John was always done too soon and the teacher was very displeased. Since John wanted the teacher's approval, he began the practice of reading each word twice. This did slow down his reading and became a serious problem for him as his school years passed and he couldn't break the habit.



You know, I don't really remember any adult ever reading to me when I was little. I remember reading books to myself. I loved to read until the third grade when this teacher I had yelled at me all year for reading too fast. So I started reading the sentences three or four times in my mind so the teacher would stop yelling at me. Now I think of myself as a slow reader because I am always reading the same sentences over. I keep hearing this voice in my brain saying you are reading too fast. You need to slow down. I wonder if that's what they mean by a mental block?

For some of the participants no extra help was offered and their lack of success with school literacy practices was seen by some of the teachers as a sign that the student was lazy. Jim talked about the illogic of the argument that he was trying to get out of work by asking for extra help. The extra help meant more work for Jim. He expressed surprise at the fact that his teachers didn't recognize that. Jeanne talked frequently about the fact that teachers told her she "simply wasn't trying" and that was why she was having a difficult time with reading. She learned to pretend to be reading by watching her peers and then copying their actions. She knew she wasn't lazy because she was working so hard trying to gain access into school literacy and being a "pretend reader" took a lot of work.

In the fifth grade there was this big parent conference. To tell you the truth I just quit trying to do the work. The teachers wanted to talk to my mother about me never doing the homework. The conference was just my teacher telling my mother I was lazy. My mother didn't say much. I didn't say anything. I get depressed thinking about it. You know what solution they came up with? I had to carry an assignment pad with me and write each assignment in it. At night my mother had to read the assignments and check

off each one when I finished it. My mother thought it was a pain but we did it.

You know what was really funny about this, I still really couldn't read like the others and no one knew it. I was afraid to tell the teacher that I was having a hard time with reading because I knew I was going to hear, "Just try harder."

When we had to read aloud, I'd always stutter and the teacher would seem to be impatient with me and she'd call on someone else. I'd feel sort of left out. I remember being in the first grade and having these headset stories. You'd start by reading a book and then you'd finish it with the headsets. Well, anyway I learned how to cheat. You know, I faked reading the book to get to the headset. No one caught on to me or maybe they just didn't care. I just copied what everyone else in my group did. One time I remember telling the teacher I couldn't finish the story and she told me time was up for my reading group so to just move back to my desk. So I did.

The fact that reading was the focus of the participants' stories is important to note. Many articulated the fact that writing was not really a skill. It was something everyone just did. Reading was different. It was the literacy practice that increased a sense of disempowerment for the participants within school.

#### E. Literacy and Social Identity and Status

For most of the participants one of the key factors in their positions as outsiders in the school community could be traced to their sense of being able to learn to read as well as others. Jayne told her story about isolation and its connection to reading more directly than any of the participants.

I know that the teachers I have at the vocational school think of me as a real reader and I am. My friend's mom turned me onto romance novels. She

knew how tough it was in my home so she said it was a great way to escape and it has been for me. The strange thing is that no one in school ever knew that I read a book a week. In school, before high school, everyone thought I wasn't too bright. If you're reading great romances at home, there is no way the junk they give you to read in school is going to hold your interest. So I just refused to read and everyone thought I couldn't do it. The other girls in my class started staying away from me at recess. I guess they thought they could catch being stupid from me. So I'd find a place that was peaceful and I read. So reading made me a loner but I was never lonely when I was reading. I think what I'm saying is pretty deep. Do you get it?

The majority of the participants had been victimized by teasing because they were not as good at schoolwork, specifically reading, as their peers in elementary school. For most this teasing continued into junior high school. Jared makes a connection between the teasing and his position as a student who was having trouble with school literacy.

No one teased me to my face but there was quite a bit of teasing going on behind my back. I heard it sometimes but I pretended I didn't. Well in grade school I had braces. I had just gotten glasses and I wasn't up there with everyone else. It was pretty hard.

When I was in the sixth grade, kids would ask me why I was older and I hated to explain it. I didn't want to say I was kept back in preschool. So later on when people would ask me about being older, I'd make something up. Starting in the sixth grade there were other kids in the extra help room with me. They all had problems reading. Some of them couldn't write. Remember this was the sixth grade. You know it's funny but I didn't want to know what they were doing because I didn't want to believe that I was in the same boat with them.



Jared could not take comfort from friendships with the other students in the extra help room because he understood the status structure of school and he did not want to declare himself as being at the bottom of the social structure by acknowledging his position as a slow learner whose friends were also slow learners.

Joel also faced teasing throughout his early school experiences. He was fortunate in that a teacher recognized his problem and tried to help him.

