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# Beyond High Stakes Testing: Rural High School Students and Their Yearbooks

Lynn M. Hoffman

*Bucknell University*, [lhoffman@bucknell.edu](mailto:lhoffman@bucknell.edu)

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## Beyond High Stakes Testing: Rural High School Students and Their Yearbooks

### Abstract

I conducted surveys, focus group interviews, and analyzed the yearbooks of fifty four yearbook students from five rural high schools to investigate students process of yearbook construction and to determine what was meaningful and memorable to them throughout their high school experience. Changs (1992) construct of an adolescent ethos, including the elements of getting along with everyone, being involved, and being independent, provided a conceptual framework, and was affirmed by students responses. References to rites of passage and intensification embedded in the high school program as described by Burnett (1969) confirmed these students perceptions of high school as a four year passage experience.

### Keywords

Adolescence, Rites of Passage, Ethos, High School, Rural Schools, and Yearbooks

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## **Beyond High Stakes Testing: Rural High School Students and Their Yearbooks**

**Lynn M. Hoffman**

Bucknell University, Lewisburg, PA

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*I conducted surveys, focus group interviews, and analyzed the yearbooks of fifty four yearbook students from five rural high schools to investigate students' process of yearbook construction and to determine what was meaningful and memorable to them throughout their high school experience. Chang's (1992) construct of an adolescent ethos, including the elements of getting along with everyone, being involved, and being independent, provided a conceptual framework, and was affirmed by students' responses. References to rites of passage and intensification embedded in the high school program as described by Burnett (1969) confirmed these students' perceptions of high school as a four year passage experience. Key Words: Adolescence, Rites of Passage, Ethos, High School, Rural Schools, and Yearbooks*

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“Academic excellence doesn’t equal human excellence” (Heath 1994, p. 112).

“Through Girl Scouts, a part time job, music, and many extracurriculars, I learned time management skills, people skills, and all the important things that schools skip over.”  
(Jennifer Bunch, as a first year university student in a social foundations class)

What is the purpose of high school? Even before reports such as *A Nation At Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) and continuing with the more recent *Raising Our Sights: No High School Senior Left Behind* (National Commission on the High School Senior Year, 2001), policy makers, business leaders, and academicians have expressed concern and dismay about the desultory qualifications and abilities exhibited by high school graduates nationwide (Kleibard, 1995). In spite of the dramatic changes in the national and international landscape that have occurred over the last fifty years, and the public lament that high schools are ineffective (Giella & Standfill, 1996), most Americans could enter their local high school and recognize the sights, sounds, procedures and events, or “the grammar of schooling” as virtually identical to their own, even if their tenth, twenty-fifth, or fiftieth high school reunion is, but a memory (Sizer, 1992b; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). How, in spite of constant and consistent demands for restructuring and revamping, does high school continue on, virtually undisturbed?

Adults who create the mission statements, determine curriculum, teach content, and manage the day-to-day workings of the school will inevitably identify high school as a primarily academic institution with emphasis on student learning and achievement (Goodlad, 1984; National Association of Secondary Principals, 2004; Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985; Sizer, 1992a; Sizer, 1992b). School leaders operating in the shadow of the

specifications of the No Child Left Behind Act (2002), concerned about their students' performance on an array of state and national tests, ponder their students' academic achievement as never before. However, in spite of the best efforts of adults to promote student academic challenge and achievement, adolescents have consistently demonstrated that their focus is on issues other than the academic ones (Hollingshead, 1975; Lynd & Lynd, 1929; Peshkin, 1978). In their ethnographic account of the Coalition of Essential Schools, modeled after a school reform initiative designed by Ted Sizer (Muncy & McQuillan, 1996), muse that helping students learn to use their minds well seems a reasonable high school goal, yet, "... in practice, making an 'intellectual focus' a school's top priority has proven difficult" (p. 289).

### **The Value of Adolescents' Perspective and Interpretation**

Goodlad (1984), noting the strength of a unique adolescent culture in the United States, wondered, "why we have taken so little practical account" of its relevance to school program design and implementation (p. 75). In a review of chapters on learning, school improvement, and school leadership in the second edition of the *Handbook on Educational Administration* Levin (1999) ponders the absence of students' voices in discussions about high school improvement and reform, noting that "where they do appear, they are still treated as objects of policy, not as actors whose volition is critical to the work of the schools" (p. 546). While research reports and position papers describing faults and limitations of high school from an adult perspective continue to accumulate, I am interested in developing a more complete understanding of the true purpose of high school, not according to the employers, academicians, or politicians who lament its ineffectiveness and wasted time, but according to the students who experience it. Along with Lightfoot (1983), I suggest that rather than "asking what is missing, wrong, or incomplete," we devote attention to "what is happening or even what is good" (p. 313). In a review of Amy Best's *Prom Night: Youth Schools and Popular Culture*, Bills and Geddes (2002) note that "much of what is important about the experience of American schooling has curiously failed to arrive on the research agenda of the sociology of the education community" (p. 1). In fact, many rituals and practices that are central to the lives of adolescents are perceived as inconsequential to the schooling landscape, failing "to merit much serious attention" (p. 1). In addition, high school is usually described primarily in terms of its effect on the adolescents who attend it. However, as Peshkin (1978) noted, "There is more to schooling than meets the eyes of teachers, legislators, and academics" (p. 208). A rural high school, in addition to educating students, serves as "a piece of the local social structure, it is often the hub that holds the community together" (Nachtigal, 1982, p. 11).

### **Purpose of the Study**

During my own prior experience as a suburban middle and high school teacher, assistant principal, principal, and a parent of adolescents, I am often puzzled over students' lack of engagement in their academic work. I also observed their willingness to pour endless amount of time and energy into extracurricular school activities or events unconnected to school. In a prior study of suburban high school yearbook students and

their yearbooks designed to investigate this inconsistency (Hoffman, 2002), I discovered that Chang's (1992) expression of an adolescent ethos, developed through her ethnographic study of a rural high school in Oregon, provided a useful framework for organizing the thoughts and written comments of the suburban students in my study. Chang (1992) used Kroeber's (in Bock, 1979) definition of ethos which "deals with qualities that pervade the whole culture" and includes "the direction in which the culture is oriented, the thing it aims at, prizes and endorses, and more or less achieves" (p. 272). Grant (1988) suggests that it is "a sharing of attitudes, values, and beliefs that bond disparate individuals into a community."

Chang's (1992) ethos elements include getting along with everyone, getting involved, and being independent. Getting along with everyone, especially peers, consumes students' time and energy. It means maintaining positive relationships with other students, regardless of differences and avoiding conflict. It requires impression management (Goffman, 1959), the maintenance of a positive reputation, and the avoidance of activities that might cause others to label one as anti-social or as a member of an undesirable group. Getting involved means constant activity and busyness that is encouraged before, during, and after school. Students are actively doing something physically, mentally, or socially during almost every waking moment, often resulting in stress. Being independent presents an ongoing struggle for adolescents. It means acting like an adult and being treated like one. Students perceive independence as something they need to earn through responsible behavior. Independence means reducing dependency upon adults and instead increasingly looking toward peers for assistance and advice. Chang (1992) identified markers of independence that encouraged students to feel that they were making progress toward independence. They included such events as successfully and responsibly driving, working at part time jobs, and moving away from home.

Throughout my discussions with yearbook staffers in suburban schools, students frequently mentioned traditional, special events such as homecoming dances and proms as their most memorable events. Their coverage consumes large portions of students' yearbooks. In addition, students described, in interviews and in their yearbooks, how they moved from one grade to the next, each with its own unique customs, events, and responsibilities. Burnett's (1969) conception of high school as a four year rite of passage experience helped me make sense of students' repeated references, orally and in their yearbooks, to the experiences they described. According to her framework, many of the special events that occurred annually could be described as intensification rites embedded in the overall four year passage rite.

Moore and Myerhoff (1977) define rites of passage as "dramatic, complex and symbolic" ceremonies that often have multiple meanings and signify more than what they appear to on the surface (p. 5). Building upon the work of Turner (1982) and Van Gennep (1908/1960), Burnett (1969) describes high school rites of passage as ceremonies that occur at individuals' crisis points. These ceremonies give students opportunities to practice behaving in new and different ways, more grown up ways. Examples of rites of passage are: freshmen orientation, baccalaureate, graduation, the alumni banquet, and the senior trip. In addition, Burnett characterizes the high school experience as an overarching four-year rite of passage cycle and experience. Students grow in prestige, power, and responsibility as they move from freshman to senior status.

While rites of passage are organized around individuals, rites of intensification are centered around groups (Chapple & Coon, 1942). Burnett (1969) describes high school rites of intensification as ways to restore interactive balance to groups faced with a change in conditions. Intensification rites, such as pep rallies and homecoming activities, help students to transition from one environment to another, usually as a class. Burnett notes that these rites of intensification provided students with practice in interacting with others in “ritualized, traditional patterns of action and interdependencies” (p. 7).

