# 5

# EQUALITY AND EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

FREE SCHOOL TEACHERS reject authority because they believe that the traditional teacher-student relationship, a relationship of dominance and subordination, prevents effective teaching and learning. Their goal is to make students' educational experiences more intense, more penetrating, and more relevant to students' sense of self. In part, these alternative teaching techniques do achieve their purposes, creating an education in which students can become deeply engaged. But this voluntary renunciation of authority also reacts back on the educators, shaping what they see as the legitimate goals and content of education—shaping, in short, their definition of what students are and what they should learn in school. Education without authority implies a new definition of the curriculum and requires a new pedagogy.

Teachers who have rejected authority may replace it with personal influence (chapter 3) or collective incentives (chapter 4). But to create an intense educational experience for students, they must also redefine the goals of education to enhance rather than diminish student self-esteem. There is, however, a danger in such a strategy: teachers may begin to undermine the legitimacy of those very educational goals for the sake of which they originally relinquished authority.

Definition of a curriculum, of what it is students need to know, is basic to the problem of authority in schools. In traditional schools the teachers' superior mastery of the curriculum justifies the subordination of students to them. As Erving Goffman (1961a:84) notes, institutions that control an unwilling client group must define their clients as defective to justify authority over them: "Entrance is *prima facie* evidence that one must be the kind of person the institution was set up to handle. A man in a political prison must be traitorous; a man in a prison must be a law-breaker; a man





in a mental hospital must be sick, why else would he be there?" And if students are in school, they must be ignorant of at least some things they ought to know.

Free school proponents argue that defining students as inferiors interferes with education, and there is some evidence that this analysis is correct. Arthur Stinchcombe (1964:181) explains high school rebellion in large part on the basis of the attack on student self-esteem required to legitimate teacher authority: "The doctrine that teachers are superior to students, and that students ought to imitate them in certain respects (especially in knowledge and competence), is necessary for systematic education. It is the justification for the teacher telling the student what to study . . . [T]he doctrine of the inferiority of students is closely intertwined with the doctrine of the inferiority of the young." Stinchcombe found that both the incidence and pattern of student rebellion could be explained by the ways the high school threatened students' self-respect. Lower-class students rebelled because they saw that success in school could not protect them against failure in the job market (pp. 49-60); boys rebelled when they experienced academic failure, while rebellion among girls was a response to failure to achieve popularity and informal status at school, a more important source of self-esteem for girls (pp. 60-71); and all students were more likely to be rebellious if they rejected the "doctrine of the inferiority of the young," believing, for example, that young people should be able to smoke, marry, and enjoy other adult rights (pp. 103-122).

Even for moderately successful students, their inferior position in the school's status system combined with continual exposure to judgment and possible failure creates resistance to the school and its values. Willard Waller (1932:161) noted "the human tendency to grow away from relationships in which one does not obtain favorable recognition." For students to grow toward the school, it must affirm their worth. Low status with peers or lack of approval from teachers can discourage students from maximum use of their academic abilities (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968; Glidewell et al., 1969:244; Rist, 1973). A status system in which students are inferiors prompts them to insulate themselves from potential failure by limiting how much they care about school and how much they identify with their school performances. This analysis underlies the educational strategy of alternative schools. To enhance the depth of students' learning experiences, alternative schools abandon the doctrine of adolescent inferiority, sacrificing the presumption that schools exist to teach the things teachers know and students do not. Instead, these schools invent a new status system in which the traits students already possess are valued and rewarded.

### The New Curriculum

Both Group High and Ethnic High developed alternative status systems in terms of which students became equals—and sometimes even superiors—

rather than inferiors. Ethnic High institutionalized student self-confidence in a curriculum built around ethnic pride, while Group High affirmed students' worth by endorsing self-expression, self-discovery, and personal autonomy as valued *educational* goals. In both schools students found themselves—their own backgrounds, identities, and values—at the core of the curriculum.

Believing that their students resisted academic work largely from fear of failure, Ethnic High's teachers offered students respect, trying to build their self-confidence before trying to teach them. One teacher, complaining about the school district's formal testing program, said, "They [the students] think it's going to be different here, and then they're faced with the same terrible thing again, being judged better or worse. Last year it took us a month to get some of the kids back into school after those terrible tests." For many Ethnic High students, schooling had in the past meant failure and humiliation, so they had learned to resist or subvert traditional academic demands; they were skilled at turning a school's authority into a joke, maintaining their dignity by outsmarting their frustrated teachers. For the black and Chicano students at Ethnic High, there was an additional reason to resist the traditional school curriculum: its alien cultural content. George Dennison (1969) argues that students will learn what is relevant to their own lives. For pupils like José, Dennison's favorite problem pupil, even learning to read is an ordeal of cultural alienation and personal humiliation:

> A white middle-class boy might say, with regard to printed words, "This is talk, like all talk. The words are yours and mine. To understand them is to possess them. To possess them is to use them. To use them is to belong ever more deeply to the life of our country and the world." José, staring at the printed page, his forehead lumpy, his lip thrust out resentfully—anger, neurotic stupidity, and shame written all over him—seemed to be saying, "This belongs to the Americans, who kick me around and don't want me getting deeper into their lives. Why should I let them see me fail? I'll quit at the very beginning." (pp. 167-168)

By making ethnicity the central value in the curriculum, Ethnic High sought to make students feel that the curriculum belonged to them.

Ethnic High's students were also unlikely to accept the doctrine of the inferiority of the young. Those who already shouldered burdens of adult life would have found it incongruous to be treated as children. Some students, for example, already had children of their own (approximately one-fourth of Ethnic High's students were themselves parents). Many students lived on their own, and many more were at least partially self-supporting. Ethnic High was a school in which they were accorded the dignity and respect due adults.

Ethnic High's teachers modified the curriculum not only to overcome student resistance but also to teach students different values than the ones espoused by the traditional curriculum. The teachers' vision of education



was in part political: they hoped to give students the confidence to criticize and change the society around them. This viewpoint provided a leitmotif for the curriculum, and it also underlay the character ideal Ethnic High's pedagogy encouraged. In this sense, the teachers wanted to heighten students' self-respect for its own sake, to instill a kind of healthy aggression. Mastery of academic skills would be only one aspect of a confident willingness to demand greater political and economic participation in the larger society.

Ethnic High's curriculum was designed, first, to teach students pride in themselves and their ethnic heritage. In addition, the school's multicultural ideology encouraged tolerance, understanding, and "mutual affirmation" among students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. As a multiethnic community, Ethnic High saw itself as superior to the larger racist society. In courses on black history and culture, Chicano politics, and African dance, students were to learn to appreciate their own backgrounds while they came to respect the culture of others. Even white students, who could not derive prestige directly from their ethnic backgrounds, were given open approbation for their willingness to transcend the racism of their society by voluntarily joining a multiethnic school. In a gesture of equality, a part of the curriculum was set aside for white students to explore and affirm the best ideals of their own culture.

The school's emphasis on ethnic identity was not simply window-dressing: it was fundamental to Ethnic High's mission. Most courses dealt with themes of ethnic history, language, culture, or politics. In class discussions, as in poetry-writing, music, or dance classes, ethnic themes predominated. Students and teachers repeatedly condemned inequality and racial injustice in the larger society, drawing a sense of proud solidarity from their critical stance. Students were encouraged to talk about their own values and experiences—as if to say that what students had already accomplished, just by being themselves, could provide the content of the curriculum.

But teachers at Ethnic High also recognized that students could profit from learning academic skills, and the students themselves felt that the school, if it were really a school, ought to teach at least some traditional subjects. Geometry, algebra, and other academic skills classes had substantial enrollments each semester. Even these courses, however, were interlaced with multicultural material and, since they were premised on the notion that teaching must start by building student self-confidence, the material was made as nonthreatening and failureproof as possible. Traditional academic subjects were invoked symbolically, but teaching still revolved around affirming students' own accomplishments, abilities, and values.

Students at Group High had fewer reasons to be anxious about academic failure. Largely white children of well-educated middle- and upper-middle-class parents, they were arrogant or indifferent toward, rather than fearful

of, traditional school work. Yet Group High, like Ethnic High, altered the educational status system, creating a curriculum that flattered students. The traditional curriculum did not threaten Group High students, but it also did not touch them very deeply: it was not "relevant." The ideal of academic excellence was not exciting enough to inspire or engage these privileged, countercultural students.

Group High's teachers wanted to break through the kind of student resistance that traditional schools take for granted. They had an ambitious view of education as significant personal transformation. To open students to deeper learning experiences, they created a curriculum to enhance rather than reduce students' identification with their school experiences. Though students were already self-confident, the teachers sought to convince them that the school was a place in which they could afford to invest themselves, a place where their identities would be affirmed. The way to foster this belief was to make students' own lives and experiences the center of the curriculum, with the clear implication that there could be no more interesting, worthwhile object of study.

Students at Group High, like those at Ethnic High, were encouraged to see new value in themselves and their own experiences. The source of this pride, however, was not ethnicity but their identity as young, hip members of the counterculture. Simply being in the school proved that one was superior, and Group High students looked down on the "common school" as boring, conformist, and repressive. Their school, in contrast, was part of an exciting social experiment which might ultimately transform society; the students' own lives represented the flowering of significant new values. Even students' "negative" traits could be given positive meaning in the free school context. As Joel Meister (1972) reports, at Atlantis, an alternative high school, even students who were bored, apathetic, or confused could be seen as struggling with the legacy of a sick society. Students were told "that they were special—and especially good—because they were young and rebellious and because they were at Atlantis, on the leading edge of change" (p. 110).

Students at Group High were praised and rewarded not only for possessing certain social values but also for being uniquely themselves. Whether the topic of a course was psychology, creative writing, art, or women's studies, the major focus was upon students' exploration of their own experiences. Although there were occasional classes in traditional subjects such as history or English (and even American history quickly became the study of *recent* American history), the preferred method of instruction was always a group discussion in which students shared their own ideas and opinions. Self-expression was so valued that no definition of facts or skills students ought to know was allowed to get in the way. Students sometimes learned skills (such as photography, judo, or Israeli dancing) and ideas (about subjects such as gestalt psychology or ecology), and sometimes an individual student would become passionately involved in learning about some specialized topic. But all these forms of learning were more or less incidental byproducts of the search for self-expression and personal identity.