I am going to tell you the truth. I try real hard not to remember elementary school. Until the sixth grade when I finally fought back and pushed one of the kids who were picking on me into the bushes and beat him up, school was hell for me. I always understood the work. I was especially good at math. Miss Kelley helped me with my reading. When she saw I was having trouble in my reading group, she started working with me by myself. I think she taught me to like reading and even to like learning.

Miss Kelley helped not only to improve his ability to read but she tried to help with the social aspect of the reading group. Her solution of pulling him from the group and working with him independently continued his isolation from his peers but at least it enabled Joel to start enjoying reading and "even to like learning."

Jacob did not have a Miss Kelley in his school experience and the teasing became almost unbearable.

I spent a lot of time in junior high trying to figure out what people wanted from me in school. I just sort of kept to myself because it was easier. I think it all started because in the beginning they didn't think I was as smart as them. I always wanted friends. Everyone does. I



was always getting picked on so I just got quiet. I didn't like it. It was really making me angry but I wasn't much of a fighter. Only once did I fight back. It was more a pushing match than a really physical fight. They were just at me one day about the same stuff-my clothes, my hair, my looks. I had it and pushed the loudest kid. The teacher came in and told us to stop. I was glad because I didn't want to fight anyone. I just wanted them to leave me alone.

I never blamed the teachers. It wasn't their fight. What could they do? I never told my mother because I knew she would feel bad. She really only spoke French (My parents are French Canadians). So coming to school would be hard for her. I was afraid the kids would make fun of her too.

Jacob felt helpless about the teasing. It had started because his peers thought he wasn't as smart as they were and then it included all aspects of his social identity. All Jacob wanted was to be left alone. He had given up on being part of the social structure of school.

Jack was one of the few participants who had early success with reading but that success diminished during junior high and so did his status within the classroom.

School got harder for me when I got to seventh grade because of the homework issue. It really started in the fifth grade but it got worst in the seventh grade. I just couldn't keep up with the reading because of my jobs outside of school. At this time my sisters started to have big time problems in school so they couldn't help me. I got by but I really hated going in there everyday feeling like I wasn't prepared. The kids started treating me different, like I was stupid or something.

Jack's story would suggest that in order to retain his status within the classroom, he had to maintain his position as a school literacy success story.

There were participants who would not accept the position of school failure when school literacy was not easily accessible to them. Maria was one of those participants.

I've had some trouble in my academic classes here. I got an A in English last year and this year I am getting an F. I've tried to explain to Miss Robbins that I don't understand the way she teaches but she just looks at me. She just says open your book and read silently. I want her to get up and move around and talk to us but she just sits there. That's not the way to teach English. It should be lively. But she always tells me when she needs advice from me, she'll retire. I wish she would. Because of her I am going to summer school. I'll be seven months pregnant in a hot classroom learning about books that she was too lazy to teach me. Arguing with teachers is never worth it. You always lose.

Maria was one of only a few participants who felt the teacher needed to accept some responsibility for her difficulties with school literacy. Marie was not one of the "rebels" within the study but her sense of being an insider at school was strong enough that her failure in high school English did not result in her viewing herself as a school failure.

Jared was not able to share Maria's sense of being successful in school. He had accepted his position as a school failure and therefore as an outsider. Even when his high school experiences were successful, he continued to see himself as a failure. Teasing had been so painful for Jared that he couldn't relax in school and decided that the way to protect his dignity was to remain silent.

When I first got to the vocational school and saw that I was placed in the top ability group, I was sure it was a mistake. I never thought that I might have done a good job on the placement tests. My parents were even worried. They wanted to call the school. They told me I could always work my way into the top group. I knew they were wrong on that one, so I begged them to stay out of it and let me try it.

When I was a freshman I was involved with 4-H and I raised ducks. It was a big deal to me. Well my shop teacher found out and told the guys in my shop about it. They started to tease me about it. It wasn't really mean stuff but I hated it. I tried never to tell them anything about my life outside of school.

They really don't have any reason to rank on me. I do okay in school now. I work really hard at school. I've done a good job here. I guess I finally realized they didn't make a mistake putting me in the top group. The other day I got frustrated in math related class because the teacher was going too slow because a couple of kids didn't get it. I stopped a minute and thought this is a switch.

Jeanne explained her view of social positioning and its connection to school literacy by using the metaphor of school as a play.

When I got here (the vocational high school) they put me in the middle group and I stayed there all year. Finally I went to the guidance office and told them I wanted to move up. I was put in the level two classes and eventually moved to the level one group. Isn't it funny that a student like me who really was always hiding the fact that she was dumb would be in the top group. I love the fact that once you get placed in the top group most teachers just assume you belong there. Sometimes going to school is like being in a play. If you act smart, teachers think you are smart. If you don't do homework or don't pay attention, they assume you are dumb. It's just like being in a play. I acted smart so the teachers here treat me like I am smart.



