

Educational Opportunity Through the Lens of American Culture

We see things not as they are, but as we are.

—The Talmud

American society generally treats educational opportunity as a serious matter, one deserving thoughtful consideration. This is not surprising. Politicians, sports heroes, Hollywood actors, and everyday, ordinary people commonly portray educational opportunity as a critical feature to American life: a fundamental democratic right, a means to personal fulfillment, the cornerstone to a healthy society.

In the late sixties and early seventies, school desegregation was a highly visible, public concern in Eastown,¹ the east coast city where I conducted this five-year ethnographic study. At the time, a sizable percentage of Eastown schools were out of compliance with federal desegregation regulations. To avoid having a federal court mandate a desegregation policy, the school system initiated its own school integration plan. The "Initial Proposal for City-Wide Integrated Education," drafted by a cross-section of the community, spoke directly to issues of educational opportunity:

The major problem confronting Eastown Schools is that of providing quality education for all public school children. Research shows and experience in urban schools supports the fact that quality education requires that children of the different races, nationalities, and economic and social backgrounds receive the same educational opportunities, regardless of accident of birth and location of home. (August 1967)

As concerns linked to school desegregation continued to surface, the State Board of Education issued a policy statement “reaffirming its position on equality of educational opportunity”:

[F]or all to achieve their maximum potential, both the State and local educational system must strive for equity in education. Only through such a commitment can equality of educational opportunity be achieved. The State Board of Education firmly believes that social or economic circumstances should never be allowed to interfere with an individual’s achieving his full potential through the educational process. These opportunities should be made available to all persons in our society according to their educational needs, and regardless of social or economic circumstances. (June 1970)

Three-and-a-half years after drawing up its initial plan for “city-wide integrated education,” the Eastown School System presented its “Plan for the Desegregation of Senior High Schools.” Once again, educational opportunity was a paramount concern:

[M]eaningful desegregation can occur only if all high schools in the system are raised to the highest standards so that the quality of education does not vary according to income or the social status of a given neighborhood . . . [W]ith thoughtful planning, bold policies, and vigorous actions, there are sound reasons to believe that the speed of segregation can be slowed, its severity reduced, and the effectiveness of school programs substantially improved. (February 1971)

Despite such public commitment to equality of educational opportunity, twenty-five years later (1996) Eastown schools remained effectively segregated and issues of race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status continued to pervade the city school system. This ethnography offers a way to understand why this has occurred—why certain systemic injustices have endured—and why these developments have been met with general indifference. Focusing on issues of equity and opportunity, the following chapters reveal how American conceptions of educational opportunity—what students, teachers, and administrators at Russell High, the site of this study, considered reasonable, appropriate, and normal—undermined the education students experienced. This is a cultural analysis that examines what people believed and valued, and how these beliefs and values influenced educational opportunity. To appreciate this analysis, it will help to understand how I employ the concept of culture.

UNDERSTANDING CULTURE

Throughout this ethnography educational opportunity is examined through the lens of American culture. Drawing on the ideas of Clifford Geertz, I define culture as “the framework of beliefs, expressive symbols, and values in terms of which individuals define their world, express their feelings, and make their judgments” (1973: 144–45). In this view, culture offers insight into how people interpret or “make sense” of what occurs in their lives and the lives of others; and these understandings shape subsequent actions and interpretations. Culture is therefore something of a paradox: People create culture, but their cultural values predispose them to perceive the world in particular ways.² Culture does not determine social action, nor is it predictive; but it defines the possible, the logical. It is this aspect of culture—its potential to delimit, but not determine, how we perceive the world, and thereby to influence how we act—that is central to this study (Geertz, 1973; Keesing, 1980).³

Although our cultural values are intertwined with many aspects of our lives, people are often unaware of their influence. As Margaret Mead is alleged to have said, “If humans were fish, the last thing they’d discover would be water”—the point being that our most intimate and fundamental values can be so taken-for-granted that they are least apparent, and consequently seldom questioned. Mead’s concern is critical because culture is never neutral: “[All] cultural models carry within them values and perspectives on people and on reality” (Gee, 1990: 90). As culture shapes our preferences, often in subtle ways, it promotes valuing one thing over another—light skin over dark, strict child-rearing practices over permissive ones, innovation over continuity (Spindler and Spindler, 1987). Further, because cultural values encourage people to interpret their worlds in particular ways, they can also “hide from us other ways of thinking . . . [such that certain cultural models] come to seem ‘inevitable,’ ‘natural,’ ‘normal,’ ‘practical,’ ‘common sense’” (Gee, 1990: 91–92). Accordingly, Ray McDermott and Hervé Varenne discussed the “disabling” potential of culture:

