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ABSTRACT

By looking at three high school assemblies, this paper addresses the resolution of a tension generated by the interplay of the American egalitarian belief in the right of all persons to equal educational opportunities and the potentially countervailing belief in individualism and individual achievement. That is, while American society espouses a belief in the right of every citizen to equal educational opportunity, there are vast discrepancies in the educational outcomes experienced by its citizens. To resolve any dissonance generated by what might appear to be an inequitable and undemocratic development, American society relies extensively on the "myth of educational opportunity." This paper focuses on three school assemblies held at one high school that served as rituals that both transmitted and affirmed cultural values. It shows how the myth of educational opportunity was promoted and how cultural interpretations were enacted and reproduced in the process of formal schooling. The assemblies promoted the myth of educational opportunity in a ritualized fashion by altering spatial and temporal dimensions of these events, by highlighting particular cultural values, and by having heroes who embodied these cultural ideals deliver the talks. Various persons (including students, teachers, and administrators) shared many of these heroes' perceptions regarding individualism and the myth of educational opportunity. Although these assemblies represented efforts by the speakers, teachers, and school system to help students achieve by increasing their motivation, the viewing of student achievement through the lens of American culture predisposed these people to understand student success and failure as an individual phenomenon attributable to individual initiative and determination. Contains 47 references. (LMI)

RITUAL REAFFIRMATION OF INDIVIDUALISM IN HIGH SCHOOL ASSEMBLIES

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[I]f anarchy is to be avoided, the individuals who make up a society must from time to time be reminded, at least in symbol, of the underlying order that is supposed to guide their social activities. Ritual performances have this function for the participating group as a whole; they momentarily make explicit what is otherwise a fiction (Edmund Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, 1954:16).

Individualism is a cultural value consistently promoted and enacted in American high school settings. It is evident throughout school life--permeating the curriculum, classroom pedagogy, assessment practices, and school policies and structures (e.g., Henry 1965; McDermott and Hood 1982; Shultz 1986). For instance, since all students are individuals with particular needs and interests, schools have developed special programs--what Powell et al. (1985) termed a "shopping mall" of offerings--that acknowledge student diversity and seek to meet the needs of these many unique individuals. So students can take advantage of these opportunities, they are scheduled individually. Despite the increasing popularity of cooperative learning strategies, in most classrooms students work and are graded primarily as individuals (Boyer 1983; Goodlad 1983). Moreover, formal sanctions are most often administered individually, taking into account particular circumstances and a student's past history (Henry 1965).[1] Finally, in the American cultural conception, individual effort, a fundamental enactment of individualism, is vital to educational success. As Jackson noted, "trying" is so valued that teachers may reward individual effort even when accompanied by academic failure:

> Consider...the common teaching practice of giving a student credit for trying. What do teachers mean when they say a student tries to do his work? They mean, in essence, that he....does his homework...he raises his hand during class discussion...he keeps his nose in the book during free study period....He is, in other words, a "model" student, though not necessarily a good one. It is difficult to imagine any of today's teachers...failing a student who tries, even though his mastery of course content is slight (1968:34).

Moreover, in the American conception of individualism, individuals have the power to influence their condition. As Spindler et al. observed: the individual "can achieve success if he or she works hard enough and...can improve social status because the social structure is open and hard work will get you there" (1990:23; see also Mason 1955; Warner 1953). This belief in the power of individuals to act on their own behalf has critical implications for how society views a related concept, individual responsibility. In brief, if individuals control their fate, the responsibility for failure lies with the individual. As Warner wrote:

> Americans--devout advocates of individualism--believe that individualism means that each man [sic] has within himself the right to make his own choices and to make or break his life-career on the basis of his own judgments. If a man makes a decision and it does not turn out right in the American system of social logics, we, more often

than not, believe that it is his own fault. We may feel sorry for him, but still we feel that it is likely to be his own fault (Warner 1953:138-9).

Since American society commonly views individuals as able to control their lives, the problems they encounter are often understood as a consequence of individual inadequacies rather than broader social conditions. Society therefore tends to focus attention and effort on individual achievement and failure and to disregard or underestimate broader social forces--outside the influence of individual actors--that contribute to these problems.[2] Yet, as Bellah et al. maintain, it is naive to accept this sense of empowerment and responsibility uncritically:

> [M]any of the myths in our fiction and popular culture have avoided coming to terms with [the] transformation [from a largely agrarian small-town society of early nineteenth-century America...into the bureaucratic industrial society of today]....Instead, they have romanticized individualism and ignored those traditions that might help us today (1985:302).