Jeanne had talked about being a "pretend reader" as a young student and her "code of silence" among her school yard friends. She could be an accepted member of the school community if she could make them think she was "smart." Ironically it didn't matter if she was or not. What mattered was the view others in school had of her.

Most of the participants made a connection between being in the margins of school and their struggles with school literacy, especially meeting the school's standards for reading. Not being a successful reader in the classroom made many of the participants the object of teasing. The peers in the mainstream classrooms ridiculed those who left the classroom to receive special services for reading. Ironically most of those who received the extra help did not want to interact with the others in the special services room because of the labels attached to that group. The isolation was complete.

Jeanne spoke about becoming a "pretend" reader. She described how she copied the actions of the "real" readers in her class when they were doing silent reading. For her and for most of the other participants successful reading was one of the keys to social acceptance. If others thought you were a reader, you might gain acceptance.

Most of the participants blamed themselves and not the school for their failure to access school literacy. This supports the critical theorists (Giroux, 1983; Aronowitz, 1981; McLaren, 1989) discussed in Chapter II who have



expressed the belief that school failures are seen as individual failures and not as failures of the institution of school. In the participants' minds failure to access school literacy was a major factor in positioning the majority of the participants within the margins of the mainstream of school.

#### F. Summary of the Findings on Accessing School Literacy

In this study I have defined literacy from a social construction perspective and from the concept of literacy as identity and status (Solsken, 1993). From that framework literacy becomes one of the tools used to position the participants within the hierarchical power structures of school. School literacy helps to keep the status quo in place by being more accessible to one group than it is to another group. School literacy practices have a middle class cultural reference, and those practices have little, if any, connections to the home literacy practices of anyone who is not part of that narrow cultural reference. Skills that are valued in school literacy practices often left the working class participants in this study with a sense of frustration and failure. Any pleasure attached to literacy practices outside of school was killed by the practices and values attached to literacy in school. School, as the institution that is supposed to develop a literate community, must be held accountable for respecting, even celebrating, diversity in cultures, social classes, gender, race, and learning style. The stories told by the

participants in this study support Solsken's (1993) premise that barriers to accessing school literacy are part of the fiber of school structures and can be identified in the every day social practices in schools. School participants who are not part of the dominant white middle class culture of schools are not in positions of power.

The stories told within this study show how school participants who are from working class backgrounds are disempowered in the struggles to access school literacy. They apparently accept unquestioningly the value of school literacy and view their failures as personal. These struggles and their effects on peer relationships point to the competitive nature of school. The disempowerment experienced because of struggles with school literacy was reinforced by the social hierarchy among peers.

Being a good or bad writer did not have the same impact for these participants' sense of power in school as being a successful or unsuccessful reader did. This may be reflective of the emphasis placed on reading in a literate society which would support the critical theoretical assumption that schools are microcosms of the larger societies beyond the classroom. It also may be reflective of the fact that accessing reading is usually a public activity that involves groups working together and traditionally writing has been taught as a private activity between the teacher and the participant. The participants' social identities were influenced by the successes or

failures they experienced accessing school literacy. That social identity positioned them within the margins of school and left many of them with a sense of being voiceless within school.

## CHAPTER VII

### DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

#### A. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between the school histories of twenty vocational high school participants and the issues of marginalization, voice, and access to school literacy as they were interrelated within the broader issue of empowerment and disempowerment within schools.

#### 1. Research Question 1

My first question was related to the connection between the participants' educational experiences and the origins of marginalization:

How do the participants' educational experiences inform our understanding of the origins of marginalization as a component of empowerment and disempowerment?

Being marginalized meant not having access to a place within the mainstream of public education. The origins of marginalization for these participants were related to the home/school disconnection. The participants never had a sense that school was a place where they belonged to a community of learners. This disconnection is reflective of a conflict in values and practices between what happens at



home and what happens in school. From their earliest experiences in school the majority of the participants felt that they were out of place. This sense of marginalization was intergenerational. It was a legacy that was passed to them from their parents. For some of the participants the issue of alcoholism within the family structure intensified the sense of disconnection between home and school. This is an issue that is not central to this study and is not necessarily related to social class, but should be noted, since it did reinforce a feeling of marginalization for six of the twenty participants.

A major factor in the marginalization experienced by the participants was their working class status. The dichotomy between the value of physical work and intellectual work is embedded within the mainstream middle class discourse of school and led to a sense of confusion and displacement for the majority of the participants prior to entering the vocational high school. This displacement was supported by the fact that the majority of the participants would not identify themselves as working class. This reinforced Hall and Jefferson's (1976) concept of "embourgeoisement", which describes the blurring of class boundaries because of increased hourly wages which allow for material possessions that in the past were signifiers of middle class status. An increase in social status did not accompany the increase in wages for working class jobs. This left the working class without a strong class identity.