Culture is generally taken to be a positive term. . . . [B]ut every culture, we must acknowledge, also gives. . . a blind side, a deaf ear, a learning problem. . . . For every skill that people gain, there is another that is not developed; for every focus of attention, something is passed by; for every specialty, a corresponding lack. People use established cultural forms to define what they should work on, work for, in what way, and with what consequences. . . . Being in a culture

may be the only road to enhancement; it is also very dangerous.
(1995: 331-32)

While cultural values, by definition, represent what society has deemed valid and legitimate, these values can serve the interests of some but not others (Bellah, et al., 1985). At Russell High, what students, teachers, and administrators accepted as "natural . . . normal . . . common sense" often times disadvantaged students and undermined the professional efficacy of teachers and administrators. Frankly stated, watching the routine unfold could be disturbing. Underprivileged students regularly battled their teachers for the right not to learn. For many teachers, 'reform' meant devising more effective ways to punish students. During the five years of my research, I knew of no instance when an administrator visited a teacher's classroom. Such practices were commonplace, the expected and accepted.

To gain some sense for how and why this occurred, I analyze the "symbolic forms—words, images, institutions, behaviors" (Geertz, 1983: 58) through which people constructed and enacted their conceptions of educational opportunity. In this introductory chapter I first present a cross-section of American society—an educational historian, a movie star, a newspaper editor, a Russell High student, a motivational speaker, and the National Commission on Excellence in Education—enacting culture; that is, in various contexts, expressing their views on education and educational opportunity. Generalizing from their remarks, I outline four prominent ways in which Americans understand and represent educational opportunity, four cultural views of educational opportunity that are central to this ethnography.

PREVAILING AMERICAN CONCEPTIONS OF EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY

Because American conceptions of educational opportunity are informed by our cultural beliefs, there is an order to how we portray and enact educational opportunity. We value some forms of knowledge and not others. Some educational practices are considered normal, others atypical. To appreciate the patterning of American values and beliefs that are central to this analysis, I first present a sampling of Americans as they discuss their views on education and educational opportunity. I later frame their remarks in terms of American culture.

In *The Schools We Deserve*, Diane Ravitch, assistant secretary of education to the Bush administration, presented educational
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opportunity as key to forming a free, united, and democratic nation from a populace of diverse backgrounds and languages:

For most of our history, penniless immigrants have streamed through our port cities; their transition from poverty and illiteracy into the vast American middle class owes much to the public schools. . . . Sometimes crudely, but almost invariably with remarkable success, the public schools made them Americans and taught them the language and ideas with which they could later demand equality and justice. (1985: 8–9)

The recent Hollywood movie, *Dangerous Minds*, featured Michelle Pfeiffer, an ex-Marine turned high school English teacher, defending the integrity of educational opportunity in urban America. When students questioned whether educational opportunity was real for them, the star of this film was unequivocal about the opportunity available to students who made the right choice:

AFRICAN AMERICAN GIRL: Man, you don't understand nothin'. I mean, you're not bussed here.

MICHELLE PFEIFFER: Do you have a choice to get on that bus?

AFRICAN AMERICAN GIRL: Man, you come and live in my neighborhood for one week and then you tell me if you got a choice.

MICHELLE PFEIFFER: There are a lot of people in your neighborhood who chose not to get on that bus. What do they choose to do? They choose to go out and sell drugs. They choose to go out and kill people. They choose to do a lot of other things. But they choose not to get on that bus. The people who choose to get on that bus, which are you, are the people who are saying, "I will not carry myself down to die. When I go to my grave, my head will be high" [quoting Dylan Thomas]. THAT IS A CHOICE! THERE ARE NO VICTIMS IN THIS CLASSROOM!⁴

Like Michelle Pfeiffer's students, in December 1994, a sizable number of Hispanic students in the Denver public schools challenged the assumption of educational opportunity—staging a walkout to protest what they saw as a lack of attention to their needs and interests by city schools. In response, *The Rocky Mountain News* included the following remarks in a feature editorial:

I'd like to say a few words to the Hispanic students who staged a school walkout the other day. . . . I haven't forgotten that plenty of

people of my generation marched on school days during the civil rights era and the Vietnam years. But it's also time you began to draw distinctions: There's a big difference between marching to protest discriminatory laws or an unpopular war and marching to protest the fact that you're not learning enough. A government can pass better laws or bring its soldiers home. But a government can't learn for you.

Sure, it's helpful if you have a great curriculum and teachers who make every subject fascinating and parents who have read to you since you were in diapers and who keep plenty of books and newspapers around the house. But even if you have none of these advantages, you still need to learn. And it's still your responsibility—your job.