While Warner's analysis of the interrelationship between individualism and individual responsibility was directed at the larger societal arena, a similar interpretation appears to influence American schools. That is, students, teachers, administrators, and the educational system often view student failure as an individual problem attributable to personal, idiosyncratic shortcomings, and thereby frequently leave relevant systemic factors unexamined or define them as outside their control.

By looking a three high school assemblies, this paper addresses the resolution of a tension that arises from the nature of American culture, a tension generated by the interplay of our egalitarian belief in the right of all persons to equal educational opportunity and the potentially countervailing belief in individualism and individual achievement. That is, while American society espouses a belief in the right of every citizen to equal educational opportunity, there are vast discrepancies in the educational outcomes experienced by our citizens. To resolve any dissonance generated by what might appear to be an inequitable and undemocratic development, our society relies extensively on the "myth of educational opportunity": the belief that educational opportunity exists for all Americans but that realizing this opportunity depends in great part on individual effort. Consequently, as a society we associate academic success with individual effort. Anthony Carmello, one assembly speaker featured in this paper, drew on this belief when he told his student audience: "I GOT HUNGRY. I *WANTED* TO SUCCEED."[3] Conversely, we often attribute student failure to a lack of individual effort and

initiative. Lt. Ellis D. Jones, another speaker presented in this paper, reflected this interpretation of American culture when he addressed an auditorium filled with students and faculty: "IF YOU DON'T MAKE IT, THERE IS NO EXCUSE! IF YOU DON'T MAKE IT, IT MEANS YOU DIDN'T WORK HARD ENOUGH TO GET IT!"

To gain some idea for how the myth of educational opportunity was promoted at Earvin High (the site of this study) and how cultural interpretations essential for preserving this myth--particularly regarding individualism--were enacted and reproduced in the process of formal schooling, this paper focuses on three Earvin High assemblies which served as rituals that both transmitted and affirmed cultural values (e.g., Hill-Burnett 1969; Lesko 1986). As Durkheim wrote, rituals

> express the way in which society represents man and the world....[they] sustain the vitality of these [cultural] beliefs, to keep them from being effaced from memory and, in sum, to revivify the most essential elements of the collective consciousness. Through it, the group periodically renews the sentiment which it has of itself and of its unity; at the same time, individuals are strengthened in their social natures (1965:420; see also, Turner 1969; Turner and Turner 1982; Warner 1953; Warner et al. 1963).

To understand the nature of these ritual experiences, this paper explores multiple aspects of these school assemblies. Since spacio-temporal dimensions of ritual settings are often manipulated to signal importance and heighten a ritual's effect (e.g., Duranti 1985; Durkheim 1965; Hill-Burnett 1969; Leach 1976; Turner 1969, 1974), the first section of this paper collapses *when* and *where* to reveal how spatial and temporal structures were altered for these assemblies. Second, this paper considers *who* was the focus of each assembly and how these persons sought to create "heroic" (Warner et al. 1963) personas by highlighting what they had achieved in their lives.[4] The third and most extensive section of this paper focuses on *what* these persons said: in particular, how they linked individual initiative with success and attributed failure to a lack of effort. The final section examines how students, teachers, and administrators reacted to these speakers.

Throughout this paper I discuss various persons' belief systems. In doing so I draw on "connectionist theories of cognition" (Rumelhart et al. 1986), viewing belief systems as schemata organized in terms of "learned associations" (Strauss 1988:314). Thus, in discussing their beliefs (in this case regarding issues of educational opportunity), people are likely to link those ideas which they associate with one another and see as logically interconnected. As Strauss elaborated:

> I take beliefs to be stored not as sentences in a central memory bank but as patterns of learned associations....Ideologies, according to this model, are not necessarily internalized as propositions. Oft-heard or personally significant sentences (for example, "The rich get richer and the poor get poorer") may be retained in this propositional way, but ideologies embodied in rituals, nonsentential symbols, and daily routines are internalized...less as explicit theory than as *implicit knowledge of what goes with what* (Strauss 1988) (19xx; emphasis added).

As will be discussed, the similar associations that emerged in all three assembly presentations as well as in the responses by students, teachers, and administrators speak to both the influence of culture and the speakers' and audience's commitment to the myth of educational opportunity.