As a new arrival to rural central Pennsylvania as a member of the education department of a small university, I am curious to learn more about the secondary schools that surround the university and the students within them. My new responsibilities include preparing local aspiring administrators and supervisors for their administrative certification and working with cooperating teachers in surrounding schools to provide student teaching opportunities for our aspiring teachers. How would these schools and these students compare with the suburban examples I knew and studied from my previous life? Would rural students articulate a similar affiliation with Chang’s (1992) ethos elements? Would contemporary rural students recognize high school as the four-year rite of passage described by Burnett (1969) so many years ago? Would school programs and memorable experiences be similar? Understanding these students would satisfy my curiosity about their nature, provide additional support (or not) for the frameworks developed by Chang and Burnett, and help me to prepare their future teachers and administrators more effectively.

Through this study of yearbook students in five rural high schools in Pennsylvania, I sought to continue to explore the apparent disconnect between many adults’ expectations of high school as a primarily academic experience and the perceptions of the students who attend them. The purpose of this study was to investigate what these rural adolescents are trying to accomplish and how they use their high school experiences, including academic work and extracurricular activities, to meet their goals. Using the adolescent ethos elements uncovered by Chang (1992) in her ethnographic study of a rural high school in Oregon as a guide for this study, I looked for evidence that these students also subscribe to the importance of being involved, getting along with everyone, and being independent. What other elements might be uncovered in the construction of an adolescent ethos for these rural students?

Being independent, a pervasive adolescent ethos element described by Chang (1992), implies a process that adolescents undergo that reflects their quest for independence. Burnett’s (1969) description of high school as a four-year rite of passage experience, including specific activities and events that are themselves discrete rites of passage and intensification, provide the language to describe how this passage from childhood to adult status is accomplished within the high school environment. Questions that framed this inquiry are

1. How do these rural high school yearbook students articulate their ethos elements? Do they reflect Chang’s (1992) ethos elements of being involved, getting along with everyone, and being independent?
2. What do these students perceive to be the essence of their high school experience?

3. How are rites of passage and intensification elements presented in students' yearbooks? Will students articulate and demonstrate their understanding of high school as a rite of passage experience?

### **Yearbook Students as Unique Informants**

Yearbook students are uniquely qualified to comment on their high school events and experiences. They research students and little known organizations, obscure academic programs, and adult perspectives to provide the inclusive coverage the yearbook demands. As a result of their own academic and extra-curricular experiences and participation, along with their year's work of identifying, interviewing, photographing, and writing about unfamiliar teachers, programs, clubs, and other organizations, yearbook students are well-informed and knowledgeable about their school and its programs. These students often demonstrate specialized knowledge and insight characteristic of elite respondents (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). Like Chang (1992), I believe that "adolescents are able to talk about their own culture; the reality they present in their own voices is more valuable than the reality constructed solely by researchers" (p. 42).

### **The High School Yearbook**

The high school yearbook functions concurrently as a one year historical record of students' high school experiences, as a memory book, as a reference source, as a public relations tool for the high school within the larger community, and as an educational tool for the students who produce it (Clark, Gerrity, Heth, & Jack, 1991; Foreman, 1989; Savedge, 1985). The high school yearbook is a piece of material culture, a physical object or artifact that can be used as a piece of data, through which a researcher might work to interpret "past and present human activity" (Schlereth, 1985, p. 6). In addition, it is a piece of documentary evidence. Bronner (as cited in Schlereth) suggests, "The researcher imagines the artifact as a mirror of culture, a code from which the researcher can infer beliefs, attitudes, and values" (p. 131). The yearbook is at once an artifact and a piece of documentary evidence. It is an example of "resources that can be considered as being both effects and causes in history" (Schlereth, 1985, p. 17). The high school yearbook records the history of the institution while representing a traditional piece of school culture (Akers, Ender, & Schaub, 1999). In response to criticism of a yearbook's coverage of a high school's drug and alcohol problem, the president of Sigma Delta Chi, the Society of Professional Journalists, noted that today's yearbook is "no longer a hardbound puff book, or sugar coated public relations tool, or an extra trip down a rose-petal covered memory lane" (Prentice, 1980, p. 13). The yearbook is meant to be a "news medium" that creates a special obligation to report the year's events with integrity (p. 13).

### **Participant Description and Methodology**

Well-versed in how to gain access to yearbook classes in suburban schools through my prior experiences as teacher, administrator, and researcher, I noted initial differences immediately between the operation of large suburban and small rural schools

as I sought access to them. As a newcomer to this rural area, I located six rural school districts physically surrounding the university. I learned that the university had placed student teachers in all of these districts at some time in the past, although only four of the six were currently being used for placements. By doing so, I engaged in “purposeful sampling” described by Patton (2002), and based my choice of schools on their rural nature and the presence of a yearbook class or club in each high school (p. 230). I began making school contacts in February to ensure that I would be able to interview students in the spring, after their books would be mostly complete. Superintendents in six selected systems returned my calls within days and based upon our conversation about my study, I was immediately referred to their principals. In two instances, it was actually the superintendent’s secretary who referred me to the building principal. The letters I prepared explaining the purpose of my study for superintendents went unreturned. Principals were equally responsive to phone calls and cordial, lacking the wariness I had encountered among some suburban building leaders; all the principals could tell me on the spot the name of the teacher who served as their yearbook advisor. To my surprise, two principals could also tell me the names of the student editors of their yearbooks that year. All six principals encouraged me to contact the teacher yearbook advisor to set up interview times. They did not seem to consider that teachers would refuse my request.

As a follow up to my phone calls, I sent letters addressed to the principals, to each yearbook advisor the principals named, and to the student editor of each yearbook. The letters described the study I hoped to do and assured anonymity for schools and participants in any future research report. I also contacted the yearbook advisors by phone. All were already aware of me and my desire to interview their students. After interview appointments were scheduled, I delivered letters of introduction for all potential student participants, including informed consent forms to be signed by students and returned to the advisor. Students under 18 required parental permission in addition to their own consent to participate, as stipulated by my university’s Institutional Review Board. I also arranged to purchase a yearbook in five of the six schools whose students I expected to interview. At one school, orders had already been taken and there were no extra books published. In gaining access to yearbook classes in these rural schools, I was reminded of Nachtigal’s (1982) overview of the characteristics of rural areas, including limited bureaucracy, direct communication, and a reliance on verbal rather than written communication. Perhaps my ease of entry into local schools was also ensured by a combination of my affiliation with a local university where many administrators had earned their credential, our shared background as school administrators, and the perception that the study I proposed was non-threatening.

While initial entry into six high schools went smoothly, glitches in completing the interviews occurred. At Grove, I arrived after a half hour drive with recording equipment and a stack of survey forms at the appointed interview time, only to learn that the advisor completely forgot I was coming. She had not distributed the consent forms I had hand-delivered the week before. I concealed my frustration and cheerfully rescheduled an appointment time for the following week, leaving additional consent forms as she sheepishly admitted that she could no longer locate the previous stack I had placed in her office mailbox. To prevent another such incident, I learned to call each advisor and confirm my appointment the day before each scheduled interview. At another school, I excitedly met with the advisor at the appointed time and was led to a room where two



sophomores appeared. Apparently, in scheduling the interview, the advisor forgot that the date we set was the last day of school for seniors, and that the seniors had other plans for the afternoon. While I spent an interesting hour interviewing these two students and later received a copy of their yearbook, I decided not to include their interview or their school in my analysis. These students did not appear to have the significant responsibility for producing their book that I typically find in junior and senior members of a yearbook staff. In all, fifty-four students in one yearbook club (Oneida) and four classes from five high schools participated in this inquiry.

The five schools that participated in this study are located in central Pennsylvania, at least an hour or more by car from a metropolitan area. All schools are designated as rural by the Pennsylvania Department of Education, and each school is a part of a small, distinctive community with its own downtown, surrounded by sparsely populated areas. Each community has its own history and unique events, and although they are within a half hour's driving time, the communities are noticeably distinct from one another as described by Howley (1997). Each fall, students decorate the entrances to their towns with hundreds of ribbons in their schools' colors; this colorful display of school spirit for the upcoming football games marks the geographic end of one community and the beginning of the other long into the school year. Two schools, Oneida and Grove, are located in university towns. Information about schools included in this study can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

*Yearbook Class/Club Composition*

School	N=	Race		Sex		Grade				Program	
		White	Other	M	F	9	10	11	12	Honors/GT	Standard
Oneida	7*	6	1	3	4	0	1	2	4	7	0
Valley	24	21	3	4	20	4	8	6	6	12	12
Harvest	9	9	0	6	3	0	0	6	3	6	3
Grove	6**	5	1	4	2	0	0	0	6	3	3
Gillette	8**	8	0	0	8	0	0	3	5	5	3

Note: All values expressed in numbers. Information reported by students.