You hear all kinds of fancy talk about education these days but the simple truth is that building up your brain is just like building up your body. Neither your parents nor your gym teachers can do exercises to make you strong. No one can learn how to throw a basketball or swing a tennis racket or do a back flip for you. It's the same where your mind is concerned: No one can learn for you how to read well or write clearly or do arithmetic accurately; no one can understand for you how to analyze a problem or think logically. . . .

I'm now going to tell you something I wish someone had told me when I was your age: The most important thing you can learn is how to learn. That's the skill you absolutely must develop. . . . Now, much more than in the past, most people have to keep on learning throughout their lives and they have to do most of that learning on their own. Instead of ducking that reality or protesting it, why not grapple with it while you're still young? It won't get easier later. . . . (Rocky Mountain News, 1994:37A)

Educational opportunity was also a topic discussed by an ex-Russell High student and me. After completing my research at Russell I stayed in touch with a number of persons, one being a student: Elena Santa Rosa. Elena left Russell after her sophomore year to attend a highly respected private school on scholarship, and later went to an Ivy League university. She is presently enrolled in a prominent medical school. For a period, we corresponded about her experiences in Russell's "Essential School," a school-within-a-school program linked to the national school reform movement, the Coalition of Essential Schools. I initiated our interaction by sending her a copy of Chapter 2 from this book and asking for her reactions. (The chapter analyzes student resistance to reforms attempted in a history class.) In recalling how the Essential School "individualized"

its policies and practices for students, Elena expressed concern about the education *she did not receive*:

[Y]ou describe one objective of the Essential School as to “[allow] students to master course material at their own rate,” which was always my impression. However, you add “without penalizing them for the time this might require” (emphasis mine). My observation is one I have been making since my days at the Essential School: “their own rate” does NOT necessarily mean “slower.” Therefore, working at one’s own rate should not necessarily involve penalization of any kind, even in a “regular school” context. It is natural that you have stated this as such, especially because Essential School faculty and staff used similar terminology. But it was this attitude that drove me away from the school. While resources were available to those whose “own rate” was slower than most, those whose rates were faster were largely ignored. . . . (October 8, 1994)

Elena and I also discussed her sense for why students in the history class completed little work and why they seemed to care little about their education:

I wonder whether these students’ main obstacle was their confusion or unwillingness to exert themselves. I don’t think most of us were that confused. If [the teachers] had kept the syllabus intact, as well as their expectations, you would have seen students get their butts in gear. Granted, the novelty and difficulty [of the course] exacerbated the degree of laziness exhibited by most. . . . I think most of us just didn’t want to bother. . . . I say this having the benefit of hindsight and having gone through two years at [a private school] and three at [an Ivy League university]. That the syllabus may have looked somewhat insurmountable is an assessment with which I agree. But I also think that to simply accept a curriculum without exposing our teachers to a good measure of bitching and moaning would have been rare at Russell. It happened in every other class. . . . (October 8, 1994)

In most classes I took, things started very slowly in terms of student participation. This was especially true with student teachers, as students tested to see how little work they could get away with. . . . I and everyone else was trying to go through high school without doing anything. . . . I was doing nothing. I would get home in the afternoon and do absolutely nothing but watch TV and hang out with friends. We had plenty of time; we didn’t want to waste it doing homework.

. . . The fact was, we were lazy, we hated high school, class was boring. No one ever conveyed to me that it was too challenging. They might have said it was “too much work” but that was very different from “it’s too hard”; too much work just implies not enough time to watch TV or hang with friends. I don’t know. I just think when a high school kid says, “I don’t get it,” he might be saying it’s just too much trouble to try to get it. I say that totally from personal experience; to this day I do this. It’s not like we’re going to admit to being lazy. Picture two scenarios:

(1) “But [teacher], I tried to get started on the timeline but I don’t get it. What events do you want us to talk about? . . . I don’t know how to pick my own events or how they fall under one theme. Couldn’t you at least tell us what themes to work with? I’m so confused. . . .”

(2) “Actually, I didn’t have time to start the timeline last night because the MTV video awards were on and my two best friends came over. Maybe I could’ve gotten started if you told us what to do because I find spitting facts back at you a lot easier than actually analyzing them. That’s what I tell all the other teachers too.”