The Assembly Settings

This paper looks at three assemblies attended by Earvin High students. The first, "The Advanced Educational Opportunities (AEO) Conference," was held in December, 1986. As the *Eastown Gazette* reported, this conference represented a cooperative effort by state educational and occupational agencies "to increase the number of minority and low-income high school students who enter and graduate from post-secondary institutions." The featured speaker was Charles Robinson, an African-American star from a popular television series. The assembly lasted about an hour. Robinson spoke for slightly more than 20 minutes.

The second assembly took place in the winter of 1989 and featured Lt. Ellis D. Jones, an African-American and former Navy fighter pilot who told students that: "Education + Hard Work - Drugs = Success and the American Dream".[5] The *Eastown Gazette* included the following description of the assembly:

> Ellis D. Jones, a former Navy jet bomber pilot strafed Eastown high school and middle school students with an anti-drug message yesterday, silenced their excuses and left them clutching at college, careers and the wild blue yonder. Students giggled, roared, fell silent and sometimes choked up as Jones piloted them through an hour of verbal acrobatics many had never seen equaled. Alternatively soft and strident, Jones bombarded the students with the endless possibilities that a life free of drugs but full of education offers.

Earvin High students were bused to a local middle school to attend this talk.

The third assembly was held in October of 1989 and featured Anthony Carmello, a White motivational expert and career consultant whose talk was entitled, "A Lifestyle By Choice, Not Chance." The assistant principal who introduced Carmello told students that the assembly had two

goals: "One, to explain to you what motivation is, to help you do better in school. Because, as we tell you so often, that's the key to success in life. The second...is to talk about careers." This assembly lasted slightly more than an hour-and-a-half and was attended by Earvin's Alliance School students.

In many respects, these assemblies broke from Earvin High routines--a common means to enhance a ritual's significance (Hill-Burnett 1969; Turner 1974). For instance, students were dismissed from class to attend these assemblies and each assembly lasted longer than a normal school period. These events also brought together students who normally would be separated during the school day. A local middle school, for example, hosted the "American Dream" assembly for three different Eastown schools and the AEO Conference included seniors from every city high school, a feature that seems particularly significant since large student gatherings, aside from lunch, were infrequent at Earvin.[6]

In addition, the settings where these assemblies were held were altered for these presentations. At the AEO Conference an American flag and a state flag stood on the auditorium stage and an Earvin High banner hung behind the speakers seated on the stage. For the motivational/career consultant, the auditorium was set up with a portable microphone system (like *The Phil Donahue Show*) so that Anthony Carmello could walk and converse among students. Lt. Jones' manipulation of the assembly setting was perhaps the most dramatic. When all students were seated for his presentation, the auditorium lights were dimmed so the audience could view a videotape of Jones landing his A-6 jet on an aircraft carrier, set to the music of the Michael Jackson song, "Bad." Six students then introduced Brown:

> First student: "How many of you have seen the movie Top Gun?"
>
> Second student: "How many women did you see flying airplanes in that movie?" [Audience: "None."]
>
> Third student: "How many Orientals did you see flying airplanes in that movie?" [Audience: "None."]
>
> Fourth student: "How many Hispanics did you see flying airplanes in that movie?" [Audience: "None."]
>
> Fifth student: "How many Blacks did you see flying airplanes in that movie? [Audience: "One."] And where was he sitting?" [Audience: "In the back."]
>
> Sixth student: "I'd like you to take a look at the back of the auditorium and see a real top gun, Lt. Ellis Jones. HE'S NOT TOM CRUISE!"

Wearing a blue flight suit, a yellow cravat, and mirror sunglasses Jones entered from the rear of the auditorium and strode to the mike amidst the stares and chatter of students. Standing at the podium with the auditorium lights reflecting off his sunglasses he began:

> You know, they got these punks walkin' around here called the bloods and the crips. These punk gangs. THESE PUNK GANGS! Hold up! You got your PUNK gangs walking around here talking about that they're bad. Even Mike Tyson the heavyweight champion of the world says that he's bad. Michael Jackson has the *audacity* to say that he's bad. [Audience laughs.] Guess what? They're not bad. *I'm* bad. [Audience hoots: "Oooohhh."] I'm bad `cause I can fly 550 miles per hour, 50 feet from the ground and carry 28 five hundred pound bombs under my wings. I have the expertise, the technology and the know-how not to just take out this school but to take out this *entire* neighborhood, and *that's* bad. [Audience: "Oooohhh."] And you see, if them PUNKS come botherin' me with those 357's and 44's and shotguns and even their *colors* [audience laughs], if them punk gangs come botherin' me, I'm in a gang, too, and its called the United States Navy and if they bother me enough, I'll go get my boys and we'll come take out Eastown. [Audience: "Oooooohhhhhh."][7]

