

“Doing School”: How We Are Creating a Generation of Stressed Out, Materialistic, and Miseducated Students

By Denise Clark Pope

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Reviewed by

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The messages about success are fairly clear in American culture, and by high school, most students have that message ingrained. Success is linked to financial wealth, and the first step to getting there is gaining admission to a “good” college. With the growing pressure to attend a good college, however, come some disturbing outcomes: sleep deprivation, emotional stress, health problems, and sometimes questionable practices, all in the pursuit of the highest grades. Sadly, the pursuit of education out of passion and curiosity to learn, and the satisfaction to create something of pride and impact, often are not part of this experience.

In the book *“Doing School”: How We Are Creating A Generation of Stressed Out, Materialistic, and Miseducated Students*, Stanford educator Denise Clark Pope examines these phenomena through five case studies at Faircrest, a large, diverse public high school with strong academic programs and teaching, where 95% of the graduates continue on to college. Pope “shadows” each of the five students over one semester, attending classes with them and using interviews, journals and notes to address the students’ goals and motivations. A disturbing profile unfolds between what the students wish to achieve and what they feel are the necessary steps for being successful.

The first chapter describes Fairview High and the methods for choosing the students for Pope’s study, which involved recommendations from teachers and guidance counselors. The description of the school’s mission and the students’ perception are in marked contrast. Pope challenges the reader to examine the five student stories in the context of broader questions about education:

What kind of behavior is fostered by the expectations of the school community and by those outside of the school? Can students meet these expectations without sacrificing personal and academic goals and beliefs? Can parents encourage their children to strive for future success without pushing too hard or advocating questionable behavior? What can school teachers and administrators do in light of the constraints of college admission requirements and national education policies that spur competition for high grades and test scores? Are we fostering an environment that promotes intellectual curiosity, cooperation, and integrity, or are our schools breeding anxiety, deception, and frustration?

Each subsequent chapter is devoted to one of the students and is told solely from their perspectives. No parents, teachers, or administrators were interviewed, which allows the reader to examine the unfiltered life of a high school student. The students' honesty with Pope is striking; the students disclose their achievements, frustrations, compromises, and breaches of ethics with her. The reader subsequently sees rich, often conflicted stories of struggle and purpose. Collectively, the stories show a diversity of cultural and economic backgrounds, achievement levels, and goals. All students' actual names are used; there are no aliases, yet the candor is still evident in what the students choose to share with Pope.

The first student profiled is Kevin Romoni, a "3.8 kind of guy" who has discovered how to work the high school system to his advantage. A self-described procrastinator, Kevin's pressure stems from this last-minute approach to his studies and the expectations he feels from his family. Pope describes Kevin's style of doing school as "minimalist": he is doing just what he needs to get by, and he supplements his work by creating strong relationships with school teachers and administrators so that he can approach them when things go awry. His style of treating both teachers and students with politeness is genuine; however, Kevin wants to please those around him. What is less clear is what makes Kevin feel genuinely fulfilled. Pope discusses Kevin's dilemma of being authentic and of pursuing his studies the way that he feels would most engage him, but how he instead produces what he believes is expected of him in order to reach his goals.

The second student is Eve Lin, the overachiever whom Pope describes as "the high school machine." Her goal is admission to Harvard University, and Eve not only has each moment of her entire day plotted out with activities and work, she has developed a system of multi-tasking to further her achievements. The competition between Eve and her friends is so intense that they maintain a sense of secrecy about their grades with each other, which raises an interesting question about the nature and depth of their social relationships. Eve's involvement in various activities, both academic and social, have an impact on her health and on her personal well-being. Ultimately, Eve is conflicted about whether she is truly enjoying her time in high school and consciously making the choices in her frantic life, or if she has succumbed to outside pressures.

Teresa Gomez, the third student in the book, shows yet another perspective of a driven student, within the context of class and background. Teresa is the only child of a single parent who immigrated to the United States from Mexico. She lives in an apartment in a less affluent part of the city, and shares her bedroom with her aunt and her baby nephew. Because Teresa speaks English well, she often has to run errands with family members to translate for them, and she works nearly full-time to help support herself. She stands in marked contrast to the previous two student profiles, who have numerous amenities and do not need to work. Teresa loses time to studying as a result, and is often sick during the school year. Her profile presents a teenager who has been faced with many adult life issues, cultural and language barriers at school, and little time to address being successful for herself. Teresa wants a challenging academic experience and strives to go to college; however, her circumstances make achieving these goals inconsistent, and her means for getting there are beset by obstacles that the other students do not face.

One of the more intriguing profiles is about Michelle Spence, whose desire to learn was cultivated in a private school she attended from 3rd to 8th grade. This educational model taught her to seek out a similar academic experience in high school and her challenges become finding that within the parameters of a much larger, constrained, public school. Michelle does not like the competition she experiences in her classes, and feels that this is having an impact on her health and her ability to have a rewarding experience. Until high school, Michelle's messages both in school and from her parents are that it is important to have a good learning experience and not just to get "the A." Pope observes that "much of what (Michelle) was learning in (the public) school was about conformity and 'playing the system.'" We see possibilities in Michelle's profile—how students can learn by doing what they are passionate about, how students can find rewards in struggling to find that passion, and how to have genuine student-teacher interactions. What is disturbing is watching how Michelle departs from her convictions to comply with the system that the others have engaged in because she understands that this is what she needs to do to succeed.

Roberto Morales is the last student in the book, and his story demonstrates the issues of "having values" in a high school system that seems to reward those who engage in questionable practices to get ahead. Roberto is well aware of the cheating going on around him, but refuses to use those methods to get better grades. He does not "work the system" by developing relationships with his teachers and counselors so that if things run afoul he can approach them. Instead, Roberto feels that it is disrespectful to question his teachers, or even speak out to obtain their attention when they are clearly neglecting him. This sense of morality holds out until Roberto is put under extreme stress, and like the other students, he too bends his values to produce the results he needs. Like the others, Roberto feels pressure to succeed, and his coping mechanisms demonstrate the differences in how gender plays a role in managing stress.

While there are only five student profiles, it is not difficult to imagine that most students engage in very similar behaviors in their pursuit of success in school. In all the student cases, some constants exist. Foremost is the stress on achievement. Every student feels enormous pressure to do well and accomplish their goals, at whatever price. Often, the cost was their own moral standards or the genuine pursuit of knowledge. Many questionable academic practices are revealed in each profile and in every circumstance the students defend their actions as a necessary component to achieving the grades they feel are essential to their goals.

The authenticity that Pope discusses at the beginning of the book is the price: we see these students abandoning the types of activities, convictions, and practices that one would think would be the most valuable for young adults, particularly those going on to college and becoming the leaders in society. It is this definition of "success"—one that is contrasted with material wealth and not personal satisfaction or moral conviction—that is distressing. Pope's final chapter about "The Predicament of 'Doing School'" raises this and other pressing points about how the American educational system is currently structured and whether it is in line with what we would hope to shape in our children and young adults. The book challenges both high school and college educators to re-examine

the existing educational structures to see if the goals we truly seek for our students are being met.