I think scenario 1 is the more likely. I’ve used it myself at Russell, at [my private school], and at [the Ivy League university]. (November 12, 1994)

The work I did was that required for [a course I took that year at a local university] and only if I had some time to kill and nothing better to do would I do Russell homework. I would much sooner just go to [a friend’s] and talk for seven hours every evening. In the two years she and I were best friends and next-door neighbors, I don’t remember studying with her even once!! You are probably thinking I am full of it, since I kept all my grades at the A level at Russell. This was not difficult. All it took was a little effort just before deadlines. I was still following the pattern of “getting by with doing as little work as possible.” But “as little work as possible” still meant good grades in my case. This sounds boastful and I do not mean it to be. I just put in whatever minimal effort was required to do well. I never did completely buy into the “slack-off” ideology and liked to see As on my transcript. This is obviously different from many of my classmates who probably didn’t give a rat’s ass as far as As were concerned. Maybe they thought As were harder to get than they were. Or maybe they actually found it difficult to get As. . . . (February 12, 1995)

In October 1989, Russell High enlisted a “motivational expert,” Anthony Carmello, to present a two-hour assembly entitled, “A

Lifestyle By Choice, Not Chance.” Issues linked to educational opportunity consistently surfaced in his talk, one being the opportunity students had to attend college:

HEY FOLKS, COME ON! You can go to college anywhere you choose. . . . You got to know how to play the game. You want to go to [an Ivy League university] and you're not accepted. What do you do about it? You go somewhere else, and you prove yourself. You ace your courses. . . . [If] you are an honors student. . . [y]ou will transfer into. . . almost any school you choose. . . . People tell me, “*Mr. Carmello, I can't go to college after high school, I've got to work*” [said in a pathetic voice]. . . . What do you do if you've got to work after Russell High and you want to go to college? YOU GO TO SCHOOL NIGHTS! THE [UNIVERSITY] EXTENSION! THE [COMMUNITY COLLEGE], TWO CAMPUSES! [THE STATE COLLEGE]! Do you know what it costs to go to [State College] nights? It costs about \$120 a credit hour. One of the finest universities in the area. . . . You go to college any way you choose.

Personal responsibility, and its link to opportunity, was another prominent theme in Carmello's presentation. To highlight this inter-relationship, Carmello involved a student from the audience:

I want you [directing himself to a student], to answer this question: There are many contributing factors to your life—your family, your friends, this school. Who else is responsible for what you become? Tell me honestly, don't pay me lip service! Speak your mind. [Student says something.] Did everyone hear what he said [pointing to the student]? [Audience: “NO!”] He said, “I AM RESPONSIBLE FOR MYSELF!” . . . THAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WINNERS AND LOSERS! WINNERS TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEIR OWN LIVES! THEY MAKE THINGS HAPPEN! Losers, you know what losers tell me? . . . “Me, I'm not responsible. It's his fault.” That's the “loser's lament.” DON'T TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOUR OWN LIFE! BLAME THE OTHER GUY. . . . WINNERS MAKE THINGS HAPPEN. LOSERS LET THINGS HAPPEN. You said it all [motioning toward the student]. You are responsible. NO ONE CAN HOLD YOU DOWN! . . . THE ONLY LIMITATIONS ARE THOSE THAT ARE SELF-IMPOSED!

Perhaps the most widely-cited and most influential document to emerge of late in the educational arena has been *A Nation at Risk*

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(1983), the “open letter to the American people” written by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. Educational opportunity was central to the Commission’s message. Quoting then President Ronald Reagan, the report acknowledged that “few areas of American life [are] as important to our society, to our people, and to our families as our schools and colleges” (1983: 2). It continued:

Our concern [with the quality of education in our country]. . . goes well beyond matters such as industry and commerce. It includes the intellectual, moral, and spiritual strengths of our people which knit together the very fabric of our society. . . . A high level of shared education is essential to a free, democratic society and to the fostering of a common culture, especially in a country that prides itself on pluralism and individual freedom. . . .

Part of what is at risk is the promise first made on this continent: All, regardless of race or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost. This promise means that all children by virtue of their own efforts, competently guided, can hope to attain the mature and informed judgment needed to secure gainful employment and to manage their own lives, thereby serving not only their own interests but also the progress of society itself. (1983: 3–4)

Citing a Gallup Poll (1982) of the “Public’s Attitudes Toward the Public Schools,” the authors continued to emphasize the importance and value of education:

People are steadfast in their belief that education is the major foundation for the future strength of this country. They even considered education more important than developing the best industrial system or the strongest military force, perhaps because they understood education as the cornerstone of both. . . . It is, therefore, essential—especially in a period of long-term decline in educational achievement—for government at all levels to affirm its responsibility for nurturing the nation’s intellectual capital. (1983: 12–14)

In its concluding remarks, the report focused on students. Speaking to the issue of their educational needs, the Commission observed:

