

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Peter Demerath, *Producing Success: The Culture of Personal Advancement in an American High School*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009, 224pp. \$US 22.00 paper (978-0-226-14241-8), \$US 55.00 hardcover (978-0-226-14239-5)

Wilton High School celebrates personal success and excellence. The multitude of competitive programs, the awards that line the school's walls and the no less than three graduating award ceremonies are a testament to its symbolic importance. At Wilton, students rise to the occasion, and an unprecedented 90% of its student population enter some form of postsecondary institution. Yet, we learn that students' personal success is not so personal after all. The extraordinary achievement enjoyed by Wilton students takes a village to produce.

Producing Success is the fruit of four years of intensive field research at a highly competitive middle-class high school in the US Midwest. As Demerath's title indicates, parents and school officials at Wilton maximize students' advancement through the careful construction of symbolic capital that is rewarded by postsecondary institutions and labour markets. Chapters 1–3 outline the cultural roots, parenting practices and institutional resources that produce success at Wilton. Chapters 4–6 show how these socialization processes contribute to a highly instrumental view of education, stress, and inequality. The final chapter reveals the downside of hyper-competition, particularly for low or average achieving students and for African American students.

Like contemporaries such as Annette Lareau, Demerath demonstrates processes of advantage. These works suggest that middle-class families are raising the bar in a big way. For such parents, the traditional markers of middle class childrearing (e.g., helping with homework) are only a small part of what it means to be a good parent. Instead, new middle class parenting strategies also include the brute manipulation of the school system.

Parents at Wilton intervened in their children's academics in a variety of ways. Besides frequently asking teachers to justify a particular grade, some parents resorted to threatening legal action. Other parents used different "tricks." To net their child extra time, for example, parents routinely excused their children from school on test days or when an

assignment was due. Parents at Wilton also strongly influenced student placement. Teachers complained that parents actively sought IEPs (Individual Education Plans), which afford students various aids, including extra time on assignments or tests. According to some teachers, “parents [are] looking to get any edge they can” and the “IEP has become a vehicle ... so the kid can get into a better college” (p. 57). As one teacher explained, “there are no average kids in Wilton. You are either gifted or special ed. And special ed. is a good thing here” (p. 56).

To some degree, schools are complicit in this process. In an effort to raise its own institutional worth, Wilton often surrendered to parental demands. Wilton also produced a number of award and recognition programs that strengthened students’ position on education and job markets. Awards included: Honour Roll, Merit Award, Junior Book Award, Honors Diploma, Hall of Fame, Academic Honor Awards, Scholar Athlete Award, Celebration of Excellence Medal, and 12 Seasons of Greatness (given to any student who played three sports for four years). A Student of the Month award was created specifically “because some students may not get any recognition” (p. 76). Teachers also admitted to “double dipping,” creating awards for students who had received awards in the community. In 2003, there were forty-seven valedictorians, and almost half of graduating students that year received some sort of award at one of three recognition ceremonies. Some of these awards confer favour at the best postsecondary institutions and increase the likelihood of a highly sought after entrance scholarship. Demerath describes how the number of IEPs, awards, and high grade point averages have proliferated, bordering (in his words) on credential fraud.

The road map Demerath and others provide is invaluable. Privileged groups are often inaccessible to researchers. Sociology also tends to favour studies of disadvantage. Yet the other side of the reproduction coin is how privilege is actively created. By tapping into the social worlds of high-achieving families, this book contributes to understanding the mechanisms of class reproduction. What do educated parents and schools actually do, and how do such practices reproduce advantages? These are the questions that work such as Demerath’s helps us answer.

Most sociologists will note that the book is not tied together by one unifying theoretical framework. A few gratuitous nods to race, neoliberal and critical scholarships are not worked out. However, the quality of the data and clearly written prose make this book a worthy read. *Producing Success* is a suitable complement to any undergraduate family or education course.

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