Group High teachers cherished students as they were but also sought to change them—to make them *more* themselves. Autonomy and independence, a combination of self-confidence and inner direction, was the Group High ideal. And not all Group High's students came equipped with these traits; they had to learn the Group High style. Teachers spoke specifically of teaching students to do without those patterns of obedience and dependence they had learned in their earlier schooling. Ricardo said of his philosophy of teaching, "I'm trying to free kids to be self-governed and independent. Parents and administrators forget that self-actualization can't be had without giving kids real freedom . . . I consider my greatest successes kids who just took off for Europe after they graduated. You wouldn't have found the traditional type of student doing that unless they had a big bankroll behind them from their parents, and these kids didn't." But teaching independence and autonomy is not like teaching reading. It cannot be accomplished by impressing on students what they need to learn or awing them with the teacher's superior competence. Indeed, Group High teachers started with the opposite premise—that whatever students did was good. By giving students a steady stream of approval, teachers sought to teach them to listen to and respect their own feelings, to express themselves with the certainty that what they said would be appreciated, and to assume that what they thought or felt was of interest to others around them. Like students at Ethnic High, students at Group High were to learn to value themselves and their own identities.[1]

Both schools, then, reorganized their values—their definitions of desired outcomes—so as to validate what students already were. In doing so, they raised student status and, implicitly, lowered that of teachers. This status equalization, although it reduced student resistance to education, also created difficult problems for teachers: how could they teach effectively when the justification for teaching was gone, when students were no longer defined as inferiors, as lacking important skills they needed to learn?

### Alternative Pedagogy

New educational goals and a curriculum centered on affirming student virtues imply an alternative pedagogy. Group High and Ethnic High employed different teaching techniques, reflecting their divergent educational goals and the differences between their students, and yet there was a com-

1. Note the similar educational priorities—"fostering personal growth in students" and "allowing students responsibility for [their] own learning"—voiced by the alternative school staff studied by Kathleen Huguenin and Terrence Deal (1978:316).

mon theme underlying their approaches to teaching: teachers in both schools tried to find ways to reach students and to motivate them by supporting rather than undermining their self-esteem.

Ethnic High students wanted to be taught some of the traditional things schools teach, but they rejected academic tasks. Teachers wanted them to learn, yet they had defined a status system according to which personality, character, and ethnic identity were more admirable than possession of skills. In this situation, one of the only educational strategies available to teachers was to "discover" students. Like talent scouts, teachers looked for student abilities that could be praised and encouraged. Then, like good theatrical agents, they could polish and promote their student stars.

Teachers were convinced that students had hidden talents (and indeed many students displayed lively intelligence quite at variance with their extremely poor academic skills). Several times, for example, I was told in a confidential tone that one student or another was "really a genius." And when teachers talked among themselves, they frequently discussed how talented or brilliant particular students really were. The clear implication was that there would be little use in trying to teach these students a few basic skills or laboriously to drum a few facts into their resistant heads. The teachers were waiting for a more dramatic transformation that would liberate students' real abilities, and as they waited they watched for those flickers of hidden genius that they hoped to fan into a bright flame. Sometimes the talents teachers discovered in students were related to academic skills, as when a good chess player was told he had a flair for mathematics. But teachers were also eager to find impressive talents in students who had musical or artistic ability, good voices, or even striking personalities.

Linked to the search for hidden student talents was a second alternative teaching technique: the use of "open-ended" assignments. The teacher did not tell students exactly what to do, and there were no right or wrong answers for these tasks. For a black history class, students read a book about lynchings and made collages of pictures cut from magazines to express their feelings about the book. In Spanish class students made collages about food in different cultures. In almost all classes, students were repeatedly asked to describe their own life experiences or express their own opinions about everything from relations of parents and children to the expulsion of black athletes from the Olympics. There was no correct response to these directives, which were designed to encourage student participation in classes and to convince students that their ideas were valued.[2]

2. Mary Metz (1978b:101-105) observes that lower-track junior-high students preferred highly structured assignments, which allowed less involvement and risked less self-exposure than more open-ended tasks. But Ethnic High's teachers sought to make precisely this tradeoff: by creating an extremely supportive environment, they hoped to persuade students to expose more of their own ideas and feelings. Indeed, the willingness of students at Ethnic High to respond to open-ended assignments indicates that students in more traditional classrooms may cleave to routine as a defense against what they see as an alien or hostile environment. But it is also clear that open-ended assignments appeal to students only when they are accompanied by an implicit guarantee that the student will not be vulnerable to public criticism or negative judgment.



But the most effective open-ended project was poetry writing, which provided a particularly fruitful way of tapping and rewarding student talents. A poem contained no fixed standards of right and wrong; free verse made any product legitimate. Street jargon or the grammatical forms of black dialect gave student poems an authentic ring. Furthermore, writing poetry had a high status mystique absent from conventional school work. Many students were verbally resourceful, and poetry writing—prestigious yet failureproof—caught on dramatically when the school hired a published black poet as a part-time teacher. Even a minimal student effort, a few fragments of sentences, could give teachers a starting point for praise and encouragement. Bernette, having missed Janet's class for several days, came in one day, and when told that the class assignment was to "write advice to someone younger than yourself," sat down and in a few minutes wrote three sentences of advice to her daughter. Janet was struck by the beauty of these lines as a poem, and she proceeded to praise Bernette lavishly, encouraging her to read her poem to the class and later to the whole school. The poetry-writing class flourished, and some of the most rebellious, difficult students started composing long, complex poems, full of striking imagery and melodic language. In the spring, Ethnic High held a successful poetry reading for other students and teachers from alternative schools in the area.

The third teaching strategy used at Ethnic High was more conventional: it was simply to soften academic demands so that they were as nonthreatening as possible. When Janet asked students to do even a minimal assignment, she handed out compliments and reassurance: "Aw, come on. You can do it. All you have to do is write down something you think about how children should be raised. You know you have a lot of ideas about it." When Raymond gave a "quiz," he immediately assured students that it was easy and that it would not count, that it was just to see how they were doing. A vocabulary lesson consisted of letting students copy definitions from the dictionary and read what they had copied, without asking them to learn the words or try to use them. Teachers gave such watered-down conventional assignments without much conviction in any case since they themselves were not persuaded of the value of teaching traditional academic skills. Unwilling to risk alienating students by evaluating them, Ethnic High's teachers sometimes filled time by using the forms of traditional education, but without the content. Quizzes were distributed but never collected, lists of prefixes and suffixes handed out but not discussed, and assignments begun in class were quietly abandoned.

AT GROUP HIGH the pedagogic problems were different, though some of the solutions were the same. Group High sought to challenge and disturb students as well as to encourage them, and open-ended teaching techniques proved very useful for this purpose. (Group High also relied more directly on the peer group as a source of affirmation for students.) Indeed, at Group High, as at Ethnic High, students were continually bathed in a sea of praise. A supportive environment was used to draw students out, to tempt them to reveal themselves, and to make them invest themselves in their school experiences.

Independent student projects and group discussions were the core of Group High's pedagogy. Its individualist ideology encouraged students to develop their own interests and to do some sort of independent project as part of each class. These projects were then "presented"—shared with the rest of the class in group discussions. But there were no critical standards for evaluating what students presented. A student was obligated only to "contribute" something, to share part of himself with the group. Like the classic "show and tell" of the progressive elementary school, a student's presentation was meant to bring some part of his life into the group, not necessarily to be informative. In encounter-style classes (like the women's studies or psychology classes), students might share intimate feelings and experiences. Whatever students offered was met with approval. Students would solemnly thank one another for a particularly honest or intimate revelation, and at the end of a class one student would say to another, "I feel it's been very important to me to have you in this class. I've learned a lot from you." By sharing and listening to others, one was automatically making a valuable contribution to the group. But approval was not reserved for such personal revelations. Students and teachers listened to any presentation, however dry or trivial, with respect and appreciation, because the presentation affirmed both the individuality of the presenter and the solidarity of the group.

Students were free to choose any project they wished. A student invited his psychology class to the nursery school where his mother was a teacher and when asked later what his project was exclaimed, "I presented my mother!" In the women's studies class, students volunteered reports on books they had read or brought a family acquaintance to talk to the class, as well as sharing personal dilemmas with the group. Through these presentations students shared their own enthusiasms with others; they varied from a casual discussion of the novel *The Harrad Experiment*, to discussion of a magazine article advocating childlessness, to an extensive report on the life and work of Zelda Fitzgerald. But all these discussions, even the most seemingly academic, were characterized by the same disregard for content and the same emphasis on individual self-expression and group approval. In an English class, for example, one young woman decided that she wanted to know more about English history. She prepared a dry recitation, extracted



directly from the encyclopedia, of all the English kings, from Egbert and Ethelred to Elizabeth II. The other students listened attentively and cheerfully began a discussion of the apparent alternation between good kings and bad ones. As with Ethnic High's open-ended student projects, there were no right or wrong answers, nor more or less interesting topics. Indeed, I never saw a teacher intervene to correct misinformation in a presentation (as when the student reporting on Zelda Fitzgerald turned out not to know who F. Scott Fitzgerald was) or suggest that a student follow up on some interesting aspect of her presentation. Nor did students reject anything their fellow students offered. Individual affirmation and group solidarity were the only valued products of presentations and group discussions.

Group High teachers did make demands on students; they used unstructured teaching techniques, a kind of enforced spontaneity, to stimulate or shock students into participating more fully in classroom life. Open-ended pedagogy may be used simply to protect students from criticism and possible failure. But in the context of intensive group life at Group High, unstructured techniques were used to force students' "real selves" out into the open, where teachers could make contact with them.

Through the use of open-ended assignments, teachers sacrifice some sorts of control but gain other sources of influence. Such pedagogy can engage students very deeply. When, for example, students in a psychology class were asked, one by one, to put themselves in the position of a Freudian therapist and to pretend they were speaking directly to a schizophrenic patient, they found it both painful and enlightening to be thus put on the spot. They were forced to express in front of a group feelings and ideas that told a great deal about themselves. Such classroom exercises panicked some students, who suddenly asked teachers for guidance and constraints. Refusing to let students off the hook, leaving students without familiar guidelines, makes them feel uncertain, exposed, and vulnerable; however, they may also become deeply involved. When the teacher does not provide cues about how they should act, their performances (or their choices) seem to reveal their "real" selves.