We must emphasize that the variety of student aspirations, abilities, and preparation requires that appropriate content be available to satisfy diverse needs. Attention must be directed to both the nature of the content available and to the needs of particular learners. The

most gifted students. . . . may need a curriculum enriched and accelerated. . . . Similarly, educationally disadvantaged students may require special curriculum materials, smaller classes, or individual tutoring. . . . (1983: 20)

The report's closing statements also included advice for students:

You forfeit your chance for life at its fullest when you withhold your best effort in learning. When you give only the minimum to learning, you receive only the minimum in return. Even with your parents' best example and your teacher's best efforts, in the end it is *your* work that determines how much and how well you learn. When you work to your full capacity, you can hope to attain the knowledge and skills that will enable you to create your future and control your destiny. If you do not, you will have your future thrust upon you by others. (1983: 29)

In these various statements, Americans presented their views on education and educational opportunity. In particular, four beliefs about educational opportunity undergird the preceding discussions and are central to this overall study. *First and most fundamentally, Americans portray educational opportunity as a valuable social resource, vital to the well-being of both individuals and society.* As Diane Ravitch wrote, "public schools made [penniless immigrants] Americans and taught them the language and ideas with which they could later demand equality and justice." For motivational expert Anthony Carmello education was key to personal success. So, too, for Elena Santa Rosa, whose actions said a great deal about her values. When given the choice, she attended the best school possible, from high school through medical school. And the National Commission on Excellence in Education stated flatly that quality education is "essential to a free, democratic society. . . . [It] is the major foundation for the future strength of this country. . . . more important than developing the best industrial system or the strongest military force."

A second cultural belief that runs throughout this ethnography is that educational opportunity is essentially an individual matter, a view that, in practice, often intertwines some related manifestations of individualism (Fine and Rosenberg, 1983; MacLeod, 1987). For one, learning is understood as an individual experience. As *The Rocky Mountain News* observed: "[A] government can't learn for you. . . . [B]uilding up your brain is just like building up your body. Neither your parents nor your gym teachers can do exercises to make you

strong." Schools therefore need to serve the interests of individual students. Elena Santa Rosa criticized her school-within-a-school program because it did not serve her particular needs: "[W]hile resources were readily available to those whose 'own rate' was slower than most, those whose rates were faster were largely ignored." Making a comparable point, *A Nation at Risk* noted, "the variety of student aspirations, abilities, and preparation requires that appropriate content be available to satisfy diverse needs." And American schools consistently honor this sense of individualism. Since all students are individuals with particular needs and interests, schools have developed a "shopping mall" of offerings (Powell, et al., 1985) to meet their needs and interests. So all students can explore these opportunities, they are scheduled individually. Despite the increasing popularity of cooperative learning, students work and are graded primarily as individuals (Kohn, 1992).

Moreover, realizing educational opportunity is closely linked to individual effort. Americans typically explain educational success and failure in terms of individual attributes, a reflection of personal strengths or shortcomings, not broader social factors—the assumption being that each person "controls his [sic] own destiny, and. . . does not need help from others" (Hsu, 1983: 4). As Lamar Alexander, Secretary of Education under President Bush, explained, "This is the country that grew up reading *The Little Engine that Could*" (Klein, 1991: 5), the children's story about a train that overcame great obstacles through dogged perseverance. This conviction, commonly termed "rugged individualism," is embodied in the lives of Americans as diverse as Abraham Lincoln and Rocky Balboa, Harriet Tubman and Madonna. Michelle Pfeiffer drew on this assumption when she told students, "THERE ARE NO VICTIMS IN THIS CLASSROOM!"—implying that students would be disadvantaged only if they allowed this to happen. In a related vein, Elena Santa Rosa saw failure as reflecting students' "unwillingness to exert themselves." Anthony Carmello put it succinctly, "I AM RESPONSIBLE FOR MYSELF!" The closing remarks from *A Nation at Risk* epitomized this point of view. Despite its rhetoric of institutional and systemic failings, the report concluded with a note to students: "[I]n the end it is *your* work that determines how much and how well you learn" (emphasis in original). Thus, in terms of education's most basic features—what is studied, how it is studied, how it is evaluated, who succeeds, and why—Americans view formal schooling as primarily an individual experience.

The third perspective on educational opportunity that informs this study concerns the taken-for-granted nature of this democratic right.