\* Oneida's yearbook was produced by an after school club.

\*\* The Grove and Gillette journalism classes also produced the school newspaper. Only yearbook students were interviewed for this study.

As promised to superintendents, principals, yearbook advisors, and students, pseudonyms have been created for all the schools in this study.

A mild form of culture shock greeted me as I entered each of the six high schools. My experience told me to expect that high school students would be generally polite and even helpful when I asked for directions to the main office or to a classroom; I was surprised by the number of students who made eye contact and greeted me, a stranger, as I walked the halls, or even initiated conversations with me as I walked through their schools. In the suburban schools I know, an adult can feel unacknowledged and almost invisible, except to other adults. I also noted an overall homogeneity in students' race and dress as I wandered the halls in four of the six schools, with denim being a part of almost

every student's attire, except for the Mennonite girls in their flowered dresses and "buckets" (starched white caps sitting atop long, updone hair). My observations reflect Nachtigal's (1982) impression of the homogeneous nature of rural communities. Similarly, Howley (1997) has noted that the need for "self presentation," evidenced in the changeable and unique clothing statements common to suburban adolescents, seems less important to rural adolescents who possess "an enduring substance of place" (p. 136). This homogeneity of student dress did not appear at Oneida High, perhaps more heavily influenced by the university students a few blocks away.

Information about these yearbook students by school, based upon their responses to a short questionnaire they completed prior to each interview session, is located in Table 2.

Table 2

*Rural High School Characteristics*

	Oneida	Valley	Harvest	Grove	Gillette
Enrollment 9-12	613	795	864	897	1066
Free/Reduced Lunch	8.0	19.3	18.8	22.6	17.5
Minority Enrollment	*	*	*	*	*
Dropout Rate	0.6	4.0	3.0	2.0	6.7
4 year college plans	78.3	61.8	63.5	65.4	45.5

Note: All values except enrollment are percentages. Information obtained from school system and state reports.

\* Schools do not contain sufficient numbers of minority students to disaggregate pupil enrollment by major racial groups.

Based on students' questionnaire responses, 53% of these students reported holding part time jobs during the school year, with hours ranging from 5-25 or more per week. In all, 25% of this group of students, or 47% of those who worked, reported working 20 or more hours per week. These relatively high numbers of hours worked per week probably reflect the primarily junior and senior status of the respondents. Of students who took yearbook as a class, 55% indicated that they spent significant time beyond the allotted class period on their books. Based on my prior experiences with suburban students, I expected that these yearbook classes would be comprised primarily of upperclassmen, or students in grades 11 and 12. I was surprised, however, by the number of males involved in yearbook; suburban classes I had encountered were overwhelmingly female. Racial composition in the yearbook classes reflected the overall lack of ethnic diversity in their schools.

## **Methodology**

Focus groups consist of open-ended interviews of small groups of people with similar backgrounds and experiences to talk about important issues that affect them (Patton, 2002). In using this method, the researcher should convey to respondents that

they have something “acceptable and valuable” to say (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p. 82). In addition, participants should recognize, through the behavior of the moderator, that their “thoughts and opinions are critical for understanding a topic” (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996, p. 17). Throughout the interviews I have conducted with high school yearbook students, students seem surprised that an adult would be interested in how they made decisions about their yearbooks, or in what they found memorable in their high school experiences. Seniors, in particular, seem to appreciate an opportunity to “debrief” their high school careers in a non-threatening atmosphere, surrounded by their peers. When I introduced myself to students, first by letter and then in person, I tried to be very transparent in explaining exactly why I was there. I told them I was interested in learning about how they made decisions about their yearbooks, and to see what high school experiences are memorable to them. I also told them I wanted to study the yearbooks they have created. While some researchers (Smith, 1972) believe that focus group interviews are most effective when respondents do not know each other, Stewart & Shamdasani (1990) indicate that participants’ familiarity with one another may promote the cohesiveness of the group, a critical component in their willingness to interact with one another during the interview.

In this study, yearbook students participated in focus group interviews during their assigned yearbook class periods lasting from forty-five minutes to two hours, depending on school schedules. At Valley, class periods were unexpectedly shortened, so I returned the next day at the same time to continue the interview. At Oneida, where the yearbook was produced by an after school club, I arranged an interview at night with the promise of pizza for attendees. I designed and used a semi-structured moderator’s interview guide (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996), implementing what Patton (2002) calls a general interview guide approach to gain students’ perspectives of their yearbook process and their high school experience. The guide was designed to reflect my research questions, eliciting information about how students made decisions about their yearbook content, the content itself, students’ awareness and inclusion of growing up or rite of passage events in their books, and their most memorable high school experiences. As the result of a pilot study, conducted with a group of suburban yearbook students in the home of a staffer, I refined the original interview guide by rearranging the sequence of questions to provide a better transition between a discussion of the yearbook decisions, elements to students’ perceptions about being independent, and their own high school experiences. With these rural students, I also wanted to ask how they represented special needs students in their books, as I had noted a wide variation in how such students were presented in suburban yearbooks. This protocol was sufficiently open-ended to allow for follow up and extension of students’ ideas when appropriate (Appendix A). I asked follow up questions when I was unsure of the meaning of a student’s response, or when I wanted to find out if others agreed with something one person had said. When students talked about their need to create an inclusive book, I asked how they decided to represent the special needs students in their school. I frequently asked students to elaborate on brief comments, and at times when everyone laughed about something that was said, I probed students’ responses concerning their academic work. All interviews were taped as they occurred, and all participating students completed pre-interview questionnaires.

I deliberately asked students to record their most memorable high school experience on the questionnaire they completed before the interview began; to have a

written record of all students' responses in case they did not respond orally during the interview. This strategy also seemed to make it easier for students to respond later, as they had already given the question some thought. I fashioned the interview protocol to begin with concrete factual questions about their yearbook production, leading into questions about their personal attitudes and beliefs as the interview proceeded. Typically, interviews seemed strained as they began, with little participation. Initially, students routinely appeared self-conscious about responding, perhaps because of the advisors' presence at Oneida and Harvest, a general reluctance to speak in front of their peers, or their unfamiliarity with me. I tried to communicate to students what Patton (2002) calls "empathetic neutrality," indicating my years of experience in schools and previous interviews I had conducted. At times I started a question with, "Other students have mentioned..." to let students know it would be difficult to shock or surprise me. I told students that I had been a teacher and a principal in another state, but I sensed that the cooperation I got from students resulted from the natural authority these students were willing to cede to any professional-looking adult in their school, along with their curiosity about an adult who was interested in what they had to say. In each of the five schools, initial reluctance to respond eventually gave way to several students talking at once. During each interview, I became aware of a point several minutes into the process where I ceased to be the interviewer and became the moderator of their discussion. While this excitement ensured that most students participated in the interviews, students talking all at once sometimes made it difficult to create fully accurate transcriptions.

After each interview, I returned to my home or office and completed field notes describing the circumstances of the interview, my perceptions of each school, information provided by advisors, and items discussed that I particularly wanted to confirm when I viewed the yearbooks these students produced. I noted things that seemed different from my experiences in suburban schools, such as students' way of interacting with an unfamiliar adult, their mostly uniform dress and overall appearance, the lack of racial diversity, and unfamiliar yearbook elements that students described. Fortunately, interviews were transcribed within a short time frame, usually allowing me to interpret most unclear comments from memory. In the weeks before students' yearbooks were available, I compiled the survey information I obtained and data about each school and created tables to represent composite pictures of the five schools and the fifty-four students in the study. From students' surveys, I separated out responses about their most memorable high school experiences. I collected the yearbooks I had purchased when they became available, including a spring supplement in one school along with additional pictures and a copy about late spring activities posted on another's website. At Harvest, books were sold out and I completed my analysis of the school's copy of the yearbook under the watchful eye of the office secretary.

Content analysis involves searching for patterns or themes in the data, and making sense of them. I was interested in discerning how these rural students articulated what was meaningful to them through the decisions they made about their yearbooks, what they valued, and how they perceived their high school experiences. In addition, I wanted to determine how these rural students compared with the suburban students I had studied earlier. Patton (2002) describes a method of analysis called analytic induction that allows the researcher to start with a proposition or theory-driven hypotheses and then to use the qualitative data obtained to verify them (p. 454). In the process of examining data in

terms of its fit with the identified framework, the researcher searches inductively for new patterns, contrary examples, and a deeper understanding of the data and the framework. Chang's (1992) concept of an adolescent ethos, encompassing the elements of getting along with everyone, being involved, and being independent, had already proven to be a worthwhile interpretive framework for data I had obtained from suburban yearbook students studied earlier. Burnett's (1969) theory of high school as an overall rite of passage experience as students move from childhood to young adulthood, punctuated by discrete rites of passage and intensification, provided a framework to describe the growing up, gaining independence elements that students discussed in their interviews. I used these frameworks to help codify the data I obtained in transcripts of the five focus groups I conducted and the yearbooks these students produced.