Open-ended teaching actually provides teachers with two kinds of leverage over students: information about students and commitment from them. Unstructured situations can provide teachers with information about students that would be unavailable in ordinary situations. In a graphic example provided by George Dennison (1969), unstructured play was used to reveal students both to themselves and to their teachers:

> We've been playing an excellent game in the gym. I turn out the lights. We've masked the windows, and the gym is thrown into the blackest darkness. Vicente and José run and hide, and I go find them in the dark. Those two, who act so tough ordinarily, invariably hold hands when the lights go out; and whenever I draw near them in the dark, they begin to titter and squeal, half-frightened, half-pleased, like five-year-olds . . .

> We played dodge ball and then tag-in-the-dark . . . The usual scampering and outcries—and when the lights were turned on unexpectedly, it was touching to see five or six kids stretched out in a line, each holding a hand or an arm or leg of the one in front, and the first in line holding fast to Mabel's skirts. (pp. 36, 48)

An unstructured situation threw children off balance and made them reveal the childish, frightened, vulnerable parts of themselves. By exposing what students were reluctant to reveal in broad daylight, Dennison tried to penetrate students' personal defenses, thus opening them to the learning process.

In traditional classrooms teachers find it difficult to acquire adequate information about students' real interests and abilities, because the structure of authority in the classroom inevitably restricts the flow of such information. If students sit quietly in their seats all day, the teacher has a class that is easily managed but about which he knows very little. Furthermore, the ideology that says education is a contest in which every student has a fair chance (see Parsons, 1959) obliges teachers to assign work that any reasonably diligent, responsible student can do. Examinations or questions are supposed to be "fair," that is, to cover only what students have actually learned in school. What teachers find out about students is primarily how well students can absorb or retain what the teacher has just taught them. Students' real abilities and the sources of their weaknesses or resistances are often hidden because students have an interest in restricting the information teachers have about them. In particular, students want to keep teachers from finding out what they do not know. The requirement of "fairness" thus tends to homogenize teaching, while the structural opposition of interests between teachers and students greatly restricts the upward flow of information. By contrast, open-ended methods reduce direct controls but expand the flow of information.

The second major function of open-ended teaching techniques is to intensify students' involvement in the learning experience. Unstructured assignments—particularly those involving personal or emotional matters—mean that students themselves have had to choose what they will do and that they are therefore partially responsible for those choices. Furthermore, the student's poem, collage, journal, or fantasy in some way reflects his true self, not an externally imposed requirement. In the social psychologist's terms, free choice, or the perception of free choice, leads to *self-attribution*—individuals seeing their behavior as reflecting the self, not situational constraints (Kelley, 1967:217-218). The heightened identification of students with their school performances is perhaps the greatest educational advantage of free school techniques. The intensified relevance of school to the true self is a source of the occasional "highs" alternative education provides. The school experience is much closer to the self and often very intense, and the personal identity of both teachers and students is more directly engaged, than in traditional educational settings.



The idea that students accepted full responsibility for what they did and what they learned at Group High was embodied in a "contract" between teacher and student and in the school's evaluation procedure. In theory, students in each class contracted to fulfill particular projects or learning experiences that satisfied their own educational needs. Although teachers and students very often let the contract lapse during the semester (and some classes omitted the contract altogether), the experience of negotiating a contract forced students to examine their educational goals and to claim that they themselves regarded certain school performances as important and valuable. The contract could also be invoked by teachers on the occasions when they actually wanted to enforce claims on students.

Steve (at the end of the first six-week evaluation period) announced to his class that students were each expected to do a written research project by the end of the week. There was considerable surprise and some complaints. Steve countered by saying that the students had each signed a contract in which they had agreed to do a project. When students said that they had not thought the project had to be a formal research paper, Steve said, "Presumably you wanted to learn about psychology or you wouldn't have signed up for this class. No one is going to take a big tablespoon dripping with psychology and shove it into your mouth. This class can just be an aid to you in learning psychology. Hopefully you're learning because you want to." Steve asked the students to write a self-evaluation in which they listed what they had been reading and the written work they had done and evaluated their class contributions. Yet when a student plaintively asked whether a book he had been reading on his own could be counted as a class text, Steve responded that they shouldn't get "hung up" on particular categories. When a student asked "Do we have to do an independent research project?" Steve said, "That's a Berkeley High-type question."[3] Steve finally backed down on his demand for a written assignment, but he had used the symbol of the contract to indicate that he wanted more work from students.

THE GROUP HIGH procedure for evaluating students also reinforced the notion that a student's entire personality should be involved in school life. At the end of every six-week period, students wrote an evaluation of each class, teachers wrote an individual evaluation of each student, and the student and teacher discussed the evaluations. This method provided another way of breaking down the barrier between the student's sense of self

3. This is one of the rare examples in my observations of a battle between teachers and students over requirements. Steve, the teacher involved, was himself under supervision while he was working toward a master's degree. His anxiety that students present concrete evidence of performance was connected to concern about his own evaluation. In this exchange the teacher was able to use the rhetoric of autonomy and choice even to make traditional demands. But since students were not graded at this six-week evaluation, there was little way for him to enforce his demand.

and his performance in school. The teachers Joe and Alice, for example, said explicitly that they wanted to discuss how students had grown and changed as individuals during the period rather than concentrate on specific classroom performances.

Thus the pedagogic techniques employed at both Group High and Ethnic High were solutions to the problems of trying to educate and transform students while maintaining that students were respected, important members of the community. These techniques involved building students' self-confidence while attempting to find a point at which they could be influenced or stimulated to further growth. At Ethnic High students were supported and encouraged so that the fears that made them resist school work could be broken down. In addition, Ethnic High's teachers hoped that the self-respect and self-assertiveness these young people gained might enable them to claim political and economic privileges in the larger society. At Group High the dominant pedagogic techniques—intensive group discussion, individual projects, and open-ended assignments—were designed to make students identify more fully with their school performances and to involve them in more intense personal change than ordinary schools can produce.

### Dilemmas of Status Equality

Status equalization devalues most things teachers are good at and it can therefore undermine teachers' confidence, leaving them uncertain about what they can offer students. It lowers their prestige, but even more fundamentally, it weakens their claim to serve valued educational goals. As an observer of a California free school put it, "After going through a typical cycle of kids getting high on freedom and doing nothing for six months, getting bored, and finally facing the big questions—What am I doing? Where am I going?—students and teachers think they have learned a lot about themselves and each other. But as the youngsters return to studying and start to seek answers to those questions, they find the teachers have little to offer besides a sympathetic ear" (Stretch, 1975:275). I described in Chapter 3 some of the insecurities free school teachers face because they must rely so heavily upon personal influence. But additional difficulties are created by status equalization: those skills teachers possess are disallowed as sources of prestige, and may even become a handicap when new values dominate the status system.

At Ethnic High the premium on ethnic identity put teachers at a disadvantage. On any scale of ethnic authenticity, Ethnic High's teachers made a weaker showing than their students. Simply by becoming teachers they had shown themselves more middle-class and conventional than the students; their very success counted against them. White teachers were at an obvious disadvantage, but even minority teachers were often on the defensive. Denise was not a true Chicana, for despite her identification with Chicano politics, she was from a middle-class Mexican background. Raymond was black, but as he frequently explained, he had grown up in an earlier era when conforming to white demands was "the only way a black man could survive." Janet, though she was not yet married to the father of her child, had a relatively secure middle-class lifestyle. Don, a middle-class black, met angry resistance from some black students when he insisted on dealing with them in a middle-class, countercultural style.



Ethnic High's teachers felt the status disadvantage that came from being less tough and street-wise than their students. When Cisco, a student, said to the Chicano studies teacher, "Hey, you want to buy some coke [cocaine], man?" the teacher answered with bravado, "I got better sources than you any day," and students laughed. When male students spoke about smuggling drugs from Mexico, or women students joked about prostitution or about how many clothes their boyfriends gave them, teachers felt their own more limited experience as a handicap. But there was a more serious side to the granting of prestige to such "authenticity." Teachers felt genuinely in awe of students who faced a variety of severe life problems the teachers had never had to confront. Janet often expressed her admiration for Bernette's strength in supporting and raising a child on her own. Other students who dealt with difficult legal, financial, or family problems seemed to possess strength and courage the teachers' more conventional lives did not require. Compared to the seriousness of students' real-life predicaments, traditional academic demands seemed petty. Teachers felt sharply the inadequacy of what they could pretend to "teach" students.[4]

Although Ethnic High is in some ways an extreme case, status equalization always threatens to undermine organizational goals. Exchange theorists have argued that prestige or status is one way people reward those who make a valued contribution to a group or organization, and therefore status inequalities reflect differential contributions to the attainment of organizational goals (Blau, 1964:269-270; Homans, 1974). The conscious attempt to suppress or eliminate status inequalities may then mean diluting or abandoning other organizational purposes. Differences in expertise or organizational contributions may have to be denied or minimized, thus requiring redefinition of organizational goals. In the free school, for example, the

4. Note the similar ambivalence of another open classroom teacher about trying to shape students' values. In offering advice to other teachers, she points out that students' attitudes about sharing food fit the "life they must live every day outside of the school": "If you are in a position to change that life so that this kind of non-sharing becomes unnecessary, then you can try to change their attitudes also. If you are not in such a position, then you should respect a value and attitude which has grown out of the reality of their everyday existence. From a very practical point of view, students will trust and respect you less if they think you are so foolish that you can not understand that it is not good to share your food. This can alienate them from you in many ways. This does not mean that you cannot show them other ways of personal relating, but you must first respect their value system" (Blitz, 1973:230).

curriculum itself—embodying what the school hoped to teach—had to be altered to reduce the importance of teachers' academic expertise. The attempt to raise student status implied a shift in basic goals.