This is evident within the participants' stories about their social class status. They claim to deeply respect the concept of physical labor and at the same time they would not identify themselves as members of the working class.

Critical theory, which is egalitarian by definition, often examines classism as a secondary issue to racism and sexism. This failure to recognize it as a primary cause of disempowerment may be reflective of an intellectual elitism that continues to see working class status as second class status. The working class is viewed as a place from which one should want to escape. This elitism about class often results in a failure to recognize that the educational needs of the working class are not automatically related to achieving middle class status.

Parents also gave confusing messages to the participants about working class status. Parents implied through their actions and sometimes their words that physical work was important, but when the decision to attend a vocational high school was made, the majority of the parents informed the students that vocational schools were second class because they lead to working class jobs. This same message was given to many of the participants by the schools' guidance counselors. The message was that vocational schools were for people who could not meet the mainstream standards of public education and therefore were somehow intellectually and/or socially defective.

Previous research (Brantlinger, 1993; Eckert, 1989; Wexler, 1992; Weis, 1990) that examined the issue of class in secondary education used as a comparison the middle class and the poor. Class distinction was denoted by income. In today's society the working class is better defined by the type of work that is done. Ironically, the working class person may make an hourly wage that is impressive, but the work being done is often seen as being of lower status because it is physical. The worker is paid for the time and not necessarily the skill. The issues of empowerment for the working class are different than for the poor. The primary concern for the poor is finding work in order to meet basic survival needs. Finding a job is not the primary concern for the working class because they are employed. Their concern can be expanded to include the issue of job status because basic survival needs are being met. This is a point that critical theory seems to be overlooking.

## 2. Research Question 2

My second question was concerned with the relationship between the participants' educational experiences and voice/voicelessness:

How do the participants' educational experiences inform our understanding of voice and voicelessness in the classroom as a component of empowerment and disempowerment?

All of the participants displayed inner voices when they were talking about their experiences during the

interviews. Unfortunately they did not use those inner voices often within school. The outer voice required by school was so alien to most of the participants that they became voiceless within school. The voicelessness became either silence or anti-social rebellion.

Both behaviors were forms of resistance against the treatment they received in schools. Resistance is a form of fighting against oppression. "Critical theory emphasizes that student resistance to the experiences of institutionalized education is forged from the contradictions they perceive between the dominant discourse of school knowledge on the one hand and their own lived experiences of subordination and violation on the other " (Lewis, p.471). Willis' (1977) research stressed that the resistance practiced is often self defeating. That was supported by the participants in this study.

It is easier to see how the anti-social rebellion is resistance because it is active aggression. The participants were not having their needs met in school and so they rebelled against school rules. The silence is passive aggression. The participants were not being heard in school and so they stopped trying to be heard. In many ways their resistance was more powerful and more self defeating because they appeared to be following the rules and they were still being marginalized. Both behaviors were reactions to the sense of being outsiders within school prior to entering vocational education. Both behaviors are



based on a need to protect themselves from further humiliations and injustices within school.

Often the participants told stories about teachers who empowered them by allowing them to use their inner voices within their classrooms. Unfortunately those were isolated incidents. Rarely did the inner voice carry over to other places within school. Those teachers showed the possibility of having voice in school. Often the participants held on to that possibility for years. Those teachers' classrooms became examples of how schools could be and maybe even should be. This allowed the participants to continue the struggle of trying to find their places in school and to have their voices heard.

The antithesis was also true. There were stories about teachers who had made the participants feel so disempowered that years later the participants still became angry or sad when talking about those teachers. It would be easy at this point to see the classroom teacher as the agent of voice and voicelessness. In order to understand the significance of the teacher's actions, it is necessary to examine those actions in the context of the hierarchical power structure of school and that was not the focus of this study.

Giroux (1988) and other critical theorists (McLaren, 1989; Aronowitz, 1991) have examined voice from the perspective of what is taught and how it is taught. Their concern has been to have voices validated in the classrooms through curricula and teaching practices. This study has

examined voice/voicelessness from the perspectives of the participants. Their perspective led to a focus on two levels: administrative (how they were grouped for instruction) and disciplinary (how they were treated). By allowing the participants' stories to direct the analysis of voice and voicelessness, this study empowered the participants and validated their voices. The suggestion made by the participants' stories is that before what is taught can be empowering, the school participants have to be in the appropriate classes and have to be treated with dignity.

The majority of the participants had experiences with receiving special help in order to improve their academic placements within the classroom. Most of the participants said that they were never oriented: to purpose or goal of special services; to the structure of special services; or to the length of time the special services would be given. This left them with a sense of disempowerment. Their voices were not heard in the planning of their school lives. They were being physically removed from classrooms where they were already feeling marginalized. Most of the participants saw the administration of special services as a key issue in rendering them voiceless.