After multiple readings of the interview transcripts, I began the process of "sorting and sifting" through the material, looking for common themes, similar phrases, and patterns (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 9). As I reviewed the words of the students, I was mindful of the ethos elements described by Chang (1992), and examples of events that would satisfy Burnett's (1969) definition of rites of passage or intensification, or evidence that students considered high school an overall rite of passage experience. I made copies of all transcripts, coded each page according to the school from which the transcript came, and reread the transcripts. I began to identify themes and commonalities, name them and record the name I gave them, and color-code the transcripts wherever a theme appeared. When I exhausted colors, I began to use symbols with the colors, so a statement highlighted in blue might stand for one element, while a blue star or a blue square might represent something else.

After checking and rechecking the transcripts against the coding system I imposed, I added the school name and student identification (sex, grade) to each highlighted piece, and then I cut the pieces apart and grouped them according to their category. To avoid duplication of student names, while honoring my promise to students to maintain their anonymity, I decided to refer to students by sex, grade, and school, or some combination of those identifiers. Following this process, I began to see how common themes and patterns matched the categories described by Chang (1992) and Burnett (1969). I followed a similar strategy with students' comments about their most enduring memory of high school, coding them by their origin (questionnaire) and theme, and adding them to the groupings already developed.

I examined each yearbook page by page to get a feel for how each was constructed. Referring to field notes about each school visit, I looked for evidence of unusual or unique events discussed by students during their interview to see if they appeared in their books. To standardize yearbooks so I could compare one with another, I decided to eliminate elements from analysis that appeared in some books but not in others, such as advertisements, indices, dedication pages by family members to seniors, and pages that simply introduced each section of a book. I analyzed the remaining pages of each yearbook according to an instrument I developed to reflect the six yearbook content categories designated by the Columbia Scholastic Press Association and described in *Scholastic Yearbook Fundamentals*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Akers, Ender, & Schaub, 1999). This text is presented as a sort of yearbook Bible, frequently used by advisors to teach students the rudiments of yearbook production. It addresses theme development, effective writing of text, design, organization, and photography, along with the business

aspect of yearbook production and the legal and ethical considerations. I determined the total number of pages in each yearbook, minus the elements described earlier, and counted the pages allotted to each category listed including: academics, student life, clubs/organizations, sports, people, and community. I modified the people category by breaking it into pages devoted to seniors, underclassmen, and teachers, and I added an “other” category for items that did not seem to fit the proscribed categories. After pages were analyzed, charted, and converted into percentages of each total book, I reread each yearbook to identify instances of emerging themes and patterns, paying special attention to those identified by Chang (1992) and Burnett (1969). Loathed to cutting apart each completed book, I created multi-page records of pertinent quotes and references labeled by school. Once again, after making copies of the new sheets, I labeled each yearbook quote by school, color-coded each one as I had coded transcripts, cut them apart, and added them to their appropriate theme or pattern pile.

### **The Construction of a Rural Adolescent Ethos**

How do these rural high school yearbook students articulate their ethos elements? Do they reflect Chang’s (1992) ethos elements of being involved, getting along with everyone, and being independent? As I talked with group after group of yearbook students, it often seemed to me that they had read Chang’s (1992) ethnography and were reciting her findings to me, weaving in their own personal stories to validate the ethos elements as their own.

### **The Value of Being Busy and Getting Involved**

Like the students in Chang’s (1992) study and my own of suburban yearbook students (Hoffman, 2002), these rural students presented themselves as incredibly busy and involved, often to the point of becoming stressed with the demands of their school and outside activities. In the Gillette yearbook, a student describing student life wrote:

A typical day for a high school student starts off at around seven a.m. with exhausted teens scrambling to get around, finish homework from the night before, and if they’re lucky, eat a little breakfast. After seven hours of notes, tests, and quizzes, you’d expect the day to be over, but that is simply not the case. Most students have meetings or sports practice afterwards, but a lot of others have after school jobs.

When I asked a senior male at Grove to elaborate on how he was “working hard and sleeping little,” he described his first semester “like English AP, American History AP, a job, yearbook. First semester it was just like I went home, went to work, came home, I slept four hours and went back to school.” In spite of the stress created by participation in so many activities, students seemed to view their involvement as positive or worthwhile for the future. In Valley’s yearbook, on a page titled “Stress Can You Handle It?” a student wrote, “Busy schedules lead to a whirlwind of activities that were enjoyable,” followed by:

Stress played an important part in many students' lives because of all the activities or jobs they were involved in. However, they benefited from this because their busy schedules taught them responsibility and time management skills. Many students who planned to attend college would be prepared to work under stressful conditions.

In yearbook text that described this rural community's lack of a nearby movie theatre or shopping mall, a Valley High student still noted that, "Even in a small town, a student could still keep busy." Some students at Valley were identified in the organizations section of their yearbook as combining their academic work with their involvement. In describing students in the Calculus Club and TSA (Technology Students Association), a yearbook student wrote:

Those students pushed their minds to the limit by getting involved and participating in ways that challenged them, while they did something they enjoyed and succeeded at. Not many students were willing to push themselves to expand their knowledge, but those who did greatly benefited from the challenge.

Based on information from text and pictures, it appears that eight students participated in the technology club, while fifteen were members of the calculus club. Calculus club included all students taking AP Calculus. "To cover the cost of this expensive exam, members held fundraisers throughout the year." A student explained, "The fundraisers were a big help in funding the costs for the AP exam." The extent of their meetings, in addition to implementing fundraisers, was to meet for breakfast with their advisor to discuss the fundraising logistics. Curiously, the calculus club seemed designed primarily to earn money for the tests, while the technology club offered students the opportunity to work in the field, and to compete with others outside of the school, in technology fields. I found this highlighting of an academic club to be unique in the yearbooks produced by these rural students; ironically, group activities appeared to have nothing to do with academics, and everything to do with fundraising for the national exam. And finally, a student comment in the yearbook captured the value of activities beyond academics, "In order to pass the time of the same day-to-day schedule in school, many students involved themselves in clubs. That gave them a way to add variety to what seemed like a long and boring day." Through their comments during focus group interviews and the text accompanying pictures in their yearbooks, these students demonstrated how they subscribed to the value of being constantly busy and being involved in an array of activities inside and outside of school. Their oral comments and yearbook text supported Chang's (1992) inclusion of being involved as a critical ethos element, consistent with my earlier findings in a suburban population.

### **Getting Along With Everyone**

What do these rural students perceive to be the essence of their high school experience?

In focus group interviews, students repeatedly indicated that they would remember their friends and the fun they had with them during and outside of school. In each school, students talked about their relationships with other students and wrote about them when asked, in surveys preceding their interviews, to describe what they expected to remember about school. A senior girl at Gillette wrote, "I'll just remember my friends and all the people that I've become close to and people that are in college that are gone." During interviews, students described special relationships with other students forged through their participation in sports, band, and other extracurricular activities. Students at Oneida recalled a foreign language trip abroad during spring break with two faculty members and a canoeing trip with members of an advanced biology class. At Valley, students described a trip to Williamsburg with the choir. Another Gillette student tried to explain an important memory and the special relationship she shared with members of the band at her school, an award-winning group that traveled to competitions and performances beyond the local community:

I think it's more like the out-of-school things that you get to do for being in school, like with the band. All the time you spend with the band and all the time you spend together and here, like over there. The few of us that were there, over and over, just like the conversations and the interaction with people.

Students described their activities inside and outside of school during their high school years, and the friends and acquaintances sharing these experiences, as the foundation for the really important things that students learned during high school. A girl at Gillette explained:

All the things that I learned, like how to respect people and what you should do and what you shouldn't do and the consequences of things that you do. And how we decide what to do and what not to do. Stuff like that. I don't know. A little bit of everything.

At Oneida, a girl extended the response of a senior boy who said he would remember "fun times." She said, "Not so much the fun times, but more of their growth as a person rather than academics." There would be more than enough time for this college-bound student and her circle of friends to attend to academics. For high school, they wanted to remember, "the stuff that was kind of more innocent, less stressful, you know." Another student finished her thought, "Being a kid."