Heroes As Cultural Ideals

In addition to deviating from school routines, each assembly included a hero, a speaker who "condensed" multiple values and meanings into a single symbol (Kertzer 1988:11; see also Tambiah 1985; Turner 1969).[8] In their classic study of Yankee City, Warner et al. alluded to the symbolic power of a hero:

> [A] hero always expresses fundamental and important themes of the culture in which he is found....Each theme is a symbolic statement which relates and organizes some of the beliefs and values of a community or a nation to each other and to the group. Rational thought is not the real source of evocative symbols or the themes, values, and beliefs expressed by them. The creation of heroic forms, their crystallization around actual persons, makes these themes and the beliefs and values they represent manifest in a human being. In this way they easily become emotionally and convincingly understandable to everyone, with personal meaning to the young as well as to the mature, the unlettered and the lowly as well as to the educated....Abstract principles, precepts, and moral judgments are consequently more easily felt and understood, and more highly valued, when met in a human being endowed with a symbolic form that expresses them. Obviously, the "hero" is ideally suited to this role (1963:210-11).

Beyond fusing cultural ideals, Warner et al. maintained that heroes may inspire imitation and reassure those who share their values:

> [The hero's] presence serves as a model for imitation and learning and for the measurement of [one's] own moral inadequacies. Further, the hero arouses the hopes and fears of those who believe in him, and he energizes and gives social direction to some of their anxieties....The belief in a hero helps single members of a group to relate themselves more effectively to each other and to the general and more universal beliefs and values of the whole society....and can release the individual from anxiety and reward him with faith that his hopes are, or are about to be,

> realized. Such belief is always exciting and reassuring to the individual in his private world, but the excitement is greatly increased when, from the evidence of his senses and the physical presence of his hero, he can publicly validate his faith (1963:211-12).

In many ways, the featured speakers at these assemblies embodied American cultural ideals. All felt that they had achieved material well-being, a commonly accepted sign of individual virtue in the context of American culture (e.g., Bellah et al. 1985; Henry 1965; Mason 1955; Spindler and Spindler 1983). Ellis Jones became an airline pilot because they make "$175,000 a year workin' eight to ten to twelve days a month." Charles Robinson told his audience, "[In 1971] I was making more than $2,000 every week in television and Broadway." And Anthony Carmello stated flatly: "I made a lot of money. So what?"

Each speaker also cited how he had succeeded in his field. Charles Robinson observed:

> Not very long ago...my future was very bright....I was starring on Broadway. The world was my oyster. I was one of the toasts of the town of New York. My picture was on the front page of the *New York Times* "Arts and Leisure" section. It said, "Charles Robinson--nothing can stop him now." People were askin' for my autograph outside the theater. I was starring on television with Michelle Morgan[9] in the "Michelle Morgan and Charles Robinson Show." I had a penthouse apartment on Riverside Drive overlooking the Hudson River....I had an antique Mercedes Benz and a brand new Mustang....I went to all the big openings. I had the personal private phone number for Barbara Streisand and Diana Ross and Michael Jackson and Bill Cosby. My name was up in lights. I had it made.

A fighter pilot, Ellis Jones explained in the "voice over" to the video that preceded his performance: "I wanted to do something exciting. Something that people just don't do. Flying an airplane off an aircraft carrier is the *crème de la crème*. It's number one." The third speaker, Anthony Carmello, did not portray himself as a cultural hero *per se*. In fact, he told his audience a number of times not to follow his example but to learn from his mistakes. Nonetheless, throughout his talk he highlighted personal accomplishments--citing the names of prominent schools where he had spoken (e.g., Boston Latin and the Bronx School of Science), and describing his business successes ("I brought the Michelin tire company into this country.").