Arbitrary administration of discipline was another issue for the participants in the analysis of voice/voicelessness. The anti-social rebellion discussed in previous research (Willis, 1977; Weis, 1990; Brantlinger,

1993) was evident in the participants' stories. Some of the participants admitted that the rebellion was the result of feeling alienated from their teachers and peers. Once the social identity of "rebel" was assumed by the participant, it was hard to leave it behind. Many of the "rebels" in this study came to the vocational high school in order to experience a "fresh start." So although the rebellion was reproductive and continued the marginalization and voicelessness, the decision to enter vocation education was productive. There was a movement made to end the disempowerment.

Boredom, escalating trouble at home and/or with peers, and a desire to be in control within the classrooms were some of the reasons given for the rebellious behavior in school. Embedded within these excuses was the sense that no one acknowledged the participants' existences within school unless they were causing trouble. Apparently for the rebels the negative attention they attracted was more desirable than being ignored. In telling their stories for this study, the participants repeatedly said that they wanted disciplinary actions to make sense and not to be a public humiliation. The need to have disciplinary action be a private matter between the offending student and the teacher or school administrator reflects the importance of peer interaction to the participants in this study.

Previous research (Eckert, 1989; Wexler, 1992) discussed in Chapter II pointed to the importance of social

interaction between peers in finding one's place and voice within school. This study supports the premise that having voice impacted the participants' social status with their peers. Being voiceless meant being isolated. The participants who saw themselves as being silent in school or as having rebel status told stories that showed an isolation from peers. The voicelessness that was at the core of most of the stories about school experiences was evident when the participants talked about their friendships. Most expressed the same sense of isolation with peers in social interactions that they experienced within the classrooms. The issue of teasing was one way that the hierarchical power structure was activated. Participants told stories about being teased by peers for a variety of reasons. The reasons for the teasing included academic difficulties, behavioral problems, and physical appearance. The teasing was very painful and increased the participants' isolation and voicelessness and caused a deep sense of being powerless in school.

The importance of social interaction among peers and its connection to the issue of voice and voicelessness as a component of empowerment and disempowerment is not often discussed within critical theory. It is important to recognize the power peers have in reinforcing the hierarchical power structures of school. If a school participant is seen as being marginalized and voiceless, peers who are part of the mainstream may not be willing to



risk their places in school by associating with someone who is disempowered.

### 3. Research Question 3

My third question was concerned with the issue of accessing school literacy as a component of empowerment and disempowerment within the educational experiences of the twenty vocational high school participants.

How do the participants' educational experiences inform our understanding about school literacy as a component of empowerment and disempowerment?

On the surface school literacy appears to be straightforward and uncomplicated. It appears to be simply the ability to read and write according to the standards set by the school. Those standards reflect a middle class bias. If we are part of the mainstream middle class culture, we undoubtedly grew up with books and learning to read was as natural as learning to swim in the summer (Stuckey, 1991; Aronowitz, 1992; Brantlinger, 1993; Eckert, 1989; Giroux, 1992; Heath, 1983; Meier, 1989; Snow, 1991). Reading and writing were our rightful skills as middle class Americans. Yet reading and writing are not so much skills as they are reflections of values and life-styles. If we change our cultural reference by a few degrees, reading and writing will not be taken for granted (Winterowd, 1989). The cultural reference of the participants within this study was a working class reference and this led to a sense of disempowerment when trying to access school literacy.

The home literacy practices of most of the participants reflected the parents' lack of success accessing school literacy. As with the issue of marginalization, the sense of failure to access school literacy was transferred from one generation to the next. The standards set by school literacy practices left the working class participants feeling disempowered. They felt inferior to students who they saw as being smarter. Realistically the difference was not in terms of intelligence, but was evident in the home literacy practices. The "smart" students' home literacy practices often imitated the school literacy practices. They knew what was valued in school. The participants in this study did not understand school literacy practices because their parents were not able to pass those practices on to their children.

It's important to note that there were literacy practices occurring within the participants' homes but those practices were not necessarily the ones that were validated within school. Literacy practices and values that occurred in school had little, if any, connection to those practiced and valued outside of school. Throughout the interviews there were repeated subtextual references to the meaninglessness of many of the skills used as the benchmarks for successfully accessing school literacy. At home the literacy practices were often meaningful and pleasurable. Stella learned about accomplishments of people by reading almanacs in the city library. Kevin wrote comic books.

Jared saw a connection between his play activities and the story of Huck Finn. Jayne read romance novels. The connection between literacy and meaning or pleasure was severed in school by an emphasis on skills (reading at a set speed or writing neatly and with standard usage) that were meaningless and offered no sense of pleasure.