### **Getting Along while Creating Yearbooks**

These yearbook students proofread information that seniors provided for their senior credits, small paragraphs that, depending on the school, listed only their school activities, or added information such as: type of school program, nicknames, ambitions, meaningful quotes, favorite songs, and likes and dislikes of a general nature. At Grove, where students could also list their telephone numbers and expected college, if applicable, student editors simply removed inappropriate references. A senior boy noted,



“...a lot of sexually slanted comments that we had to take out” adding, “That’s normal, I think, in every school.” Another student described some controversy among staff members about senior comments that described hatred for other people. She explained, “To some extent we left it in, because it’s freedom of speech, but, I mean, if they were slanderous to the person in a really mean way and everyone could tell, we took them out.” At Harvest, student editors tried to work with students who submitted questionable credit material, although yearbook students agreed that most students self-edited their work before it was submitted. When necessary, student editors, not the faculty sponsor, approached students and explained, “We’re not going to be able to use the one (quote) you gave us.” At times, the editors described going back over and over to individual students.

I think if we had to go back to a kid a couple of times, we didn’t want to make a real big deal out of it. We said, hey, you need to come up with a different quote and that was really how we handled it. We’re not going to be able to use the quote you gave us.

In books that listed only school activities, student editors merely had the headache of cajoling late submissions from classmates. This method also emphasized the obvious lack of school involvement by some seniors, ranging from 11% listing no school activities at Grove to 23% of the total number of seniors at Oneida. In books that encouraged students to list their favorites, general interests and activities, a special quote, or likes and dislikes, students without a significant listing of school activities appeared more equivalent to their peers. One senior girl at Oneida listed her school activities as “getting yelled at in homeroom, laughing at the Big Sexy, and yelling for (a female student) down the hall.” A senior boy from Grove, in a parody of typical football 9-12 or chorus 10-11 entries, listed “dislikes sports 9-12” as his school activity.

### **Teachers as Friends**

Students in these yearbook classes described their teachers as part of their most memorable high school experiences and spontaneously discussed them in interviews as they reflected on the importance of their friends. In contrast to the students in Chang’s (1992) study, and with my own findings among suburban students (Hoffman, 2002), these rural students perceived their teachers, as well as their peers, as friends. At Gillette, students reflected upon the impact of popular teachers no longer at the school, about the excitement of new teachers, and the positive influence of student teachers. A senior girl noted “the impacts [sic] that they’ve had on me as a person, not only in school, but out of school.” Students described special relationships they developed with certain teachers who “care about you as like a person, not just as a little student. They talk about personal things.” A senior boy at Valley mentioned a particular teacher, saying, “If it weren’t for Mr. \_\_\_\_, I probably wouldn’t be going to college.” He described how the teacher persuaded him to consider college, encouraging him to speak with recruiters and explaining to him over and over why college would be a good choice for him, even when his interest flagged. “He was like always there, just kind of a friend as well as a teacher.”

When I asked students if some teachers might be reluctant to invade their privacy, a senior girl said,

Kind of, but I'd rather have those that do invade my privacy- not really invade, just if they show concern or show that they're there, the support. They don't have to bug you about anything else, they can just state in the beginning (of class) that you can meet and then you'll come.

Yearbook students in this study echoed Chang's (1992) inclusion of making friends, keeping them, and negotiating relationships with peers and adults as critical components of an adolescent ethos. These students indicated that their friendships would be the most memorable part of the high school experience. Students worked at developing better relationships with their peers and described learning to get along with others as important to their personal growth. Working on the yearbook provided students with opportunities and practice in negotiating with their peers to accomplish their tasks without alienating other students. These students counted their teachers as friends, unlike the students in Chang's study or my own (Hoffman, 2002), who reserved that designation for their peers. Through their discussion of their relationships with peers and teachers, including their efforts to maintain positive relationships in conflicted situation, these students confirmed the importance they ascribed to getting along with everyone.

### **Growing Up and Being Independent Outside of School**

Chang (1992) called being independent one of the critical elements of an adolescent ethos, and described several markers of independence among the students in her study. Like Chang's students, the yearbook staffers in this study craved independence, and discussed several markers of their own, some unique to this population. In their interviews, yearbooks, and questionnaires, students noted the importance of turning sixteen, primarily because it allowed students to obtain their drivers' licenses. For example, in the Grove yearbook, students wrote, "With the coming of age experienced at turning sixteen, we felt a new sense of adulthood and independence. However, our main focus of concentration lay in procuring that long awaited and seemingly unobtainable driver's license." At Oneida, a student said in his interview, "That (driving) was a big deal for everyone." At Grove, a student noted that driving a car meant taking responsibility for its maintenance, and being responsible for chauffeuring oneself and younger siblings to their activities. An Oneida senior mentioned that having a curfew, relating to driving his parent's car and attending activities independently, made him feel more grown up. At Valley, students noted that turning eighteen was even better, because "you're legal." Students chimed in with the benefits during their interview, such as being able to drive after 11 PM, not permitted in Pennsylvania with the junior license obtained at sixteen, and the ability to buy "tobacco products," lottery tickets, and get credit cards. Differences in state driving guidelines between Chang's adolescents and these Pennsylvania students appeared to elevate the importance of the eighteenth birthday over merely turning sixteen.

Working was presented in yearbooks and discussed extensively by these students as a positive experience that made them feel grown up and responsible. "Getting a job"

was important in itself, working regularly was even better. As a student from Valley said, “You have your own money supply. And you have responsibility. You have to be there at a certain time. People are depending on you rather than the other way around.” Students indicated that having jobs forced them to learn to manage their time and gave them a feeling of pride in earning money for themselves. At Grove, a senior boy said, “You earned the money, not like if you get it from your parents. You stayed there and worked and earned the money.” Students described being more careful with the money they earned. At Oneida, a boy noted,

Yeah, I don't like it, but it makes me feel more grown up where I think about now if I buy this (tennis) racquet, that means I can't buy these DVDs. I have to actually think about well, if I can't get everything I wanted.

Another student interpreted his meaning, “More responsibility.” Unlike these students who indicated that parents easily afforded additional funds, a senior boy at Gillette described a more difficult situation.

I know my own personal experience. My parents got divorced when I was in the tenth grade and I had to work in order to help my mom out and so having to work and my studies and trying to keep everything in perspective was, really made me grow up pretty quick.

As an antidote to this somber story, which resulted in a few moments of awkward silence, another boy mentioned, “I think negotiating a contract with a major news organization, a major telecommunications organization, is one thing that made me feel kind of adult.” This student, along with friends from school, had created a video for a television show looking for entries that captured the theme, “I Must Be Crazy.” Negotiating the use of their video required several calls to California to hammer out an acceptable deal. At Grove, a senior noted that “worrying about college” made her feel grown up. Her parents had indicated that they had no money available to give her and “like you realize like how much, how expensive things are.” Consistent with Chang's (1992) findings, these students perceived turning sixteen as a marker of independence, primarily because they were then able to drive. Turning eighteen freed them from state-imposed driving curfews, and both ages were mentioned as important to feeling grown up by students in each focus group. Working at a part time job was also described as a significant marker of independence, consistent with Chang's findings and my own. Students mentioned earning money, making decisions, and handling responsibility as positive outcomes to employment.

### **Growing Up and Feeling Independent in School**

In talking with the yearbook students at Valley in May, I asked a senior girl:

Interviewer: Do you feel like you're an adult at this point?

Senior girl: I guess.

Interviewer: Well, what gives you the feeling that you are?

Senior girl: In school I don't. I don't know what you're asking me!

Students across the yearbook classes in this sample echoed this senior girl's reply about the lack of connection between feeling grown up and her school activities. Overall, students did not initially associate feelings of being more adult with anything that happened at school. At Oneida, when students were asked what made them feel more grown up at school, a senior girl replied, "How about the things that make us not feel grown up?" As one student positively described his four period day schedule that allowed him to concentrate in depth on fewer subjects, his cohorts chimed in, "We had a lot of stuff taken away!" A junior girl added, "Change the menu, give us bars and we're in jail!" During the season of the Columbine shootings, this school had been plagued with regular bomb threats forcing the evacuation of students into the "downtown" movie theatre within walking distance of the school, a unique possibility borne of their rural, small town setting and cooperative relationship with the local movie theatre owner. These students resented the new restrictions put into place since then, such as sign-out sheets in each classroom to go to the bathroom and locked exterior doors. A reference to memories of newly forbidden backpacks appeared in the Oneida book: "...scrubbing off scraps of KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken), \_\_\_\_\_ (a local pizzeria), and Taco Bell from the undercarriage of personal 'fire hazards' (a.k.a. backpacks)."