I have argued that teachers at Group High and Ethnic High initially rejected traditional classroom organization because they had a new, and in some ways strikingly ambitious, conception of education. Both schools sought to transform students' whole selves rather than simply to teach a few skills. Because teachers wanted to shake students out of conventional patterns, to penetrate and shape their real selves, status equalization and open-ended pedagogy made sense. Yet the paradox of the entire free school approach to education was that, once committed to status equalization, teachers found that their ability to define and assert any educational goals was weakened. Without the superior prestige given by valued skills, teachers were in a poor position to hold forth a strong model of educational change. Furthermore, their sense of commitment to a clear set of educational objectives was undermined by the demands of status equalization itself. The consequence was increasing vagueness and uncertainty about educational objectives.

All teachers face difficult problems in defining educational goals and evaluating their own performance (Lortie, 1975). But these problems are especially severe for alternative school teachers, and the erosion of goals caused by status equalization is a major factor. A group of investigators found that alternative school teachers, compared with teachers from traditional public schools, were less likely to feel clear about their goals, less confident of being able to reach their goals, and less sure about what methods might be effective in attaining their goals (McCauley, Dornbusch, and Scott, 1972:29-30). This insecurity is all the more striking since the alternative school teachers were, on the whole, younger and better educated then their public school colleagues. At Group High and Ethnic High, despite an ambitious, "activist" vision of education, teachers often played a passive part when it came to teaching. They had to begin by building student self-confidence and allowing students the freedom and unrestricted approval that would open them up, draw them out, and commit them to school experiences. The teachers redefined the curriculum so that it primarily revolved around students' own life experiences. Under these constraints, teachers found that their role was often reduced to giving students support and affirmation while waiting, somewhat wistfully, for dramatic personal transformation to occur. Teachers earnestly discussed students' problems and inner conflicts and had a vision of how students could be changed into stronger, freer, more self-affirming people. But they had little idea of how to bring about such dramatic change.[5]

5. Mary Metz (1978b:62-65) notes that progressive educational rhetoric can be used by teachers to mask what is really an abdication of educational responsibility. But even conscientious teachers, who sincerely want to have a significant impact on the students they teach, may also be led to give up their claims to educate children in the effort to find new ways to break through student resistance to schooling.



Teachers were even more uncertain about their own role in the educational process. They no longer believed that teaching in the traditional sense was useful; indeed, they felt that it could only hurt. Even academically sophisticated teachers were often inhibited from using their expertise to stimulate or inspire students. At most, teachers at Group High could try to challenge students to face new experiences. But the basic implication of status equality was that teachers must downplay their own skills while emphasizing students' virtues.

This tension between goals and expertise on the one hand and status equalization on the other is characteristic of many alternative organizations, both collectives of egalitarian workers and service organizations that equalize relationships between clients and service providers. Although the tensions of status equalization take different forms, both sorts of organizations are driven to modify or redefine their goals, minimizing the importance of expertise to protect status equality. So, for example, alternative medical clinics that try to provide a full range of health services are plagued by their continuing dependence on the sophisticated technical expertise of physicians (Taylor, 1975:327-376; see also Rothschild-Whitt, 1977:181-182). Clinics committed to egalitarian staff relations do better to redefine their goals—to concentrate on routinizable services such as abortion, gynecological screening, or treating drug abuse, so that all staff can learn the basic procedures and physicians can be relegated to the role of backup and legal "cover" for the clinic's activities.

The attempt to keep statuses equal can be costly. Of the participatory-democratic organizations recently studied by Joyce Rothschild-Whitt (1977), two, the law collective and the alternative paper, practiced extensive job rotation, despite visible costs in terms of efficiency (pp. 187-193). At the alternative paper an experienced, skilled reporter was put to work selling advertising—work she hated—so that less skilled, enjoyable, and prestigious work could be shared equally. Tasks were often divided so that each person did several different jobs, spending part of her time on routine manual work and part on more stimulating, gratifying tasks. Inexperienced, unskilled people were assigned even to important jobs—like writing—just because they wanted the experience. Similarly, the law collective, although prohibited from using nonlawyers to handle such matters as court appearances, assigned all other work equally, organizing tasks and training to minimize differences in skill levels. Lawyers and lay workers all did their own typing and, according to Rothschild-Whitt, members of the collective were very proud of the extent to which nonlawyers could "learn competently to fulfill most of the functions commonly reserved for practising at-

torneys." She writes that "they happily report the case of one legal worker who, after being a member of the Law Collective for only a month, wrote a writ of mandate to the California Supreme Court which succeeded in overturning local residency requirements for holding city office" (p. 184). The free clinic described by Rothschild-Whitt intentionally excluded physicians from the collective, debating whether their expertise would destroy real egalitarianism. Members of another alternative clinic (Taylor, 1976:87-88) kept physicians from monopolizing power by recruiting part-time, volunteer physicians who were unwilling to spend the long hours in meetings necessary to have an influence over clinic decisions.

In alternative organizations redefinition of goals is also used to equalize relations with clients. I have already mentioned that medical clinics with egalitarian staff structures found it easier to keep statuses equal when they dealt with routine rather than critical medical care. But at the same time these alternative clinics explored new definitions of adequate medical care that allowed more egalitarian staff organization and an equalization of relations between servers and clients. Alternative mental health clinics emphasize that therapy is a two-way process in which both therapist and client give and receive help (Freudenberger, 1973; Holleb and Abrams, 1975). The women's health movement has pioneered in teaching self-examination, trying folk remedies for common medical complaints, and giving clients the information and skills to care for their own health. They have advocated less "medicalized" services like home birth and have even in a small way democratized access to medical technology through symbolic gestures like selling women speculums for use in self-examination. These new approaches to medical care, dealing with health maintenance rather than acute illness, can easily be provided by lay staff. Viewing medical problems as consequences of political and economic inequalities is a way of trying to remove health care from the control of the medical profession by defining the problems as outside the sphere of specialized medical competence. Emphasis on medical self-help both demystifies professional expertise and recruits patients as collaborators in the medical effort (see Taylor, 1975; Rothschild-Whitt, 1977; Ruzek, 1979).

We have seen how alternative organizations redefine their goals and reorganize their working arrangements to equalize status. But these strategies may lead to demoralization, as a collective becomes uncertain about its goals and frustrated by its inability to act effectively and reward people for their contributions. Professionals may become discouraged as they begin to wonder what they really want for their clients and whether they can effectively deliver the kinds of "alternative services" they have defined as valuable (Taylor, 1976:92-93). In some sense, it is an alternative organization's capacity to use expertise that makes its product or services valuable, yet internally it must devalue the very expertise it would like to claim. Commitment to equality thus leads to ambivalence about expertise and increased uncertainty about organizational goals.



### Status, Expertise, and Commitment

I have maintained that in free schools status equality and the associated pedagogy of the open classroom were designed to open students to their teachers, to generate information about them, and to commit them to their school performances. The payoff for status equalization was a deeper and more active educational experience. Gordon Holleb and Walter Abrams (1975:128) make a similar observation about alternative mental health clinics, arguing for status equalization despite its apparent costs:

> Since clinical expertise is a precious resource, why should a qualified supervisor's time be wasted answering phones when that work could just as easily be done by less-skilled volunteers? Yet for all the reasonableness of this argument, we have observed that it is more of a response to staff members' needs for recognition of their higher status than a response to the organization's needs. For the organization has many different needs. The gains in efficiency achieved by such reorganization would be canceled out by some of the likely negative effects of a more hierarchical system: staff members' feelings of anger, rebellion, alienation, and loneliness.

Status equalization is thus justified as a way of promoting commitment, initiative, and participation in organizational life.

Writing about ritual in primitive societies, Victor Turner (1969) outlines a model of "anti-structure"—intentional status reversal strikingly similar to that found in contemporary alternative organizations. During rituals of status reversal, the "strong are made weaker; the weak act as though they were strong" (p. 168). Those of high status are humbled, and the humble are temporarily accorded the privileges of the mighty. According to Turner, all societies contain two conflicting principles: "structure" and "communitas." The structural model of social relations "is of a differentiated, culturally structured, segmented, and often hierarchical system of institutionalized positions" (p. 176). According to the principle of communitas, on the other hand, social life is "an undifferentiated, homogeneous whole, in which individuals confront one another integrally, and not as 'segmentalized' into statuses and roles" (p. 177). Structure, in Turner's view, constitutes the substance of social organization: rights and obligations, task allocation, and systems of roles and relationships. But structure must periodically be dismantled, purified, and renewed by communitas. Structure is divisive; it undermines the social bonds that make people with different statuses and roles members of a cohesive group. Temporary reversal or suspension of structural positions renews the group ties that transcend structural differences and allows structure to be reaffirmed, clarified, and cleansed of its destructive implications.

Turner highlights the advantages of status equalization for revitalizing collective loyalties and drawing members' full energies into the group. But he also argues that communitas cannot be a permanent state of affairs. For primitive societies "tribal communitas is the complement and obverse of

tribal structure," and contemporary egalitarian communities "have not yet developed a structure capable of maintaining social and economic order over long periods of time" (p. 203).

How can egalitarian organizations resolve the dilemmas inherent in status equalization? How can they reward expertise and maintain goal commitment without introducing the inhibitions on effort, communication, and participation that accompany status differentiation? The general problem is how to preserve both goals and expertise while avoiding the debilitating effects of status differentiation. The answer lies in an organizational attempt to detach both goals and expertise from a structure of organizational statuses.

For most organizations, the task to be performed determines the structure of roles, rewards, and statuses. And thus, except during periods of organizational transformation, the goals of the organization are "built in" to the structure of positions, sanctions, and rewards that govern day-to-day functions. Even the power of organizational superiors to make decisions and to reorder priorities exists within given parameters and must be implemented through the commitments already established in the organization's structure. But in egalitarian organizations, goals are detached from structure, and the process of defining goals is made explicit and collective. (This fact is the source of the endless attention paid to goal definition in free schools and other participatory-democratic organizations [chapter 4].) Rather than organizational goals (in the case of schools, the definition of what it is students should be taught) being built into a set of fixed roles and statuses, goals become conscious collective commitments. They also remain tentative, subject to continual revision, so that they do not become the basis for a stable stratification by task and level of responsibility. Egalitarian organizations do find their goal commitments constantly threatened, but the solution is to reintroduce the question of goals directly and consciously into organizational life.

Expertise is the second crucial aspect of modern organizationl life imperiled by status equalization. Expertise and associated distinctions in prestige are destructive of the solidary loyalty that binds workers to their colleagues and encourages commitment and initiative in their work; it also blocks the engagement of clients with their professional servers. Yet denial of inequalities in expertise can ultimately undermine both the services that professionals offer clients and the effectiveness of workers.