In American society, few question whether public schools offer educational opportunity; they assume they do. Although the two previous beliefs represent historically enduring views of educational opportunity, this particular belief points to a shift in American values. During the post-*Brown* era, the American government, at least, felt that those who had been disadvantaged for generations through segregated schooling, inequitable funding, and being defined as socially and academically inferior needed assistance to establish a foothold in American society. Yet, increasingly, Americans no longer question the reality of educational opportunity. It exists. There is no need for affirmative action. Quotas are now defined as discriminatory, rather than ameliorative. The playing field is assumed to have been leveled, at least enough so that students of color and urban students warrant less concern.

As Jeannie Oakes found, “[even though] schools fail to serve all students equally well . . . [They] are seen as essentially neutral . . . as color-blind and affluence-blind. . . . All children are seen as entrants in an equal, fair, and neutral competition” (Oakes, 1986: 63). According to the 22nd Annual [1990] Gallup Poll of the “Public’s Attitudes Toward the Public Schools,” many Americans shared this view. To the question, “In your opinion, do black children and other minorities in this community have the same educational opportunities as white children?” 79 percent of the total sample answered, “Yes”; 15 percent said, “No” (Elam, 1990).⁵

That educational opportunity is not at issue is also implicit in the historical record. While myriad policy changes have followed *A Nation at Risk* and there is a clear lack of support for the status quo, most schools remain strikingly uniform institutions (Newmann and Clune, 1992). There are 180 days in a school year. Each day is divided into six, seven, or eight periods. The typical period lasts about fifty minutes. The school itself remains a hierarchical bureaucracy made up of independent, discipline-specific departments. The dominant pedagogy continues to be didactic instruction. If society felt something were drastically wrong with the American high school, its institutional structure and practices would not have remained so unchanged for the past 100 years.

In line with this understanding of educational opportunity as taken-for-granted, Diane Ravitch wrote, “Sometimes crudely, but almost invariably with remarkable success, the public schools made [penniless immigrants] Americans and taught them the language and ideas with which they could later demand equality and justice.” Anthony Carmello told his audience, “HEY FOLKS, COME ON! You can go to college anywhere you choose.” And Michelle Pfeiffer

was adamant in this regard: "The people who choose to get on that bus, which are you, are the people who are saying, 'I will not carry myself down to die. When I go to my grave, my head will be high' [quoting Dylan Thomas]. THAT IS A CHOICE!" In other words, opportunity exists.

The final view of educational opportunity that under girds this cultural analysis is that what constitutes educational opportunity should be defined for, not by, students. Consequently, the intended beneficiaries of public education have little say in formally defining educational opportunity for themselves (Fine, 1991; Sarason, 1990, 1996). As not-yet-adults, schools treat students in ways "that largely deny their representational status as active citizens" (Giroux, 1996: 31), entrusting them with little power or responsibility. In this sense, Diane Ravitch's use of language is subtly revealing. She wrote, "the public schools made them [immigrants] Americans." That is, students did not do this to themselves; the schools did it to them. Throughout *Dangerous Minds*, Michelle Pfeiffer's actions embodied a similar assumption; she stood in the front of the class, dominating and directing all classroom talk. Likewise, Anthony Carmello mainly "talked at" students. The National Commission on Excellence in Education made its own symbolic statement: the Commission included no student members, nor were any students quoted in *A Nation at Risk*.

Studies of American schools and classrooms fully accord with this view, portraying students as subordinate, passive recipients of information, not as active and responsible participants in a school community (Everhart, 1983; Powell, et al., 1985). Most school reform efforts have adopted the same attitude. As Michael Fullan and Susan Stiegelbauer maintained, "When adults do think of students . . . they rarely think of [them] as participants in a process of change and organizational life. . . . [Rather,] they think of them as the potential beneficiaries of change" (1991: 170; quoted in Corbett and Wilson, 1995: 13).⁶ In terms of formal power and responsibility, students are institutional nonentities.

But there is an ironic and counterproductive sense of empowerment to the student's predominantly passive role. Although having little formal power, because of their numbers, students simply overwhelm many schools and promote values that serve their perceived interests. In essence, they collectively determine much of what goes on. As Elena Santa Rosa said, "to simply accept a curriculum without exposing our teachers to a good measure of bitching and moaning would have been rare at Russell. It happened in every other class." As studies of U.S. schools and communities throughout the twentieth century reveal, students view school as a

social institution (as do many adults, including parents); they focus on the extracurricular, not academic; and they consistently seek to limit responsibility so they can realize their social interests (Henry, 1963; Holland and Eisenhart, 1990; Hollingshead, 1949; Lynd and Lynd, 1929; Steinberg, et al., 1996). Theodore Sizer put it bluntly, "School's . . . attraction for many kids is simple: it is where their friends are" (1992: 126).