A new, more restrictive dress code had also been implemented at Oneida High. Students expressed their contempt for the "no hat, no bandanna rule" designed, students were told, to thwart gang identification, an assertion that appeared as implausible to me as it was to them, based upon my frequent visits to the school as a student teaching supervisor after the interview. Students described an intelligent, artistic senior girl from the year before who routinely wore a bandanna to keep her long hair out of the way and how she had sparred verbally in front of classmates with a substitute assistant principal about its significance. The man's lack of understanding of this girl and her sensitive, artistic nature along with the erroneous conclusions he drew about her based on her headgear infuriated them. Students laughingly described how she had taken several of the forbidden scarves and sewn them into a skirt, wearing it, legally, to school. Students were further traumatized when this well known, popular girl was killed in a car accident the day of graduation. Seniors wore bandannas around their arms in her memory on the night of their graduation ceremony at the local university; shortly after, a tree on the high school's front lawn was filled with bandannas of all sizes and colors as a tribute to her life and spirit. This year's yearbook at Oneida was dedicated to her memory, and a lead cast member in the fall musical, pictured in the yearbook, wore a bandanna as part of her costume to remember the girl who had loved and participated in theatre.

### **Living Through Bomb Threats and Renovations**

At Harvest, students talked about living through the turmoil of a major renovation to their high school building when asked about feeling more grown up. "We've had to have a lot of patience this last couple of years with all this construction, all the problems we had, and it's really been a pain." A senior boy noted, "There are so many things that affect small groups more than others, but this is something that affected all of us." In the

yearbook supplement accessible through the high school's web page, it was reported that both the valedictorian and the salutatorian "touched on the bomb threats and construction as the major incidents during their time at school." Students at this school also coped with an incident in December when, as reported in the yearbook, "a former student walked into the school, armed with knives, and wished to negotiate a recent expulsion." According to the local newspaper, this eighteen-year old set off a stick of dynamite outside a classroom and then went to talk with the assistant principal, armed with two knives. This same local paper reported the former student's death by a self-inflicted gunshot wound in the following August.

As a result of bomb threats, the easy entrance of an armed student, and construction problems, students were subjected to additional rules and restrictions designed to ensure their safety. Senior students resented the loss of the soda machine during construction, their ability to eat lunch outside the building, as well as the loss of convenience, and even existing parking spaces during the renovation. At one point, a field of mud was all that was available to them. Their principal's comment over the intercom, perhaps uttered in frustration with his inability to correct the problems, showed up in the students' yearbook, "Just deal with it!"

Chang's (1992) study did not specifically uncover markers of independence related to school, other than students' feelings of being grown up when they participated in fundraising activities. Students in this rural sample did not mention raising funds as important to them in any way, while students in a prior suburban group actually expressed a real aversion to fundraising and handling money (Hoffman, 2002). Chang's students did equate independence with being treated like adults, but her examples came from descriptions of interactions with parents rather than teachers or school administrators. In this sample, students described how perceived unreasonable rules and questionable explanations for new procedures reduced their sense of independence in school. As adults dealt with bomb scares, an armed student, and construction inconveniences, students documented these events and their repercussions in their yearbooks and described during interviews their resentment of the coping mechanisms adults designed. Perhaps by expressing so fervently their anger at the way adults handled these events, students were indirectly articulating their desire to be treated like grown ups, and its omission at the hand of adults in school.

### **Block Scheduling**

At Oneida, a student noted that "picking your own courses, selecting your own courses" made him feel grown up, especially when "having only four courses" encouraged him to be selective. A senior girl agreed with him, saying "Your schedule is sort of concentrated so you can focus on a couple of courses at once." These college-bound students were aware of the similarities between this block, alternate day schedule and the ones they would experience next year as college students.

### **University Connections**

In this college town, students agreed that close proximity to the university and its students made their own prospects for college more imaginable. Some of these students

developed relationships with out-of-town university students while working together in local eateries and other businesses, and attending their social events when supervision was lax.

We're like really surrounded by colleges, especially around like where we live in Pennsylvania, and like I guess that probably brings in another independent aspect of it because I know I have college friends and, I mean, you can't really avoid college kids at \_\_\_\_\_, so you kind of get the perception of yeah, we're in high school, but look in a couple of years we're going to be in college, so people are already thinking about where they're going to head, or...

This junior student, relocated from Florida, noted that friends without the university connection conveyed the attitude:

of like, yeah, we're going, but I won't think about it now. Here I think a lot of people are like, yeah, I'm going here or what are you going to do, what do you want to major in? People are more focused on the future.

A senior girl at Valley also connected an orientation to the future with being grown up, explaining what made her feel more adult. She said, "Looking at colleges. Like planning your future, instead of just next weekend."

### **Senior Graduation Project**

Several students described completion of their senior project, a state graduation requirement, as a school activity that made them feel grown up. At Grove, students begin planning their project early in their high school careers, working with a teacher mentor. Students described projects that often included a community service component, as well as the required written research paper and presentation to a panel of teachers. A senior boy noted at Grove described his senior project:

I coached a Little League team, which, like for me, I grew up playing little league, like in little league is often like looking up to the coaches, like I don't know, I used to dream of being a coach someday, too. And it made me feel really grown up, not just that, but a lot of times when I work with younger kids, I feel really, really old. Like, if I look at myself now, like in high school, I'm just ah, I'm a senior, but then, if I remember how I was when I was a freshman, I looked up at the seniors and I was, whoa, they're old, you know, like they're big or huge. And now I'm a senior I don't feel like I am. It's just, but yeah, graduation project, it really made me feel older. Plus, when you present, you present to a panel of teachers. So you're kind of teaching the teachers.

These students articulated four unique markers of independence not described by Chang (1992) or uncovered in a sample of suburban students (Hoffman, 2002). Attending

school with a block schedule, in which students take fewer classes for longer periods of time, allowed students to feel more grown up as they attended school organized the way they imagined college would be. At Oneida, students met their classes every other day, further approximating the university experience. Making connections with nearby university students, especially in part time work situations, allowed these high students to interact with slightly older near-peers and realize that their own graduation and college experience were imminent. This orientation to the future, whether it meant selecting and attending college or gaining employment after graduation, appeared as an additional marker of independence among these students. While Chang did not uncover this particular marker, she interpreted moving out of the family home as one, often a component of attending college. Among the suburban students I studied (Hoffman, 2002), students noted that getting mail from prospective colleges addressed personally to them made them feel more grown up, but this element was not mentioned among the rural students in this study. Finally, students described how their senior graduation projects, a Pennsylvania graduation requirement, allowed them to take responsibility for a community event or become an expert on a particular topic, acting as adults among younger children or in the company of their teachers.

### **The Yearbook Experience**

Students in this study described their involvement in the production of their yearbook as a source of feeling more grown up. Students from every school described the enormous sense of responsibility that came with producing their books. To make sure that deadlines were met and all spreads (two page features) were completed on time, each group of students described some combination of summer organizational meetings, extra time after school, missed classes during the school day, work at home and at school on snow days, and late night sessions, especially among section and general editors. During the interview at Valley, yearbook class members first learned of an “all-nighter” that the advisor and several section editors spent getting required pages ready by deadline. Students described how they used after school time and all of their negotiating skills to cajole local businesses into buying advertisements for their book to offset production costs. Then, they described their efforts to get these businesses to pay for the ads they ordered. At Grove, one co-editor was praised by other seniors for his ability to effectively match assignments with students’ skills: he was remembered fondly for the fake due dates he issued for different assignments to ensure that procrastinating fellow students would have their work in by the real and later deadlines. Describing a particular incident involving one student staffer, the editor sheepishly admitted, “And so, yeah, I’d lie to him. I’d say our deadline’s now!”

Students described their yearbook work as stressful but fun. “Yeah it was fun! I liked the pressure, actually.” They enjoyed having a hand in creating an important school memento, knowing that their own hard work would make an excellent, well-received book possible. A senior girl from Oneida in her second year on the yearbook staff said, “That’s why I came and then also last year when we handed out the yearbooks it was nice to say here, I made this and then that’s one of the reasons I came back.” A senior boy from Grove noted, “Yeah, I’m like going to like this yearbook more than any other yearbook because I put a lot of work into it. Like there’s twenty pages that, you know,

yeah (I did).” Just knowing that he was responsible for sections seemed to be enough. In contrast to the yearbooks produced at Harvest, Gillette, and Valley, students at Grove were not listed on yearbook pages as the authors of particular text.

Students also appreciated the autonomy they had in the production of their books. They noted the freedom they had to create pages. A senior boy at Harvest noted, “Designing the page was really up to us.” Another student described the balance of the advisor’s oversight with the freedom they had in producing their book,

There was like freedom but then there was like directives. Well, here’s what you have to do. Do it like this. When you have it done let’s look at it. So it’s kind of your own deal but yet there was still some control.

At Grove, students described a similar awareness of responsibility to their advisor while enjoying the freedom to work as they wished,

And no adults helped out. Any time like the adults just sort of stepped back, and say, do it. And that’s what made me feel like an adult because Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_ wasn’t gonna, she couldn’t do anything. She just sort of-it was up to us to do it.