Free schools show how some alternative organizations handle the problem of expertise: they borrow standards of expertise from outside, keeping it separate from status within the organization. Thus although free school teachers require sources of personal prestige (chapter 3), in this chapter we have seen that they cannot develop prestige directly related to the educational function of the school, that is, they cannot rely on academic expertise. Prestige has to be imported from outside the school—for example,



from the worlds of radical politics, avant-garde art, or humanistic psychology. As a student from New York's Elizabeth Cleaners Street School (1972:218) put it, "All the teachers we hired have the same kind of personality. They like Chinese cooking, they all know urban problems, they're all into art and photography and pottery and things like that, and things like ecology and Cuba." Teachers were to be expert, but not in areas directly connected with the school's organizational activities. Status within the school was equal, and that equality was made more delicious by the importation of "personal" sources of prestige.

Of course, in other organizations with different tasks the attitude toward expertise can hardly be so cavalier nor the array of expertise so anarchic. But the underlying principle is much the same: expertise and status are conferred and regulated from outside the organization, while within the organization everyone is equal. Here alternative medical clinics are in some ways a limiting case. Medical expertise carries such prestige and is so central to the clinic's concerns that there is often no way to import it without having it interfere with the organization's internal egalitarianism. As we have seen, this problem is a constant source of tension in alternative medical organizations, handled most often by restricting the organization's tasks to those for which expertise can be democratized, or alternatively, keeping the experts on the outside of the organization while trying to exploit the skills they offer.

Status equalization combined with the externalization of sources of expertise can be seen in other organizations that require a high level of initiative, creativity, or commitment from their members. Universities and scientific research laboratories, for instance, rely extensively on expertise, but that expertise is created, judged, and rewarded from outside the organization (for universities, see Dornbusch and Scott, 1975). "Good work" and a "good" reputation are defined by standards set outside the organization, in an external community of experts. The organization borrows from outside the system of differential prestige and rewards that guides, controls, and motivates its members; it thus tries to avoid being rent internally by demoralizing divisions between those who have higher or lower status in the organization. In this sense the organization becomes a communal shell, generating loyalty, morale, and motivation for activities that are judged and rewarded from outside. Within the organization "collegiality" reigns, and all statuses are formally equal. The potential benefits of status equalization can be seen in the research and development laboratories studied by Tom Burns and G. M. Stalker (1961) in the 1950s. "Organic management" allowed these organizations, which relied on continual innovation, to encourage creative initiative while harnessing it to organizational goals. The solution was precisely to rely on regulation of expertise through the standards of external communities of experts while using explicit articulation of goals to guide research activities. Within the work group statuses could then

be equalized to maximize initiative, commitment, and participation in the work.

To recapitulate: status equalization is a device for heightening organizational commitment by reducing those barriers that block the involvement or responsiveness of workers and clients. It offers certain clear advantages: as we saw in examining free school pedagogy, clients can be made open to their professional servers and willing to identify with their organizational performances. Workers in an organization can be induced to identify with the organization's goals, avoiding the divisions and resistances generated by status inequalities. But status equalization has serious costs. When workers attempt to minimize status differentiation, they may also weaken their commitment to goals. They may shift to goals that do not require differential skills, or they may devalue goal attainment to avoid instituting a stable division of labor with unequal tasks and rewards. Status equalization may also mean devaluing expertise—sacrificing goals for which expertise is essential or redefining goals so that expertise is not required. The potential costs of such strategies are demoralization of workers who become unsure of the effectiveness of their work or the goals for which it is intended, and the disillusionment of clients with "demystified" services.

But the outlines of a set of solutions to the dilemmas of status equalization also begin to emerge. Conscious attention to collective purposes can provide a substitute for the goal commitments embodied in status differentiation. And expertise can be readmitted to organizational life by relying on external sources for the creation, regulation, and reward of expertise, leaving the internal life of the organization free of the inhibiting effects of status differences. Although these solutions provide only partial remedies for the defects of equalitarian organizations, they also reflect the challenges of modern organizational life.

# PART THREE

# living without authority

# 6

# WHAT FREE SCHOOLS TEACH

ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS, like traditional schools, teach norms of conduct and patterns of social organization as well as skills. The former are conveyed to students through the "hidden curriculum" of free schools —what they teach implicitly through their organization, their methods of social control, and their impact on the student peer group. Thus in addition to examining the effectiveness of alternative education at teaching academic skills, it is important to analyze the organization of free schools for the implicit lessons it teaches. These lessons, in turn, suggest the social and cultural changes that may have led people to found or support free schools. Discovering the effects of alternative education on students from different social groups paves the way for understanding the contemporary historical context of the free school movement.

### Academic Skills

The argument that children will blossom intellectually when freed from the humiliating constraints of traditional classrooms is an appealing one, but there is no evidence to date that free schools do a better job of teaching academic skills than do traditional schools. Indeed, there is considerable evidence that at least some kinds of students learn *less* in alternative schools (Minuchin et al., 1969; Bane, 1972a; Bennett, 1976; Stallings, 1976). Although research on teaching effectiveness is notoriously difficult to do well and comes to frustratingly inconsistent conclusions (Boocock, 1973; Bennett, 1976), sufficient research has now accumulated to allow the conclusion that, at the very least, neither free schools, with their extreme rejection of authority and order, nor milder open classroom experiments offer a panacea for the weaknesses of traditional education. Each of the studies reviewed below has its own limitations of evidence or analysis, but taken together

they show that, despite significant advantages in student motivation, open educational approaches do not improve and in many cases hamper the acquisition of academic skills.

A careful, reliable evaluation of Group High (by an outside consultant) after its first and second years compared its students to controls who had applied for admission and had been excluded by lottery.[1] During the first semester, when the school was small, the first cohort of Group High students made significantly greater gains on the TAP reading achievement test than the controls and kept even in arithmetic achievement. They also showed significant gains relative to the control group on tests of cognitive functioning (Gottschaldt Hidden Figures Test) and of ego maturity (Loevinger Sentence Completion Test). During the second year, the Group High students in the original cohort maintained the gains from the first year but showed no differential gain relative to the control group in the second year. The second group who entered Group High in the second year, thus doubling the size of the school, showed no greater gains in academic achievement, or in cognitive functioning and ego maturity, than the relevant control groups (and indeed the second-year cohort fell behind the controls in academic achievement). Thus only the first cohort of students during the first semester of the school's operation showed academic advantages of an alternative school education. The evaluation attributed the relative failure of Group High's second year to the school's rapid growth and to personality and motivational differences since students in the second year were found to be significantly less idealistic and community oriented and more egocentric, rebellious, and concerned with their own personal goals than those in the first cohort. In evaluating the results of this study, it seems as fair to say that Group High produced its positive effects only in the first semester for the special group of highly motivated students who founded the school. Although no reliable evaluation of Ethnic High was conducted, tests administered throughout the Berkeley school district (but with no effort to match alternative and traditional school children on background characteristics) showed no overall differences in achievement for students in on-site[2] alternative schools as compared with students in regular classrooms for my year of observation (Scientific Analysis Corporation, 1973:157-166) or in later years (Institute for Scientific Analysis, 1976:88-91). These results are particularly discouraging since the students who chose to attend alternative schools were more likely to be white and middle class than students in the regular schools and since the alternative schools had smaller student-teacher ratios and substantial supplemental funding.

1. Citation omitted to protect anonymity.
2. Students in off-site alternatives were not tested systematically, but those few students for whom scores on the California Test of Basic Skills were available had scores substantially below the school district average (Scientific Analysis Corporation, 1973:161).



Brian McCauley and Sanford Dornbusch (1978) compared students in an alternative subschool of a public high school with controls from the regular high school, matching students individually on race, grade, sex, academic aptitude and achievement, and course load. Administering the Iowa Test of Educational Development to both groups of students at the beginning and the end of the 1971-72 academic year, the investigators found no significant differences in academic gains on any subtest between the alternative school students and the controls from the regular school. A similar comparison of the two groups made the next year, using a different set of standardized tests, also revealed no significant differences. The authors conclude that "we were not able to show that students in the public alternative school were able to perform better on standardized achievement tests as a result of their experiences in the public alternative school" (p. 229). As we shall see below, such findings are particularly striking when placed beside the fact that alternative school students consistently like school better and think they are getting a better education than students in traditional schools.

Even more discouraging results come from studies of the effects of alternative schooling on younger children. Mary Jo Bane (1972b:274n), in a review of research on preschool programs, concluded that "more structured programs . . . are more effective in raising the cognitive scores of disadvantaged children than unstructured programs like those of traditional nursery schools." In her own study of two contrasting first-grade classrooms, Bane (1972a) found no significant differences in reading achievement between students assigned to an open versus a traditional classroom. A national study conducted for the Stanford Research Institute (Stallings, 1976) compared 105 first-grade and 58 third-grade classrooms in "planned variation" educational experiments sponsored as part of Project Follow Through. Although the results must be treated with caution since classrooms rather than individual children were used as units of analysis,[3] Jane Stallings concluded that "systematic instructional patterns" including "a high rate of drill, prac-

3. When classrooms are used as the units of analysis and no controls are introduced for social class background, results can be misleading. If, for example, open classrooms were better at keeping lower-ability children from dropping out of the program, these classrooms might show lower overall gains in test scores, even if the open classroom children had made superior gains. Although all classrooms were, in theory, for "disadvantaged children," it is easy to imagine that the classrooms showing superior gains were those with children from higher class backgrounds.

Another large-scale study by Joyce Epstein and James McPartland (1975; 1976) tested 7,200 students in Maryland public schools. The investigators found no consistent effects of openness on academic achievement (as measured by standardized tests) when student background variables were controlled. But the usefulness of this ambitious study is limited, since the investigators do not provide convincing evidence that their measures of classroom openness (the amount of independent work assigned, for example) correspond to the kinds of differences in classroom structure tapped by other studies of open and traditional classrooms (see Epstein and McPartland, 1975:7-10).

tice, and praise" (p. 15) were most effective in raising students' test scores in both reading and math, though children in more "flexible" classrooms showed superior gains on tests of nonverbal problem solving, were absent from school less often, and were more independent. Two smaller studies comparing matched samples of elementary school children in open and traditional classrooms found traditional students superior in academic achievement (Ward and Barcher, 1975; Wright, 1975).