The previous discussion outlined four prominent ways in which educational opportunity is understood in contemporary America. It is a critical asset and resource, a key to personal fulfillment and society's well-being. It is fundamentally an individual phenomenon; which, in turn, means that schools must meet the varied needs of diverse students, and that educational success, in great part, will reflect individual effort. Further, educational opportunity is commonly unquestioned and taken-for-granted by Americans. And finally, educational opportunity is something defined for, not by, students. Certainly, these particular perspectives are not the only way to interpret the words and actions of those previously cited. For this study, however, what is critical is that these points of view dominate. Not only did these conceptions of educational opportunity inform people's rhetoric, they shaped the practices, policies, and actions of school personnel and students, often to the detriment of the educational process.

In constructing a cultural analysis of Russell High this ethnography does not attempt an in-depth examination of race/ethnicity or socioeconomic status and educational opportunity, common foci of research on urban schooling.⁷ This is not to deny the relationship between these factors and educational opportunity. It is to explore a related issue, the influence of American culture on urban schooling. That is, Russell High, as an institution, embodied a commitment to prevailing conceptions of educational opportunity; the school promoted these values as well. Assumptions derived from these beliefs surfaced in assemblies and media accounts of the school. When these taken-for-granted views were challenged in the late sixties by African American students, the institution was thrown into turmoil. Ultimately, Russell students experienced educational opportunity in similar ways, for similar reasons, and with many similar outcomes. Issues of race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status are explored as they intersect with these manifestations of culture.

Initially, my research at Russell High focused on a reform initiative at the school (Muncey and McQuillan, 1996). Over time it

became apparent that this urban school played a role in reproducing the conditions and beliefs that allowed existing social and economic inequities in Easttown to endure. In making this critique, I therefore seek to blend theory and practice: to examine the taken-for-granted at Russell High from a cultural point of view; and then to consider the implications of such understanding for promoting educational opportunity more equitably (Anderson, 1989; Brodkey, 1987; Lather, 1986; Simon and Dippo, 1986). As Seymour Sarason has maintained for some time, those seeking to improve schools must first thoroughly understand the "assumptions and conceptions that are so over learned that one no longer questions or thinks about them . . ." (1971: 193). In line with Sarason's concern, this study reveals how prevailing American conceptions of educational opportunity permeated the school system and undermined students' education.

Given the critical nature of this ethnography, I stress an additional point: What I describe is not a malicious conspiracy. Far from it. It is normal, accepted behavior. It is the interaction of a value system, an institution, and ordinary people, often very well-intentioned, who have come to understand their world in specific ways—and therefore not to understand it in other ways—doing what they believe they should.

A CULTURAL BLIND SPOT

Understanding how Americans view educational opportunity is essential because it also exposes how we do not view educational opportunity. As readers are reminded throughout this work, culture can hide as well as highlight. Because we emphasize the individual, we often overlook the collective.⁸ Because educational opportunity is so taken-for-granted, we seldom look at it critically. Because students are institutional nonentities, their views inform very little of what occurs in schools. As a consequence, our understandings of educational opportunity are incomplete and distorted. Urban dropout rates, suspension rates, and failure rates can soar while the country invests proportionately less in its most needy schools (Alexander and Salmon, 1995; Kozol, 1991). The American population can grow increasingly polarized, in terms of income and race/ethnicity, while schools not only promote these undemocratic outcomes but also the attitudes that allow society to accept these divisions as equitable.⁹

Moreover, issues of educational opportunity in urban America are intensifying. By the year 2000, over one-third of all school children will be from lower-income groups or will be ethnic, racial, or linguistic

minorities—the vast majority segregated in urban neighborhoods.¹⁰ Schools will be one of the few organizations with a chance to address their needs. If American society continues to be blinded by our own cultural predispositions, this country will continue to treat a dysfunctional system and widespread failure as problems only of individuals within the system, not failings of the system itself. And opportunity will remain little more than an illusion in too many urban schools.

METHODOLOGY

At its heart, this study is an ethnography, a research methodology that is well-suited for understanding educational opportunity. For instance, ethnographic research is long-term in nature. This study encompassed five school years, August 1986 through June 1991.¹¹ Consequently, I followed two classes of students ('90 and '91) from their first day of school to graduation. I watched an effort at school reform go from inception through development to its demise. I observed courses from September to June. I saw educational opportunity play out over time and gained an appreciation for the interrelationships among the multiple and interrelated factors that influenced students' education. In addition, this extended research design allowed me to shift my research foci as new developments emerged at the school.

A second feature of ethnographic research, its holistic orientation, was also useful for examining educational opportunity. What happens in a classroom on any particular day, for example, is likely shaped by the interaction of many factors—a teacher's view of her/his profession, the students' collective understanding of what "real school" should be, the structure of the school system, and the material being taught. Ethnographic research is designed to consider various features of any social system as they interact and influence one another, thereby more closely paralleling real life.