Students uniformly spoke positively about their yearbook experiences, and suggested that participating in the process of creating their yearbooks made them feel more adult. They appreciated the autonomy of the yearbook process in which students managed their time and work output to meet deadlines. They enjoyed the responsibility associated with the production of their book, and demonstrated their commitment by working well beyond the allotted class or club time to complete their tasks. Students’ extra hours devoted to the yearbook production fed their appetite for being purposefully active and involved, and they practiced their people skills by soliciting ads, interviews, and negotiating among themselves and fellow students to accomplish their work. For these rural adolescents, working on the yearbook effectively tapped Chang’s (1992) three adolescent ethos elements. This finding is consistent with results gathered from suburban yearbook students.

### **High School as a Four-Year Rite of Passage**

Students did not refer to high school as a rite of passage experience in their interviews, as Burnett (1969) described, but expressed their awareness of high school as a four-year passage in their yearbooks. In the Oneida yearbook, a student wrote, “Who will forget the first intimidating days of freshman year, or the last crazy months of senioritis? With football games, SATs, Prom, and those annoying things called classes, high school is quite a mix of experiences.” Elaborating on the theme of high school as a journey, another student wrote:

From classroom gossip to lunchroom drama, the frozen images of high school will last a lifetime. From the first step into high school to the last



step out, students embark on a journey that fills the gaps from childhood to independence.

In the Gillette yearbook, a page was devoted to the current senior class's four year high school sequence laid out in blocks by year, listing class officers, homecoming representatives (the elected girls and their escorts), and the faculty advisors. Text in the freshman block, "entering the high school gave us a new identity and a new outlook on life," gave way to "maturity began to set in as we got used to our new surroundings" in the sophomore section. "Getting closer to graduation, we began planning for life after high school," began the junior block. And finally, in the senior block, "We'll remember... the changes we have been through to get as far as we have." In another portion of the yearbook, a junior girl wrote, "Personally, I'm kind of scared to be a senior. Everything so far has been set as to what you have to do. After next year, we're basically free to choose where our life will lead." Another junior wrote about the responsibility inherent in her fast approaching senior status. "Next year we'll have to be the leaders, and the people that will be looked up to for guidance." A junior also expressed an awareness of high school completion as the beginning of new challenges:

But being a senior is only one step in the whole big staircase of life. Next year will (be) the end to a beginning; we're completing a portion of our life that we can never go back and change...after we graduate...we'll be out on our own, away from our parents and what we grew up knowing.

Yearbook students at Grove also expressed an awareness of high school as a rite of passage that cannot be rewritten. "There are no words to adequately describe the finality and sense of loss that the completion of high school brings. We, the class of 200-, have reached that milestone from which there is no turning back." A senior yearbook writer encourages classmates to reflect upon their transition from "scared, impressionable freshmen" to "seasoned, experienced seniors." Freshmen must endure "the put-downs inherent [sic] with their freshman status" as they, along with other underclassmen, hope for "seniorhood" which is "looked upon with much anticipation and envy." In the Grove yearbook, each underclass section was introduced by a poem. *Upstream* by Carl Sandburg aptly captured the freshman situation, while *Precious Moments* also by Sandburg, introduced the sophomore section. The junior section began with Horace Gregory's, *This Is the Place to Wait*. In the Oneida yearbook, sophomores are described as coming "a step closer to being mighty seniors." Each of the five yearbooks created by students in this sample contained text that reflected these students' perception of high school as a four-year rite of passage experience as described by Burnett (1969).

## **Prom**

The Harvest yearbook website included graduation pictures taken after the hard copy of their book was completed and distributed. *Prom*, a junior-senior affair in each of these high schools, was covered in the spring supplement of the Grove yearbook, and on the Harvest yearbook website. The Oneida yearbook chronicled the events of the prom of the previous year. In these rural schools, *Prom* occurs in each school's lavishly decorated

gym or cafeteria, except at Grove, where the prom would be held for the first time in an area restaurant. Students expressed emotions from excitement and enthusiasm to bored indifference when asked about their upcoming proms. Reluctant students noted the expense, the uninspiring locations, and a lack of uniqueness associated with the event, as most students attend during both their junior and senior years. In suburban schools, juniors attend the junior prom, usually in the gym or cafeteria, and the senior prom is a lavish, truly once in a lifetime off-campus event, reserved just for seniors (and their dates). However, yearbook coverage described star-struck nights laden with special meaning for the prom goers. At Oneida, "Stars, sparkled and lit the way, as students danced the night away." The king and queen are pictured, along with a variety of candid shots of students at the prom, including a boy in a tuxedo made of duct tape. The yearbook caption read, "(Student) shows his style with his duck tape [sic] tux." Rather than resisting this conventional, adult-authorized arena for being grown up by refusing to attend, this student demonstrated his resistance through his style of dress (Best, 2000). The Grove spring supplement captured the essence of the prom's meaning for many students:

Waking up on that Saturday morning of April 21, you knew the day was anything but ordinary. However, you had no time to relax and daydream about your expectations for one of the biggest nights of your high school career. Hair, makeup and nail appointments are scattered throughout the day. Tuxedos are hanging patiently at the mall and (local store), waiting to be picked up by their teenage owners for the night. Flowers are being arranged into boutonnieres and bouquets by the dozens. Hundreds of teenagers are running errands around\_\_\_\_, frantically preparing for the most momentous high school event of the season: The Prom.

Yearbook students at Grove seemed more excited about their prom during their interviews than students in other schools, perhaps in anticipation of their first prom to be held off school grounds. Their yearbook supplement copy reflected their enthusiasm. "The 200\_ Prom, 'A Night Under the Stars,' will certainly go down as one of the most remarkable evenings in Grove High School history."

Valley's yearbook students made reference to the ritual senior trip, taken independently by students to a nearby seashore town after school ended. Burnett (1969) would call *Prom* a discrete rite of passage event embedded in the high school program. It is primarily an event reserved for juniors and seniors, and its rituals, including a specialized format, dress, and expectations are designed to be a life changing experience for each adolescent who attends. The senior trip is another rite of passage event that Burnett would say sets the adolescent apart from the daily routine and propels him into a unique situation apart from his family resulting in a change within the individual as a result of the experience

### **Rites of Intensification**

Students did not spontaneously discuss intensification experiences, defined by Burnett (1969) as ways to restore interactive balance to groups faced with a change in

conditions. However, there were ample references to such rites in each high school's yearbook.

## Homecoming

Each yearbook in this study devoted several pages to *Homecoming*, a week-long fall high school tradition that captures the attention, enthusiasm, and participation of students, teachers, graduates, and community members. Special events and activities are planned during school hours in the selected week, culminating in a pep rally on Friday afternoon, a community parade on Saturday morning, a football game on the home field with a rival school on Saturday afternoon, and a dance on Saturday night that is sometimes open to recent graduates as well as current students. Given the yearbook publication deadlines that precluded extensive coverage of spring events, or even the traditional Winter Dance or Ball, Homecoming was one rite of intensification that could be covered in detail.

Homecoming traditions appeared to be fairly uniform across the five high schools in this study, including spirit week activities within the schools; a pep rally; a football game; the selection of a king, queen, and court; a homecoming dance; and a parade that became a community as well as a school event. Spirit week in each school, designed by upper class students and sanctioned by school officials to rally students' school pride and interest in school activities, entailed dressing up to a proscribed theme each day of the week, selected by the student government members with approval from school administrators. At Oneida, students participated in "comfy-cozy day," college T-shirt day, hat day, and color day. At Valley, yearbook students demonstrated through their copy how they have internalized school rules and regulations. "*Hat Day* was a day set aside when students could wear hats even inside the building. It took some coaxing to allow it, but they finally got the OK." *Beach Day* was also approved, with some apparent caveats. "Although students weren't allowed to dress inappropriately, many still had fun." Long before the Saturday community parade, students in each grade level designed and constructed class floats according to a pre-selected overall theme. Elections were held to select the year's homecoming senior king and queen, along with members of their court representing all four grades. At Gillette, the student body elects only the queen and the female members of her court. Male students become part of the queen's court by being chosen by the selected girls as their escorts. According to the Gillette yearbook, in a school assembly that has supplanted the traditional Friday afternoon pep rally, musical talent segments created by students appear "for the Queen's approval [sic]." On the Friday of spirit week, students in the other four schools participated in an afternoon pep rally, where members of the football team were introduced and applauded, and the newly selected homecoming queen, king, and court members were introduced.

In keeping with Burnett's (1969) definition of a rite of intensification, individual homecoming events helped students to transition from one environment to another, as from school, to community, to a social event such as the homecoming dance, usually as a class. Planning for homecoming also solidified the status of the rising seniors early in the school year as they assumed major responsibility for the execution of its events, and incorporated the new freshmen into the high school as their members created floats within a designated theme, while electing members of the class to represent them on the

court of the senior kings and queens. Burnett noted that these rites of intensification provided students with practice in interacting with others in “ritualized, traditional patterns of action and interdependencies” (p. 7).