Neville Bennett (1976), in the most sophisticated study to date of the effects of teaching style, found that for a large sample of ten- to twelve-year-old students from a wide range of British primary schools, informal teaching methods failed to teach reading, mathematics, or English composition and grammar as well as more formal methods. The superiority of formal approaches appeared in every subject area and for almost all students, though formal methods were particularly effective for high-achieving boys and low-achieving girls (pp. 84-87). On tests of imaginative and descriptive story writing, where one might expect any advantage of informal methods to be most evident, there were no consistent differences in degree of imaginativeness; on a second descriptive story-writing test, where students were directed to strive for accuracy, many more errors of punctuation occurred in the stories of students from the informal classes (pp. 118-126). This study, which surveyed a wide range of classrooms and used well-validated measures of classroom organization and careful measures of student achievement, dramatically confirms earlier research in failing to find advantages, and finding some disadvantages, of informal teaching.[4]

The results of diverse studies are thus fairly consistent. But they are particularly puzzling when we take into account two other findings: first, students in open classrooms are much more apt to to like their teachers and identify with their schools than are pupils in traditional classrooms; second, both students at alternative schools and their parents are substantially more likely to think that their schools are doing a good job than are traditional-school students and their parents. To discover why alternative schools are unable to take advantage of their clear superiority in atmosphere and why parents and students praise alternative schools despite their unimpressive academic results, it is necessary to examine further what actually goes on inside alternative schools.

4. Bennett has been criticized for not controlling for the effects of the presence or absence of the competitive eleven-plus examination (see Featherstone, 1977). Informal classrooms were disproportionately in areas that did not have the eleven-plus exam, while areas that still used the eleven-plus system were more likely to have formal or mixed classrooms. Students in eleven-plus areas also had higher levels of academic achievement. It is thus possible that the poorer academic performance of students in informal classrooms resulted from the absence of the competitive pressure of the eleven-plus examinations (see Bennett, 1976:99-101). Such a conclusion, however, lends no support to free school ideology.



## Informal Learning

If free schools do not, as many have hoped, make students blossom intellectually, the question of what they do teach becomes all the more pressing. Why did Group High's students willingly sit through what seemed endless hours of boring meetings and desultory group discussions, apparently satisfied, even exhilarated, by the process? What made Ethnic High's students and teachers choose informal learning, and what did students gain from the experience? In a survey of Group High students, most reported that they liked the school, and in contrast to 41 percent of a sample from traditional schools, 72 percent said that Group High "was doing a good job of preparing them for the future."[5] The parents of Group High students (surveyed during the Group High evaluation) expressed more satisfaction with the school, evaluated their sons' and daughters' school experience as better, and thought their children were learning more than did parents of the controls. Similarly, Brian McCauley and Sanford Dornbusch (1978) report that despite the absence of significant differences in academic achievement between the alternative school students and the matched control sample, there were striking differences in student and parent satisfaction. The alternative school students, although they were more critical of the regular high school than their traditional school peers, were more likely to report that in the alternative high school they were "close" to their teachers, that they engaged in independent study, and that they were treated with respect.[6] The alternative school students also evaluated their *educational* experiences more highly, seeing the alternative school as less coercive, more likely to stimulate new interests, and less frustrating. Eighty-five percent of the alternative school students in contrast to only 29 percent of the control sample said the methods used by their teachers were often "interesting and effective" (pp. 223-225). The parents of the alternative school students were also more likely to report that the school's methods were "interesting and effective" and that it was responding to their child's needs (pp. 225-226).

What, then, do students learn in alternative schools that makes them think school is interesting, exciting, or good preparation for the future—even when they are learning no more (and perhaps less) than students in traditional schools? And why do students show disappointing progress in alternative schools, even though the schools have clearly succeeded, at least in part, in overcoming student resistance to teachers and to school life? Looking again at studies of open education, we can begin to understand why free schools often fail to teach conventional academic skills and what they teach in their stead.

5. Citation omitted to protect anonymity.

6. Joyce Epstein and James McPartland (1976) report that, particularly for secondary school students, classroom openness has a strong positive effect on the quality of students' reported relationships with teachers, but no significant effect on commitment to classwork (but see note 3 above).

Mary Jo Bane (1972a) systematically recorded the way twelve lower-ability children in two contrasting first grade classrooms actually spent their time. Children in the open, unstructured classroom engaged in more varied activities, moved around more, and made more choices about what activities to pursue than did children in the traditional classroom. These differences did not, however, lead children in the unstructured classroom to concentrate for longer periods on the activities they had chosen. Although children in the unstructured classroom spent significantly less time in activities coded as solitary nonproductive (that is, sitting at their desks doing nothing) and were less often overtly bored, they also spent less time participating in learning activities. Instead, children in the open classroom spent their time in social interaction with teachers and peers. "[T]here is more social activity of all types in the unstructured room than in the structured. There are more conversations and there are also more competitive and aggressive interchanges. Because both types of interactions, positive and negative, exist together, it can be suggested that open classrooms provide opportunities for a wider range of personal relationships than structured classrooms do" (p. 99).

Other studies confirm Bane's findings. Judith Evans (1975) observed a great deal more reading activity in American traditional classrooms than in either American or British open classrooms, though open and traditional classrooms were similar in the frequency of math and science activities. Richard Brandt (1975) reports almost twice as much peer interaction in two British open classrooms as in comparable traditional classrooms in American schools, though he was also struck by the degree of task involvement in the British open classrooms. Finally, Neville Bennett (1976:103-114) followed up his analysis of the weak academic performance of informal teaching methods with an analysis of observed pupil behavior in different classroom settings. The crucial difference, he concludes, is that students work more in formal classrooms. True, he says, pupils in the informal classrooms fidget less and spend more time cooperating and talking about work, but even this work-related peer interaction does not make up for the time students spend simply socializing. Differences in time spent on work activities are particularly striking for high-achieving pupils in formal versus informal classrooms (the same pupils for whom achievement differences are the greatest). High-achieving students are particularly prone to spend their time in informal classes talking and gossiping rather than working. In sum, although informal teaching may succeed in motivating students, it fails to make them work consistently enough to match the time spent on learning activities in traditional classrooms. One "deviant" informal classroom showed high academic gains because, Bennett argues, it combined a warm, informal atmosphere with a clearly structured and organized curriculum and strong emphasis on "the cognitive rather than the affective/aesthetic" (p. 97).



What replaces academic effort in alternative school classrooms, then, is social interaction, and what replaces academic learning is the learning of group skills. One of the most interesting studies of the effects of classroom structure on learning was conducted by Patricia Minuchin and her colleagues (1969) in the 1960s. The Minuchin group studied 105 fourth-grade children from upper-middle-class families in four contrasting schools, ranging from a conservative parochial school to a progressive private school that emphasized freedom, expressiveness, and independent exploration. Despite the advantages of having smaller classes and more positive attitudes toward school, children from the progressive school scored substantially lower than students from more traditional schools on several measures of intelligence and achievement, while there were no significant school differences on tests of imaginativeness (pp. 215-220) or self-confidence and satisfaction (p. 290). Achievement differences between progressive school and traditional school students were not accounted for by family background.

Where the progressive school children excelled was in measures of group skills. The Minuchin team gave children in all four schools a modified version of the Russell Sage Social Relations Test. Children were asked as a group to build a bridge out of large blocks to match a demonstration model, and they were given scores for the effectiveness and accuracy of their constructions and the quality of their group interaction. In both these respects, the progressive school students were strikingly superior. Students from the most traditional schools showed the most tension and competition, the greatest rigidity of group structure, and the highest percentage of nonparticipants. Students from schools with moderate amounts of structure fared slightly better. But only the progressive school students were able to finish the project in the allotted time. Their performance "had the qualities of an effective group effort, carried through with considerable *esprit de corps*. Planning was vigorous and relevant; building was self-propelled, effective, and technically accurate." The progressive school group was more cooperative and was the only group to include all the children. The children "took responsibility for reviewing their own work and finding their errors; they conducted a systematic check of the correspondence between their construction and the model before declaring it finished." Most interesting was "the spontaneous activity which followed completion of the second construction . . . The children re-formed the test blocks to fashion the figure of a man, likened it to George Washington, and finished by adding a 'wig' which they shaped out of cotton lying on a nearby shelf. The activity was characterized, as was most of the session, by a sense of productive autonomy, a flow of ideas that built on each other, harmonious relations among the children, and general pleasure in what they were doing" (pp. 204-205).

The progressive school children had learned not only group skills but also a set of norms emphasizing peer ties rather than relations with authority. In attitudes toward authority they, unlike the children from more traditional

schools, had passed the "conforming stage" and showed a "rational, objective" attitude toward authority. In tests of moral development, they were more loyal to peers, saying, for example, that they "would refuse to reveal the guilty child to the teacher." "They were most concerned about direct or indirect violations—through deceit or manipulation—of what they regarded as the code of fair play in the life that children lead with each other. The emerging principles seemed to be expressive of a child society in active formation" (pp. 279-280). Although other evidence of the effects of open classroom organization on group cooperation is scanty, it does confirm the Minuchin findings. There is more interaction and cooperation in open classrooms (Stallings, 1976), and Maureen Hallinan (1976) has shown that children's friendship patterns are more open, flexible, and less hierarchical in open classrooms. Similarly, Neville Bennett (1976:131) concludes from "sociograms based on pupil popularity ratings" that "perhaps a more complex, integrated social structure existed in informal classrooms."

What, then, is the most accurate general picture of the effects of alternative education? First, the early claims of free school proponents that educational openness would dramatically improve academic performance seem unfounded. On the other hand, evidence of the educational *disadvantages* of alternative education is neither firm nor consistent (see Bissell, 1977; Featherstone, 1977). In many cases alternative education seems to make no difference in academic achievement (especially in the secondary grades), and in other cases the apparent shortcomings of informal teaching methods may actually result from separate factors that affect academic achievement. Although the balance of evidence still indicates that informal teaching is less effective than traditional methods, there may be some types of pupils for whom, or some sorts of skills for which, informal teaching is superior.[7] Finally, there may be some "right" mix of formal and informal methods that has not yet been clearly enough defined or widely enough implemented to produce positive results. Teachers using both methods agree that informal teaching is more difficult, and perhaps informal or "mixed" methods, used well, would teach academic skills better than even the "best" traditional methods (see Bennett, 1976; Featherstone, 1977).