The most obvious example occurred when Maria would not call the four hundred poems she wrote for her daughter poetry. She refused to call them poems and said they were "just rhymes." She apparently did not feel that they met the standards set for poetry by school literacy. Although Maria does have home literacy practices and these may be passed down to her daughter, what may also be passed to the next generation is a sense that these literacy practices don't meet the standards set by school literacy. One of the ways to stop this kind of intergenerational transference of a sense of failure in accessing school literacy is to expand our understanding of school literacy to include the varied and rich meanings of literacy in our complex contemporary society.

Seventeen of the twenty participants were taken from their classrooms in order to receive special services. That help was often focused on difficulties with reading. The isolation from the "good readers" increased their sense of failure at accessing school literacy as well as their senses of marginalization and voicelessness. Because most came to school not "ready" by the standard set by school literacy,

there was a sense of failure from the start of school for most of the participants. The isolating manner in which the help was given increased a sense of not being able to meet those standards. Ironically the help became a validation for the participants that they were not good enough to even stay in the room with the "good readers." There apparently was a disregard for the social practices of reading and writing. The message that was internalized by the participants was that school literacy was the superior form of literacy and if you could not master it, you were isolated from those who could.

Peer interactions were influenced by failure to meet the standards set for school literacy. School literacy practices helped to define school participants' social identities. Peers will not risk associating with those who are disempowered because of the need to maintain social status. This points to the competitive nature of schools. Peers need to secure their places in school by meeting the mainstream standards. Their places apparently were at risk if they befriended someone within the margins of school. Even the participants who were removed from classrooms for special services and therefore felt marginalized, refused to associate with peers in the special services rooms for fear of increasing their marginalization. Critical theory stresses the need to address the inequalities of public education. The focus has been on addressing the issue through curricular theory and practice. That focus needs to



be expanded to include a closer examination of the social construction of schools in relationship to peer interactions. An institution with the social impact of school can have a life long impact on the social identity of its participants.

#### B. Reflections on the Study

I began this research believing that I would examine the vocational high school experiences of twenty participants. I did not expect to experienced any tensions between my role of teacher and that of researcher. I naively thought that the research would simply enhance my passion for teaching in vocational education. My greatest fear was that as a researcher, I would be too strong an advocate for the value of vocational education as a cure for the inequalities of secondary public education.

As I complete the research I realize that the change in the focus from the vocational high experiences to the participants' educational experiences prior to coming to a vocational high school is reflective of my own growing awareness of the complexities of vocational education as a viable form of secondary education. The words of Walter, one of the participants, were caught in my head throughout the analysis of the interviews. Walter said, "Here at the voke school we are all the kids who were the listeners at our old schools." I kept wondering how all the listeners (which was Walter's term for marginalized students) ended up in vocational education. I was plagued by the thought that

vocational education might be the ultimate marginalization. The decision to escape marginalization and enter vocational education might not be productive but instead be reproductive.

After devoting eighteen years of my professional life to vocational education, I was finally facing the paradox that my students had found their places in school by entering a system that might be their final marginalization. I began to avoid directly examining what was going on in the vocational high school and concentrating on what brought them to a vocational high school. I rationalized this shift by saying that this was what the participants wanted to talk about. Now as I reflect, I realize it was what I wanted to listen to. I was too closely tied to vocational education not to become defensive in any analysis of its role in empowering or disempowering the participants. I hope that after leaving my position as an English teacher at a vocational high school, I will have the opportunity to conduct the second part of this research which will examine what happens once school participants decide to enter vocational education.

For the participants within this study their school experiences left many of them with a feeling of hopelessness about their ability to be a part of the mainstream of school. Vocational education offered them a means of escape from that marginalization by removing them from the mainstream of public secondary education. Schooling is a

social activity and the school experiences of most of these participants suggest that one's success or failure at schooling can be a major factor in determining one's social status within the community of learners that is school. Being different in school meant being isolated for these participants. Friends were few for those participants who were labeled as needing special help with school literacy. The way that the special help was given, by the removal of the participants from their mainstream classrooms, unintentionally mirrored the social isolation the participant felt from his peers. Obviously the causes for social isolation in school are complex and varied, just as they are in the wider society outside of school. It would seem from the stories told by these participants that there were barriers to successfully accessing school literacy that were preventing these participants from achieving a place among the students who did have access. Some of those barriers were reflective of not being part of the mainstream middle class culture that accepts school literacy as their right and not something that needs to be achieved through often times insurmountable struggles.