Finally, each speaker alluded to himself as a rugged individualist who, having overcome adversity, warranted student attention. Charles Robinson, for instance, told his audience: "I paid a very, very high price in time, in money, in sickness, in depression, in desperation. And I paid very

dearly for the right to tell you today that I know what I'm talkin' about." Ellis Jones cited his military experience as reason students should listen to him:

> I PUT MY LIFE ON THE LINE FOR EACH AND EVERY ONE OF YOU SO I SAY EXACTLY WHAT I WANT TO SAY ANYTIME I WANT TO SAY IT! I WAS IN BEIRUT AND I WAS IN LIBYA AND ALMOST DIED FOR Y'ALL! **I ALMOST DIED FOR YOU!**

Urging students to learn from his mistakes, Anthony Carmello told his audience:

> Thirty years ago and thirty pounds ago, with a black leather jacket on my back and a cigarette hanging out of my mouth, if you had the misfortune of looking at me the wrong way, I'd rip your eyes out of your head....When I was 13-years old, I hit the streets running. I didn't stop running for about four years. I wrote the book on being a jerk as a young man. I didn't want to listen to my family. I spent most of my days, all of my nights, in some of...the worst places that you could imagine. I'm not here to play games with you. I'm here to help you....If you use me as a role model, you'll deal yourself more grief than you ever dreamed existed. I screwed up everything I touched as a young man. If you use me as a point of reference--I'm willing to share with you my life's experience--I could help you avoid much of the grief that I encountered.

After establishing why students should take account of what they would say, these speakers moved to the body of their talks.

The Power of Individual Initiative and the Value of Education

As connectionist theories of cognitive development would imply, a series of interconnected themes (among others) ran through the speeches at these assemblies. These included discussions of the power and autonomy of individual actors, the link between effort and success, and the importance of education. In terms of individual autonomy, the speakers portrayed individual actors as empowered, able to influence significant events in her or his life. As Lt. Jones remarked:

> You have to make the decision: either you're gonna be like me and do the drivin', or memorize this because you'll be sayin' it for the rest of your life: "Two-sixty-five, please." SEE, EITHER YOU BUST YOUR BUTT...IN HIGH SCHOOL AND BUST YOUR BUTT IN COLLEGE, and then be like me and *slide* for the rest of your life, or you can just slide now and work forever....See, either you work for three-thirty-five an hour with the decimal point after the three, or you work hard now and you work for three-thirty-five an hour with the decimal point after the five. *It is up to you.*

While discussing college admissions, Anthony Carmello maintained that individuals had considerable control over their ultimate choice:

> HEY FOLKS, COME ON! You can go to college *anywhere you choose*....You got to know how to play the game. You want to go to [an Ivy League] University, and you're not accepted. What do you do about it? You go somewhere else, and you *prove* yourself. You ace your courses....[If] you are an honors student...[y]ou will transfer into...almost any school you choose.

He presented career choice from a similar perspective:

> You see the major contributing factor why so many people are unhappy in the working world is because so many people allow themselves to fall into a career. You don't have to *fall* into anything. You can *choose* what you'll do for a living.

Later, he spoke in general of the power of individual initiative when combined with commitment:

> You're gonna get whatever you want. Whatever you focus on in your life or you commit yourself to, *you* are going to achieve. It's a matter of mind-set....Anything your mind can conceive, we say, the body ultimately will achieve.

And in the words of Charles Robinson, success was a matter of individual choice: "Choose success and you'll achieve success. Choose quality in your life, then commit to it, and you will have it. Quality is never an accident. It's always the result of...sincere effort, intelligent direction, and skillful execution."

These speakers' view of individual empowerment closely tied to a second theme they shared: that effort and determination, when combined with education, will lead to success. Although each cited some idiosyncratic reasons for his success in life--Lt. Jones emphasized his father's influence, Carmello credited his wife's patience, and Robinson felt that God helped him overcome cocaine addiction--all three attributed much of their success to individual perseverance and education. Lt. Jones, for example, told students, "I never quit":

> I learned, from being a little boy, I don't quit anything. I do not quit anything. Why do you think I'm a pilot? Do you think in the projects my father had an airplane and he used to come up to me and say, "Come on son, let's take a little spin?" Why do you think I'm a pilot?....I joined the Navy and I studied I studied I studied I studied I studied. I didn't even know how to spell "aerodynamics" when I got in the Navy. I knew *nothing* about flying. But I really studied hard.....I NOW AM AN AIRLINE PILOT....AND THE ONLY REASON I'M AN AIRLINE PILOT IS 'CAUSE I NEVER QUIT!