7. Studies of the effects of open teaching on creativity, for example, give interesting though mixed results. Although Patricia Minuchin and her colleagues (1969) and Neville Bennett (1976) found no differences in imaginativeness or creativity in the stories of children from open versus traditional classrooms, Jane Stallings (1976) found children in more flexible classrooms superior on tests of nonverbal problem solving. Robert Wright (1975) found no significant differences in self-esteem, creativity, or locus of control between pupils in open and traditional classrooms; William Ward and Peter Barcher (1975) found no differences in self-concept, locus of control, attitudes toward school, or "conceptual tempo." But other studies (Soar and Soar, 1972; Wilson, Stuckey, and Langevin, 1972; Ramey and Piper, 1974) have found open classroom students superior on some measures of creativity, "divergent thinking," or "complex-abstract" thought, though Ward and Barcher found high-IQ pupils in informal classrooms inferior on tests of "figural creativity."



But the debate over academic skills misses the central point of the free school movement. Although free school proponents often claimed that liberated children would learn basic skills "naturally," their vision of human renewal had little to do with teaching academic skills. Free schools were part of a broader movement to transform organizational life, and their educational goal was to live out—and thus to teach—the new norms and values, the new styles of selfhood and community, appropriate to that life. If we wish to understand why a segment of the educated middle class threw itself (and its children) into the free school movement, and why students found themselves so engrossed in these educational experiments, we must examine the implicit lessons of the free school experience.

### Norms and Values

Robert Dreeben, in *On What Is Learned in School* (1968:44), argues that schools, through the structural arrangements they make for handling children, teach pupils to "accept principles of conduct, or social norms, and to act according to them." For free school students and their parents, the alternative norms taught by free school social organization provide the major attraction. I pointed out in chapter 1 that for students the appeal of alternative schooling derives from symbolic changes in relations with teachers and among students. Alternative high school students reject the regular school because it tries "to make you conform to a specific set of values other than your own" (McCauley and Dornbusch, 1978:270; see also the testimony of rebellious high school students collected in Gross and Osterman, 1971, and the expression of student views in Elizabeth Cleaners Street School, 1972). Students choose alternative schools because they embody a new set of values and teach new patterns of social relationships.

Dreeben claims that students in traditional schools learn to act in a public arena, according to rules resembling those of the marketplace and the world of work rather than rules appropriate to the intimate life of the family. In this sense, as S. N. Eisenstadt (1956) suggested some time ago, the school provides a bridge between the values of intimacy, acceptance, and authority that pervade the family (what Parsonians would identify as ascription, particularism, affectivity, and diffuseness) and the more demanding, impersonal rules of the larger society. Dreeben argues that "pupils, by coping with the sequence of classroom tasks and situations, are more likely to learn the principles (i.e., social norms) of *independence, achievement, universalism,* and *specificity* than if they remained full-time members of the household" (emphasis added; p. 65). The structure of tasks and activities in free schools also provides children with experience in a public realm outside the family. But free schools teach norms that contradict those implicit in the traditional school setting. Free schools, like traditional schools, create a

bridge between the normative order of the family and public life, but the form of public life they envision rests on a different set of normative principles.

Take first the traditional school norms of independence and achievement. Dreeben characterizes independence as follows: "[P]upils learn to acknowledge that there are tasks they must do alone, and to do them that way. Along with this self-imposed obligation goes the idea that others have a legitimate right to expect such independent behavior under certain circumstances" (p. 66). The focal point for learning the norm of independence, Dreeben argues, is the formal testing situation where students are judged on their performance as individuals. The value schools place on independence is expressed by the prohibition against "cheating"—one of the primary breaches of school morality. Students must also learn to submit to being judged. Accepting the norm of achievement means learning to be evaluated, to cope with both success and failure. "Classrooms are organized around a set of core activities in which a teacher assigns tasks to pupils and evaluates and compares the quality of their work. In the course of time, pupils differentiate themselves according to how well they perform a variety of tasks, most of which require the use of symbolic skills . . . [T]hese activities force pupils to cope with various degrees of success and failure, both of which can be psychologically problematic" (p. 71).

In striking contrast, free schools subordinate individual achievement to group life and actively protect students from judgment and experiences of success and failure. The studies reviewed above on the effects of open classroom structure (Minuchin, et al., 1969; Bane, 1972a; Evans, 1975; Bennett, 1976) concur in the conclusion that open classroom pupils spend their time socializing rather than working, and working in groups rather than working alone. Group life in free schools drives out individual achievement both by dominating students' time (with meetings, parties, group discussions, and gossip) and by undermining the importance of the standards by which individual achievement might be judged.

The studies of open classrooms also reveal that students have not learned to deal with the psychological risks of being judged. The relatively poor academic performance of the progressive school students in the study by Patricia Minuchin and her colleagues (1969), for example, was explained in part by their failure to learn achievement norms, their inexperience with being evaluated, and their anxiety over the stresses of coping with success and failure. The progressive school children had not learned to put forth that burst of concentrated effort that allows good test takers to work at top speed and peak effort. Hence they attempted fewer test items than children from traditional schools. They also had particular difficulty with subtests that required using words out of context just to show that one understood them. Finally, the students had not learned to cope with evaluation in a testing situation and displayed anxiety and disruptive behavior (pp. 186-188). There is also evidence that open classrooms heighten pupils' anxiety, in part because students are not provided a clear framework to guide their activities, and in part because they do not become inured to the pains of being tested and judged (Wright, 1975; Bennett, 1976).



In place of the norm of independence, free school children learn norms of participation and openness, cooperation and group sharing. And in place of traditional achievement norms, students in free schools learn to accept a continual if subtle pressure to be unique, to follow their own interests, to display themselves—without any clear standards about how they will be judged. As Basil Bernstein (1975) has pointed out, such a pedagogy leaves larger parts of the self exposed to the group, even while it weakens the direct threat of judgment and failure. A new psychic bargain is struck between the individual and the group: the individual is offered continual appreciation and encouragement to be her "self," but at the same time there are no distinct criteria defining in advance what will be asked of the individual or setting aside some part of the individual's life as a "private" sphere not subject to the sympathetic prying of the group. Finally, the locus of judgment also shifts in free schools, from authoritative judgment by teachers to the mutual evaluation of group members.

Now consider the traditional school norms of universalism and specificity. Dreeben argues that children learn in school to accept treatment as members of a general category of students, in contrast to their treatment in the family as unique individuals who are loved on the basis of intimate, particularistic attachments. Students learn that they will be held accountable for distinct tasks (such as obedience to rules or performance on specific assignments) rather than evaluated as whole people. They learn to accept the norm of "fairness," so that they themsleves come to demand treatment on the basis of general, objective criteria rather than personal liking or attachment. "When children compare their lot—their gains and losses, rewards and punishments, privileges and responsibilities—with that of others and express dissatisfaction about their own, they have begun thinking in terms of equity" (pp. 79-80).

Group High and Ethnic High, like other free schools, not only violated norms of universalism and specificity (or fairness and impersonality) but actively worked to undermine the meaningfulness of these norms. Where students were not judged and sorted, the usual problems about fairness could not arise. As I emphasized in chapter 4, these free schools substituted for the traditional debate over fairness of tests and grades a constant concern with problems of participation, commitment, and autonomy. But the "practical ideology" of alternative schools undermined the ideal of fairness in an even more fundamental way: because the only legitimate language for expressing and evaluating motives was a "selfish" one, emphasizing personal needs for development, each person's statement of his own needs provided the only criterion against which he could be judged. This changed

vocabulary of motives "personalized" the norms of both fairness and achievement.

These standards applied throughout both Group High and Ethnic High. At Group High, where a student's individual "contract" in theory specified his academic obligations, the rejection of traditional definitions of fairness was most explicit. But as I noted earlier, teachers at both schools negotiated with students over grades and assignments, giving high grades to students who really "needed" them (to calm worried parents or raise a student's self-confidence, for example) and adapting schoolwork to students' special abilities and interests. Group High's insistence that students be evaluated not on the basis of their specific performances during the semester but in terms of how they had grown and changed as individuals is perhaps the clearest rejection of "specificity." The Ethnic High view of students as complex individuals whose lives might be transformed by their school experiences, rather than as "students" from whom specialized performances might be extracted, attests equally strongly to the same principle.

It must be stressed that these normative shifts were not simply a breakdown in traditional academic standards: they were elements of a new normative order. At other countercultural institutions, less concerned with the traditional problems of standards and impartiality that plague schools, the rejection of universalism and specificity has been just as strong. Clients of free clinics and legal collectives are treated as whole people and not in terms of particular symptoms or problems; workers in many collectives are paid on the basis of need rather than skill or performance (Taylor, 1976: 89; Rothschild-Whitt, 1977: 165-166). These countercultural institutions refuse to identify specialized roles or functions separate from the individuals who perform them and reject impersonality as the worst sin of the bureaucratic machine. Abolishing competitive individualism, attacking traditional forms of inequality, rehumanizing "dehumanized" services, and reintegrating the divided, specialized individual are the most cherished goals of countercultural organizations. These organizations replace individualism and achievement with community and equality and substitute individual uniqueness and intimacy for universalism and specificity.

### Impact of the Hidden Curriculum

Robert Dreeben (1968) argues that the norms schools teach—independence, achievement, universalism, and specificity—are the norms governing formal institutions (such as churches and unions, work organizations, the legal system, and the political order) in contrast to the norms operating in the intimate, personalized world of the family. Schools intervene on behalf of public life, teaching the child to adapt to the world outside the family.