Because many of the parents of the participants had experienced difficulties similar to their children's with school literacy, they were not able to offer intervention. Even when intervention was given, as in the case of Walter's summer tutoring, it did not change the social identity of the participant as a slow reader and an outsider. When

Leroy's mother actively fought for help with his reading problems, her position as a social outcast in the community outside of the school increased his isolation within the school. The interrelationship among family experiences, classroom experiences and peer relationships for these participants was complex and filled with tensions.

The participants who had the strongest sense of self in relationship to their social identity had a positive experience with an adult role model. In the case of Joel that role model was Miss Kelley, his teacher, who saw his isolation and offered him her help. Jayne had a friend's mother who showed her the joys of reading for pleasure. Ironically this kind of reading offered her escape from the pain of being an outsider at school as well as increasing her isolation. Rita had unconditional validation from her parents that she was smart and nothing that happened to her in school could shake that.

None of the participants were able to identify themselves as school success stories even when they achieved success academically at a vocational high school. They almost unanimously felt like second class students who would always accept personal blame for their failure to access school literacy. Jared said it most poignantly when he said:

You know what's funny? Sometimes when I'm on my break at work and the guys I work with start talking about world events, I start to feel slow again. I wonder if I'll always feel like I'm behind?



### C. Implications for Teaching

As a teacher/researcher I had the opportunity to be researching a phenomena at the same time that I was a practitioner working with students who were the counterparts of the participants within the research study. I found that the research was offering me the time for reflection about my practice. This time for reflection about one's practice is often missing in the hectic day to day teaching schedule of a public high school teacher. As I began to ponder the "why" questions as well as the "what" and "how" questions about my teaching, I began to look inward at my own biases and presuppositions about school. This reflection was painful at times but it allowed me to grow. Many teachers need to step back from their practice and to reflect on the assumptions they originally brought to their teaching career, to see if those assumptions are still applicable to today's classrooms. This reflection needs to be an ongoing process, so that the teacher's world view corresponds on some level with the world views of the students within the classroom.

It is also important for educational researchers to value the voices of teachers. Educational research should empower teachers. Unfortunately it rarely does because the voice of the teacher usually is not part of the analysis of schooling. Empowering teachers by asking to hear their school experiences and to validate their interpretations of what happens within schools may be one important step

towards activating theory into practice. This would also help teachers to examine presuppositions and biases they may be bringing to their classrooms.

Embedded within our concept of schooling in the United States is the concept of egalitarianism. Most schools would claim to promote humane, liberal learning, but as Rose (1989) points out what often occurs within school is a rigid intellectual class system. This study supports the concept that a hierarchical power structure was evident in the school experiences of these twenty participants. The participants within this study instinctively knew that they were not in the mainstream of public education.

Most teachers represent the middle class value system. There is a tendency to see the working class as a place from which one needs to escape. In the world beyond the classroom, the working class is the second class and schools reflect society's bias. The image of the blue collar worker as presented by the communication media (including textbooks) is usually negative. Teachers need to become conscious of a class bias so that all students, regardless of social class, can be part of the mainstream of the classroom.

The elitism about social class was particularly evident in the reactions of school representatives to the participants' decisions to attend vocational high schools. Many were advised by guidance counselors that they were "too smart" for vocational education. The implication is that

vocational education is a place for unsuccessful students. Teachers and other school representatives need to become sensitive to the varying needs and aspirations of all students.

As teachers, many of us feel overwhelmed at times by the complexity of our jobs. The problems facing society are played out in our classrooms. Often we are left with the feeling of helplessness. How can we make a difference, when our students are facing what seem to be insurmountable social ills outside of our classrooms? One of the implications of this study is that individual teachers do influence the sense of success that a student takes away from the classroom. The participants told stories about simple acts of caring that teachers performed, maybe even unconsciously, in their daily teaching routines. These acts of caring were signs for the participants that they could somehow make it in school.

The issue of discipline is another implication of this study for teachers. The participants want disciplinary actions to make sense and not to be public humiliations. This simple observation can become difficult to implement. In the heat of a classroom crisis, overreaction on the part of the teacher and the student results in an escalation of tensions. In this situation no one's dignity is respected. Often teachers administer disciplinary actions the way those actions were done to them as students. Most teachers would admit that those actions were painful and were not

learning experiences. I have often felt that all teacher education programs should develop courses in mediation and crisis intervention. An explosive disciplinary action done in front of the entire class is destructive to both the students and the teacher. Fair disciplinary action that respects the dignity of all those involved can enrich the sense of community within school instead of making the classroom a battlefield.

Another implication of this study is that literacy is a birthright of all who attend school in the United States. The assumption is that all students who come to school will have had some experience with school literacy practices at home. The stories told within this study show that this does not happen. Because many of the participants' families did not share the middle class value that everyone reads to their children, many of these participants felt like outsiders at school from their earliest experiences. In the construction of a literate environment within the classroom, teachers need to recognize the complex communicative abilities that are part of the students, everyday lives, so that every student is given the opportunity to experience a private sense, as well as a public sense, of achievement. The cultural reference of school literacy needs to be broadened to include the infinite complexities of all home literacy practices.