Later in his talk, Jones again linked education with personal success:

> You know the only thing that makes me bad? I HAVE A COLLEGE EDUCATION! THAT'S WHAT MAKES ME BAD!...YOU SEE, SINCE I TOOK MY BUTT TO COLLEGE, MY LEVEL OF FUN IS UP HERE. When I party, I party in Paris. When I jam, I jam in Jamaica. I do the cabbage patch in Monte Carlo. [Audience laughs.] Since I went to college I'm so bad, I do the "butt" in the Bahamas. [Audience laughs.]

By the end of his presentation, Jones was explicit about the need for education:

> The truth is that this is 1989, and if you don't plan on gettin' an education, I'm sorry to say this...[but] you're gonna be a bum....[T]hat's the truth. How did they keep black people down 200 hundred years ago? HOW DID THEY KEEP US DOWN 200 YEARS AGO? YOU THINK IT WAS WITH WHIPS? WITH CHAINS? WITH PICKIN' COTTON? THEY WOULDN'T LET US

READ. THEY KEPT A WHOLE NATION OF PEOPLE SLAVES JUST BECAUSE THEY WOULDN'T LET US READ....We used to be kings, queens, and princesses and we were slaves because they wouldn't let us read. Now, on the other hand, how come every time you go to the senator's house, the mayor's house, the governor's, or you watch *Dallas*, *Dynasty*, or *Falcon Crest*, or you go to the president of a large corporation's house, how come every time you go to their houses and you ring the doorbell--ding, dong--somebody comes to the door and says, "They'll meet you in the library"?

HOW COME EVERYBODY IN THIS COUNTRY WHO HAS SOMETHING HAS A LIBRARY? YET THEY KEPT A WHOLE NATION OF PEOPLE SLAVES JUST BECAUSE THEY WOULDN'T LET US READ. YOU BETTER WAKE UP AND GET TO THIS! THIS IS ONE PLUS ONE EQUALS TWO. IF YOU DON'T LEARN HOW TO READ AND FURTHER YOUR EDUCATION, YOU ARE GOING TO BE A SLAVE....You don't understand, this is the truth what you're hearin' here....IF YOU DON'T FURTHER YOUR EDUCATION YOU'RE GONNA BE A SLAVE! But if you do further your education, you can be anything you want in this life.

Throughout Anthony Carmello's speech he alluded to the value of determination and education. For instance, at one point in the assembly he posed a question of a 17-year-old young woman:

Young lady, what happens to people who hate what they're doing? Those people who go around saying, "I hate this job. This job stinks. I can't stand another day." [She responds but it can't be heard by most in the audience.] She said, "They quit." Hey folks, I wrote the book on being a quitter. Quitters never win. Winners never quit. You know that axiom....You're 17 years old miss, OBVIOUSLY THEN YOU KNOW THAT WINNERS NEVER QUIT AND QUITTERS NEVER WIN. YOU KNOW THE AXIOM. YOU'RE LIVING IT! YOU COULD HAVE QUIT THIS BUILDING AT AGE 16. I DID! ONE OUT OF THREE OF YOUR PEERS HAVE!....I TELL YOU, I QUIT EVERYTHING I EVER ATTEMPTED UP UNTIL AGE 17. I DIDN'T KNOW THE AXIOM.

Reflecting on his own life and his decision to quit working as a laborer for a local construction firm, Carmello again linked education and effort with success: "I GOT HUNGRY. I WANTED TO SUCCEED. I went back to college....I made the dean's list."

Charles Robinson also associated success with effort and tied his rise from drug addiction with educational advancement:

I almost died, more than once....I reduced myself to a statistic and I became just another number on a list of drug-infested failures. But I was lucky, I got a second chance....I was able to kick the habit and I went back to school. I got a bachelor's degree in three-and-a-half years. I graduated second in my class. I went back to college at 35....I went straight from there to graduate school and I just finished a master's degree....By determination and education and by that second chance, I achieved success.

In addition to Robinson's message, other speakers at the AEO Conference stressed the importance of education. A representative of the State Commissioner of Higher Education told students:

> You should consider these facts regarding higher education: Higher education is associated with increased earning power and job satisfaction, better health, and a more positive family life as well as lower unemployment, more varied and rich leisure activities, and greater geographic mobility....So I will close by encouraging you to listen carefully to the advice of your parents, teachers, and guidance counselors as they direct you to continue your education. I too encourage you to consider your options and then to pursue a college degree. Higher education will take you further on the road to success.