In analyzing the social-structural role of alternative schooling, what is one to make of the diffuse (that is, intimate and nonspecialized), particularistic, collectivist, and egalitarian qualities of the free school experience? Do alternative schools attempt to govern a large secondary organization on the same principles as a family? To a certain extent organizations attempting to operate collectively do often fall back on family life for ideology, norms, and patterns of psychic functioning. To become aware of this fact we need only note the presence of the terms *brother* and *sister* in countercultural communities and the explicit desire of many contemporary collectives to be "families." When free school teachers use bonds of affection to replace authority, when the schools insist on treating students as whole people rather than producing specific skills, when students value sharing rather than achievement, then life inside these schools certainly resembles family life more closely than do most formal organizations in our society. And yet there are some important differences.

First, free schools are much more egalitarian than families. They are somewhat like a large group of siblings: a society of peers, without parents or children. The teachers are "really friends with the students," as students put it, and statuses are equalized to counterbalance the teachers' traditional advantages of age, experience, and position in the organization. In its atmosphere of intimacy and mutual affection, its reliance on motives of love and guilt to bind people to the community, the free school mimics family life. But it explicitly challenges that combination of love and domination that characterizes traditional family life in our society and carries over into the usual relationships of teachers and students in schools. If anything, the free school resembles an adolescent's fantasy of the perfect family—containing interesting, accepting parents who act like pals in a warm crowd of equals. But the significance of this pseudofamilial culture is not that it represents a regression to family norms or a temporary triumph of adolescent demands over adult controls. The normative order of free schools is itself in some ways a demanding rather than a hedonistic one, requiring students to learn autonomy and group participation in place of individualism and achievement.

Second, free schools are not purely diffuse and particularistic. Group High rejected universalistic achievement standards and tried to deal with students as unique individuals; yet in other respects the norm of universalism at Group High was much stronger than in any traditional school. Group High teachers could not discriminate among students *even* on the basis of achievement. Since the standard of achievement had been redefined so that it referred only to each student's obligation to inner growth, it offered no external criteria for judging students either against teacher demands or in comparison with one another. And the school's emphasis on group cohesion also made friendship a commodity that was distributed universally. Students and teachers were expected to apportion warmth, attention, and support with impartiality. Teachers did not pick students they liked or disliked, allowing their personal preferences to govern their behavior. As a

member of the community, everyone in the school had claims on the others. Even students were supposed to, and did to a considerable extent, suppress personal preferences. Within the school context, students were to extend to their fellows the kind of consideration, affection, and concern they might, outside of school, reserve for their own intimates.

Alternative schools do not, then, represent a regression from the norms of modern public life to those of the family. Group High taught norms appropriate to a public sphere in which social life was ordered around patterns of cooperative group effort rather than around individual performance coordinated by a central authority. These norms subordinated achievement to the ideals of personal growth and community, while within an equalitarian ethos they encouraged individual uniqueness.

But where does Ethnic High fit into this picture? What was the hidden curriculum at Ethnic High, and what, more generally, were the consequences of alternative education there? It has been clear throughout my analysis that the free school ideology was acted out more fully at Group High than at Ethnic High. Although organizational strategies for coping with the absence of authority were similar at the two schools, their normative meanings were different—in large part because Group High possessed what Ethnic High lacked: a set of ideological resources that legitimated and strengthened new patterns of collective social control. Ethnic High rejected universalism, for example, but did not establish in its place the "superuniversalism" of the collectivist counterculture. What often replaced impersonal, impartial, universalistic standards at Ethnic High was a genuine, old-fashioned particularism. Students made claims in terms of special needs or problems, friendships with teachers, or idiosyncratic charm or persuasive power. Much of the school's collective life was organized around friendship cliques rather than by a direct commitment to community.

Ethnic High's rejection of individualism and achievement norms was also ambivalent. On the one hand, students really did learn to cast off traditional definitions of achievement just as they repudiated the schools and the society that imposed such standards. They were taught that at best the larger society's achievement standards were obstacles to be mastered or subverted as practical interests dictated. On the other hand, although students valued the special freedom and respect Ethnic High offered, both they and their teachers had a lingering feeling that students should learn basic academic skills. As we saw in chapter 3, students often seemed confused by or resentful of the fact that teachers did not assert authority and insist on academic performance. Yet the normative value of independent work and academic effort was undermined; students were protected from the experience of being judged and ranked, of dealing with relative success and failure. Ethnic High's students were to gain confidence and self-assurance not from their achievement but from their claims as members of an oppressed class or racial or ethnic group.

What consequences might alternative schooling have had for the white



upper-middle-class students typical of Group High and for the working-class minority students of Ethnic High? First, I think it fair to conclude that most of the potential advantages of free school education serve the educated upper-middle class, while its weaknesses are particularly damaging to poorer, less academically advantaged students. This contrast has, I believe, been typical of the entire free school movement. Although alternative teaching has been proposed (largely by upper-middle-class white educators) as a remedy for the failure of traditional schooling to reach the educationally disadvantaged, such schools have had their greatest popularity in the educated upper-middle class. In Berkeley, the alternative schools with predominantly minority students and staff began to insist on increasingly structured education even while they retained an emphasis on ethnic history and culture. There were deep divisions among staff and students in some of the Berkeley alternative schools, with minority students and staff favoring more structure and discipline (Baum, 1974). Michael Katz (1971:136) and Carole Joffe (1977) have pointed to the tension between the goals of educational reformers and the demands of many minority parents who want a traditional but more effective education for their children.

It seems justifiable to conclude (as have others, both friends and foes of free schools [Graubard, 1972; Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Friedman, n.d.]), that free schools are not likely to reduce economic or educational inequality. Indeed, the educationally advantaged students in upper-middle-class schools may suffer little educational harm in the relatively lenient free school atmosphere, whereas lower-class students, who need more conventional academic help, may be hurt by free school pedagogy. Though evidence concerning the academic effects of alternative education is not conclusive, the hidden curriculum of free schools does seem to serve the cultural interests of a segment of the educated middle class. Yet this is not quite the whole story. Although the hidden curriculum of free schools is designed to fit middle-class needs, it has some advantages for less privileged students.

Ethnic High offered its students certain concrete benefits. By ignoring or defining away academic failure, Ethnic High gave academic credentials to students who might otherwise have failed, dropped out of school, or graduated with poor academic records. If, as some have argued (for example Collins, 1971; Jencks et al., 1972), educational credentials are more important for occupational success than the skills schools teach, then Ethnic High may have served its students well simply by giving them high school diplomas. As a grateful student put it at her Ethnic High graduation, "I never thought I'd get through school. It's better to have twelve years than twenty [in prison]." The argument for the importance of Ethnic High's degree-granting function is even more persuasive in view of the evidence that no currently available educational techniques will significantly reduce the gap in academic skills between middle-class and working-class students (Jencks et al., 1972). From that perspective, leaving students educationally disadvantaged while providing them with educational credentials in an atmosphere

that protects their happiness and self-respect may be a valuable accomplishment.

But even Ethnic High's hidden curriculum, its implicit normative order, had its advantages. Without developing a full-blown countercultural ideology, Ethnic High taught students an ideology of *entitlement*. The encouragement of ethnic pride and the protection from potentially humiliating academic judgment meant that students were spared the message that they had "earned" their low station in life. Indeed, students were taught that they were deserving, that they had a right to more in life—whether in traditional terms they had earned it or not. Perhaps in this way Ethnic High most effectively countered the normative assumptions of traditional schooling.

Ethnic High's students absorbed a sense of entitlement in two ways. First, they learned to manipulate bureaucratic machinery. The ability to get around high school requirements, fight one's way into special programs, or persuade administrators to bend rules came naturally to Group High's students. Students at Ethnic High, encouraged by their teachers, came to expect and to be willing to fight for similar special treatment. Second, the school's emphasis on self-confidence and ethnic identity taught students that they deserved society's rewards just for being who they were. As they learned to value the knowledge and skills that were part of their background, students also learned to make claims to special benefits based on their racial or ethnic status. Most important, they learned to want new things—from better jobs to more political power—and to presume that they were worthy of possessing them. If this sounds like a dubious virtue, we must remember how much the success of middle-class people is based on their having learned to expect the good things in life whether or not they deserve them—from presuming that they are among the deserving. Although this attitude challenges the "hard knocks" view of many working-class families who stress discipline and work, the norms of entitlement may be more effective for achieving both mobility into certain middle-class careers (like the Chicano student at Ethnic High who knew that he had the right to demand special admission to college and then to law school and declared that no one was going to stop him) and the ability to deal effectively with bureaucratic organizations.

The academic impact of alternative schools, then, is largely neutral. In comparison with traditional schools they probably do not enhance learning and may put at least some students at a disadvantage. On the other hand, students seem happier in alternative schools; if the schools do little or no academic harm, perhaps on balance they constitute an improvement—particularly for students who are unhappy in traditional schools. But thinking of schools in terms of how well they teach skills takes account of only one aspect of schooling. In addition to teaching academic skills, schools both embody and convey cultural models of social life. The evaluation of this aspect of school success must depend on the social futures toward which students of various sorts may be headed.

# 7

# FREE SCHOOLS AND THE MOVEMENT FOR CHANGE

ALTHOUGH THE CULTURAL and political ferment of the 1960s left its mark on popular attitudes and public policy, the revolutionary optimism of that period has been replaced by a cautious "realism" and the reduced aspirations of an era of limits. These developments leave the social theorist in an awkward position. To insist that nothing has changed seems a return to the ill-founded complacency of the 1950s. But to embrace recent events as harbingers of social transformation is to slip into a different, and perhaps more dangerous, smugness about the significance of our own times. I shall try to avoid both these dangers. Although doubting that reforms as limited in scope and as evanescent as free schools herald the dawning of a new age, I do think these movements were significant and should be taken seriously. They embodied, in dramatically heightened form, important new social forces.

Interpreting educational experiments is particularly difficult because of the wide disagreement about the social functions of schooling. The traditional sociological view (harmonizing with the popular notion that universal public education is the crowning jewel of American democracy) has been that education promotes economic and social mobility. Schooling prepares people for, and distributes them within, the occupational structure of modern societies (Eisenstadt, 1956; Parsons, 1959; Dreeben, 1968; Jencks and Riesman, 1968). According to this view, changes in schooling reflect changes in the technical or social skills required for economic success. More recently, however, it has been broadly recognized that schooling contributes to individual success more by sorting and credentialing than by educating the young (Jencks et al., 1972). Critics of schooling point out that an emphasis on educational credentials reinforces social inequality (Collins, 1971), making the educational arena the locus of status and class conflict.