Finally, ethnographies attend to issues of culture, what people believe and how they interpret what they experience. In this study, it was critical to explore conceptions of educational opportunity because doing so revealed why the status quo at Russell High proved so enduring despite clearly unequal educational outcomes among Eastown students.¹²

At the school itself, I relied on three primary sources of data: formal and informal interviews, ethnographic observations, and archival research (e.g., school documents and records). I conducted formal interviews with standardized protocols on a regular basis with

Russell students, faculty, and administration. In total, I interviewed ninety-seven students (approximately one-quarter were interviewed more than once), fifty-one of sixty-six full-time teaching staff (roughly one-third were interviewed more than once), and the entire school administration—including the principal, two assistant principals, director of studies, department chairs, and guidance counselors. The principal and two assistant principals were interviewed multiple times. I also conducted informal interviews in various contexts—with a teacher over coffee, walking to class with a student, or while the principal monitored the cafeteria.

The ethnographic observations I conducted fall into four categories: (1) classroom observations; (2) school meetings (including entire school faculty meetings, department meetings, assemblies, school reform-related meetings, and meetings with parent groups); (3) day-in-the-life studies (when I spent an entire day with a particular student, teacher, or administrator); and (4) informal observations (e.g., eating lunch in the cafeteria or teachers' room, attending extracurricular activities, or walking the hallways). Archival documents available on Russell High included a faculty newsletter, the school newspaper, reports on the school authored by faculty and outside researchers, copies of student work, and school memos that detailed dropout and attendance rates and the number of course failures, for example. I used newspaper articles and a television news special to analyze how local media portrayed educational opportunity. To create a socioeconomic and demographic picture of Easttown, I drew on U.S. census data. Although this work represents a collaborative effort, my perspective dominates. I decided what the final product would be. Nonetheless, those who were directly involved with this research had an opportunity to respond to what I wrote. (The Appendix, *Methodological Reflections*, offers a more detailed discussion of research methods.)

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The following chapters are divided into four sections. The first, *Educational Opportunity in Practice*, examines the day-to-day life of the school. To challenge the prevailing characterization of educational opportunity as a largely individual phenomenon, Chapter 2 emphasizes the collective point of view to consider how the nature of the Russell student population influenced classroom learning—specifically, how student resistance to a curriculum that differed markedly from most Russell classes led a team of teachers to modify their goals, pedagogy, and curriculum in favor of less demanding and

more rote conceptions of schoolwork. Once again challenging individualist assumptions about educational opportunity, Chapter 3 draws on the notions of cultural and social capital to reveal how the collective nature of the student population reverberated throughout the school, influencing the work of the administration, guidance counselors, and teachers—and ultimately students' education. While most Americans would say they value a high school education, Chapter 4 details a day-in-the-life of a lower-track Russell High senior that throws into question the basis to this popular belief.

The second section, *The Resilience of the Status Quo*, describes how prevailing conceptions of educational opportunity endured. Chapter 5 examines the efforts of Russell faculty to reassess educational practice, efforts which, over a three-year period, consistently aimed to improve discipline and order but never to change the nature of the education students received. Chapter 6 offers an historical perspective on the school, describing how Russell High evolved from being a respected school to being seen as a catch-all for the city's least able students—in particular, how a “riot”¹³ in 1969 signaled the school's ultimate loss of respectability.

The third section, *Promoting Faith in Educational Opportunity*, offers insight into why educational opportunity was often unquestioned at Russell High and in Eastown. Chapter 7 presents an assembly in which the speaker assured students that educational opportunity was real and that success was largely a matter of individual effort. To understand how local news media conveyed similar messages, the chapter also examines a television special on Russell High. To situate this research in a community context, Chapter 8 looks at how during the eighties Eastown grew increasingly divided, in terms of race/ethnicity, income, education, and neighborhood—divisions which paralleled developments throughout U.S. cities. Further, these educational, socioeconomic, and neighborhood divisions are explored as a way to understand why educational opportunity remained largely unproblematic.

The concluding section and chapter, *So What?*, draws on findings from the previous chapters and considers their implications for educational practice. The ensuing proposals for urban school reform all derive from a single, overarching assumption: to be successful reform must be undertaken systematically. Moreover, to be systematic reform initiatives must attend to issues of culture, what people value and believe. In this regard I emphasize two areas for reform that are simple in focus but have wide-ranging implications: providing teachers with more time to do their work and giving students greater power and responsibility.