The competitive nature of many classrooms, particularly in secondary schools, makes the process of empowerment and



disempowerment inevitable. It is important for secondary teachers to question why a cooperative learning model seems to stop at middle school. Once the student enters high school the competitive nature of school resurfaces. All of the participants in this study were victims of a competitive atmosphere in their school experiences. One can only guess at how the quality of education could have been improved if they had participated in a cooperative learning model.

The importance of the ways special needs are addressed is another implication of this study. The schools need to understand that the student is a participant in schooling. That student is not simply a recipient of dogma passed down from school representatives. These participants wanted someone to clearly explain why they were receiving special services, how long those services would last, and what the goals of the special services were. This could have been accomplished if the schools had recognized the students as active participants in schooling and not as passive objects whose school life was organized without input from them.

#### D. Implications for Research

Research that explores the issues of marginalization, voice/voicelessness and access to school literacy often has been focused on race and gender. Social class has been mentioned only as a minor contributing factor. The literacy needs of secondary vocational students are rarely the object of attention for educational researchers. When vocational education is the subject of research, it is usually with the

intent of making a more productive worker not to insure that the school and/or community literacy needs of the vocational student are being met. Research needs to examine the elitism that may be at the heart of this lack of attention. By understanding the school literacy needs of working class students through the exploration of their school experiences, researchers will gain insights into the broader issues of reproduction and production within schools.

### 1. Setting

This study needs to be duplicated with schools from different areas of the country. Although rural, urban and suburban settings were used, the three were in the same state. If different geographical locations were used in future research, that variety would enrich the study by exploring how different areas approach the need for vocational education. This would help in evaluating the effectiveness of each approach in addressing the classism that was evident in relation to vocational education in this study.

### 2. Participants

This study focused only on the participants' experiences, even though there were strong intergenerational connections within the participants' stories. The home/school connections need to be addressed more directly in future research. This could be done by also interviewing the parents. Throughout this study the parents' experiences

were told through the lenses of their children. It is important to get their stories first hand.

Another group that would enrich a future study would be participants' teachers prior to and within vocational high schools. Understanding these teachers' own educational experiences and their biases and presuppositions about vocational education may lead to answers concerning the second class status that vocational education occupied in the minds of some of the parents, some of the school representatives and some of the participants in this study.

It would also be interesting to do a comparative study between two groups of working class students with similar school experiences prior to high school. One group would be in a vocational high school for secondary education and the other would be in a traditional academic high school. By comparing their school literacy experiences prior to high school, it would offer data for analysis about the reasons vocational education is selected for secondary school. This might help to answer questions concerning whether vocational education is productive or reproductive.

### 3. Changes over Time

Although this study was conducted over a year, the participant was interviewed over a period of one month. It would be enlightening to interview each participant over a four year period. One set of interviews could be done during freshman year, the second set during sophomore year, the third set during junior year, and the final set during

senior year. This would allow the researcher to track attitudinal changes as well as academic and social movements.

#### E. Summary

The study began as an examination of the school experiences of vocational high school students. The intent was to examine what happened within a vocational high school in relationship to components of empowerment. The participants interviewed directed the study to the focus on the educational experiences that brought them to vocational schools as their choices for secondary education. The findings show that there is classism embedded in their school experiences. This supports the assumption made by critical theorists (Aronowitz, 1981; Giroux, 1983; McLaren, 1989; Weiler, 1991) that school practices empower some groups of students while disempowering other groups.

Classism is an issue that is often ignored within educational research. Racism and sexism are more easily identifiable because they are more visible. Classism can go unnoticed because, as Sennett and Cobb (1973) pointed out, classism is so embedded into our society that members of the working class in the United States rarely identify themselves as working class. The white middle class discourse of public education reflects that bias. The stories told by the participants in this study are stories about school histories based in classism. The marginalization, voicelessness, and failure to access school



literacy experienced by these participants before vocational high school point to the hierarchical power structures of schools that result often in reproduction.

What is truly remarkable about these participants is that the majority of them never gave up their struggles to overcome the barriers that were preventing them from attaining their rightful places within school. Their stories activate critical theory. By telling their stories, they are informing the educational theorists about what is happening within school to the disempowered. They are telling how those who are disempowered practice resistance. In the stories of these participants that resistance eventually became productive because the majority of the participants found their places within school. They found vocational education. Vocational education may not be the solution to the issue of classism in public education. Many would argue that it is an example of the existence of classism in education. Yet in the stories told by these participants, vocational high schools offered the participants the first places in school where they felt comfortable and achieved a certain sense of school success.

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