### Conclusions

There is a danger associated with bringing a conceptual framework to the analysis and interpretation of data. Absent the vigilance of the researcher, important pieces of contrary data can be ignored, missed, or shoehorned inappropriately into a preconceived design. Coming to focus group interviews with the frameworks of Chang (1992) and Burnett (1969) in my mind, I was constantly aware of my obligation to look for non-examples or lack of fit in these rural students’ comments and in the yearbooks they produced. After interviewing a group of suburban students who seemed to have read Chang and Burnett’s work and described it as their own, I was certain that this group of rural students would have something different to tell me. I was wrong.

In their interviews, questionnaires, and yearbooks, these rural yearbook students articulated an adherence to the adolescent ethos described by Chang (1992), valuing getting along with everyone, being involved, and being independent. These students, like those previously studied, valued their friends and acquaintances. Unlike the suburban students from a prior sample, or the adolescents described by Chang, these rural students included their teachers as friends. Consistent with Chang’s findings and my own (Hoffman, 2002), these rural students enjoyed busy, stressful lives filled with commitments to school activities primarily outside of their academic program, along with part time work and community responsibilities

Finally, consistent with previous findings, these students were actively involved in becoming independent people. They described how driving and working at part time jobs contributed to their feelings of independence, while articulating markers of independence different from prior adolescent groups. Attending a block-scheduled school, interacting with current university students, and developing an orientation toward the future are markers unique to this group of students. Perhaps the relative isolation of these rural students magnifies the influence of the local university student population.

In school, students described their yearbook participation as a maturing experience, steeped in adolescent ethos elements, in which they took control of their own product and workflow and negotiated with peers and adults to create a book of which they could be proud. These yearbook students demonstrated sensitivity to their classmates as they worked to produce inclusive books, attempting to provide some positive coverage of all students regardless of their involvement in school. Suburban yearbook students expressed almost identical ideas about the benefits of their yearbook involvement. Creating and implementing a community project to fulfill their state’s mandated senior project requirement helped students feel mature, especially if they had to describe and defend their project before a panel of teachers. Identifying the completion of a senior project as a way of demonstrating maturity is unique to this sample of students.

Students who experienced the stresses and inconveniences of a major construction project, along with the fears associated with bomb threats and other unrest, appeared to feel more grown up as a result of these experiences. They resented the unilateral steps that school administrators took, ostensibly to ensure their safety. School administrators

grappling with the development of system-wide or school-based safety and security plans, the logistics of conducting school amid lengthy construction projects, or other disruptions, might capitalize upon students' natural investment in these projects, along with their desire to be treated like adults, by including them in related decision-making and implementation processes.

Through their yearbooks, students demonstrated an awareness of high school as a four-year rite of passage experience, echoing Burnett's findings (1969). As Peshkin (1978) observed, these rural students knowingly participated in a four-year journey culminating in the senior year, in which "mystique blends with myth, supported by a bedrock of prerogatives granted and assumed" (p. 177). In addition, they described a variety of intensification experiences that were important to them, such as homecoming, and covered them thoroughly in their books.

Students did not spontaneously discuss their academic experiences during focus group interviews and there was no academic section in three of the five yearbooks analyzed (Table 3).

Table 3

*Comparisons by Percents of Yearbook Pages Devoted to Aspects of the High School Program*

	Suggested in <i>Yearbook Fundamentals</i>	Oneida	Valley	Harvest	Gillette	Grove
Pages		n= 166	n= 166	n= 146	n=155	n=157
<b>Academics</b>	<b>12-15</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>0</b>
Student Life	25	11	19	16	15	17
Clubs/ Organizations	12-15	22	16	12	21	14
Senior Portraits		25	14	24	16	22
Undergrad Portraits		11	17	14	15	14
Teachers/ Staff	25-30 (Total People)	4	5	4	4	5
Sports	15-18	27	16	21	16	24
Community	5	0	0	3 (Festival)	0	0

Other				6 (current events, travel, work)		4 (seniors' younger years)
Total		100	100	100	100	100

All values are expressed in percentages of total pages after ads, index, initial dedication page(s) (if present), and theme pages with only titles are subtracted.

Like Peshkin (1978), I noted that for students in this sample, “school work is so seldom mentioned that it appears as a truly minor event in their lives” (p. 151). These students’ failure to include academic sections for their yearbooks, or stated reluctance to be assigned coverage of the academic sections that did exist, mirrored suburban students’ lack of interest in their academic work. Consistent with students in my suburban sample, these students did not initiate conversation about their academic work in focus group interviews, and never spontaneously mentioned academics when talking about what was meaningful to them.

Students in this study were actively involved in the process of growing up. These adolescents demonstrated agency as they appropriated pieces of the high school program to accomplish their maturational goals while constructing “statements of their own sense of position and experience in society” (Marcus & Fischer, 1986, p.153). Excited and proud of the progress they had made, students noted that adults seldom seemed aware of their real accomplishments, as evidenced by this poignant comment made by the high achieving senior male yearbook editor at Grove:

I’m going to remember the fact that every time you tell parents how hard it is, they tell you it’ll get a lot harder. That’s what I’ll remember. You never feel a sense of like you’re doing something great because everyone always looks at you that’s older and goes, “You’re preparing for college,” or so it’s really neat because all the hard work we do is easy, compared to what you’re supposed to do later in life. And that’s how I’m going to remember it.

Restructuring the American high school looms large as the next great initiative of school reformers. Yearbook students in this study have reaffirmed Chang’s (1992) findings of the importance of an adolescent ethos, in which getting along with everyone, being involved, and being independent are critical components, and ones that are achieved with significant effort.

Unfortunately, students rarely seem to be able to fulfill their need for these elements through their academic work, looking to extracurricular activities and part time jobs to provide these critical life skills and experiences. In particular, students note that much about school actually diminishes their sense of feeling grown up, causing them to look elsewhere for opportunities to mature. Students in this study seemed eager to make connections to their communities and the people in them, designing senior projects and participating in school/community events that reflected an awareness of their communities as special places. In spite of all the societal shifts that have occurred since Burnett (1969) described high school as a four year rite of passage, it seems clear that the

same rites and rituals continue to be important to adolescents. What other mechanism is available to adolescents for making the transition from childhood to young adulthood? What other rites and rituals in our society can they share with their parents and other adults of their generation?

Future studies of urban yearbook students in more diverse environments would help to determine if Chang's (1992) ethos elements are more universally expressed, and whether the rites of passage and intensification described by Burnett (1969) are in evidence in urban schools. Study of additional suburban and rural schools would also help to determine if Chang's adolescent ethos elements are more universally held. How might the rural high school program be designed if adolescent ethos and passagework, along with the cultivation of "human excellence" described by Heath (1994), were the centerpieces of the new program, rather than the peripheral elements we adults often perceive them to be?

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## Appendix A

### Interview Guide

#### I. Introduction

- A. Expression of appreciation/ need for taping of the interview
- B. Statement of the purpose of the interview
- C. Guidelines to be followed during the interview

#### II. Warm-Up

- A. Distribution of index cards/ Students write most memorable high school experiences
- B. General demographic information/ yearbook information (title, theme)

#### III. Yearbook Content

- A. How staff made decisions about sections
- B. Page allotment to various sections/ rationale
- C. Second thoughts about
- D. Most memorable experiences (as listed on questionnaire)
- E. How experiences are incorporated into yearbook, if at all

#### IV. Passage to adulthood experiences

- A. Experiences during high school years that made students feel more adult
- B. How incorporated into yearbook, if at all
- C. Extracurricular activities/ effects on students
- D. Value of their yearbook staff experience

#### V. Wrap-Up

- A. Reconfirm major themes from interview
- B. Additional points from students' perspective

VI. Member Check

- A. Determine how individuals perceive issues if not already stated

VII. Closing Statements

- A. Reminder of anonymity of participants/ confidentiality of data
- B. Answer questions
- C. Express thanks

Adapted from: Overview of the Sections in the Moderator's Guide. In Vaughn, Schumm, and Sinagub (1996, p. 43).

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**Author Note**

Lynn M. Hoffman is a former middle and high school teacher and administrator. She is currently an Assistant Professor of Education at Bucknell University in Lewisburg, PA. Her primary research interests are in high school culture and adolescent rites of passage and their manifestation in yearbooks. Her teaching interests are in school administration, ESL instruction, and the preparation of novice teachers.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Lynn M. Hoffman Ed. D., Education Department, Bucknell University Lewisburg, PA 17837; Telephone: 570-577-3454; E-mail: lhoffman@bucknell.edu

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