Later in the program, the Director of the Eastown Urban League described the League's involvement in the AEO Conference:

> [T]he Urban League launched an educational initiative because we were very concerned about students, the young people in this state and in this country, who are not pursuing education. We see education as the passport for excellence that helps you to move from one place in society to another, a passport that increases your opportunity to do well in life.

A third theme common to the assemblies also reflected the assumption that individual actors had substantial autonomy: The obstacles one might face in life could be overcome; they therefore should not be used as excuses for failure. Jones, for instance, repeatedly said that race and ethnicity had no influence on success and failure:

> LET ME TELL YA SOMETHIN': THERE IS NO WHITE AND BLACK! THERE'S ONLY IGNORANCE AND INTELLIGENCE!...SO YOU TAKE THIS TO THE BANK: IF YOU BLAME YOUR SUCCESS OR YOUR FAILURE ON YOUR COLOR...YOU ARE A LOSER. [Audience applauds.]

He later reinforced this point: "Don't you ever say that your race or your creed, or your sex or your gender or anything else is keepin' you down. Because it's not. That's an excuse and all children like excuses....There is no excuse." Employing a similar message, Carmello told students, "EXCUSES ARE FOR LOSERS":

> Whether you're going to college or not, your *attitude* is going to determine, for the most part, how people are going to deal with you....The issue: many people have--I had--a very bad attitude...."I can't do this." "I can't do that." "My family's no good." "My school's no good." "My ethnic background's holding me back." HERE'S THE GREATEST COP-OUT--VOLUME ONE, NUMBER ONE, GREATEST HITS OF ALL TIME, you've heard it: [in a pathetic sounding voice] *"My racial background's holding me back."* HEY FOLKS, EXCUSES ARE FOR LOSERS!...LOSERS NEED EXCUSES TO JUSTIFY WHY THEY FAIL EVERYDAY!....No one has the ability to hold you down. THE ONLY LIMITATIONS THAT EXIST, IN TERMS OF YOUR POTENTIAL FOR SUCCESS, ARE THE LIMITATIONS THAT ARE SELF-IMPOSED.

Students also heard that financial constraints should not restrict educational success. As Jones maintained:

> There are some of you who are gonna say, "I can't afford to go to college. *I can't afford to go to college.*" Well I'm gonna tell you what: Don't you ever lie to me and don't you *dare* lie to yourself.

> If you can't afford to go to college, you bust your butt in here in school, and people will make sure, if you have a three-point-eight, three-point-nine, or four-point-oh grade point average, you go to any college in this country for free. It's called a scholarship. AND IF YOU CAN'T GET A THREE-POINT-EIGHT, THREE-POINT-NINE, OR FOUR-POINT-OH GRADE POINT AVERAGE, THEN YOU GO WORK IN MCDONALD'S AT NIGHT, OR YOU WORK AT BURGER KING AT NIGHT, OR YOU GET A LOAN, OR YOU GET A GRANT, OR YOU GO BORROW THE MONEY, OR YOU GO IN THE NAVY, THE ARMY, THE AIR FORCE, I DON'T CARE WHAT YOU DO, BUT YOU TAKE YOUR BUTT TO COLLEGE BECAUSE IT'S NOT THAT YOU CAN'T AFFORD TO GO COLLEGE, YOU CAN'T AFFORD *NOT* TO GO TO COLLEGE!

Carmello developed the same theme--if you want to attend college, you can; financial concerns can be resolved:

> People tell me, "*Mr. Carmello, I can't go to college after high school, I've got to work*" [said in a pathetic-sounding voice]. I've heard that before. I've heard that kind of *nonsense* right in this building. I believe there are students, for one reason or another...who'll have to work full-time after high school. What do you do if you've got to work after Earvin High School and you want to go to college? What do you do about it? [Asks the question directly to a student but never waits for an answer.] YOU GO TO SCHOOL NIGHTS! THE [UNIVERSITY] EXTENSION! THE [COMMUNITY COLLEGE], TWO CAMPUSES! [THE STATE COLLEGE]! Do you know what it costs to go to [the state college] nights? It costs about $120.00 a credit hour. One of the finest universities...in the area....You go to college any way ya choose. Ya gotta work full time? WORK! There are 15 million people in college right now. One out of five are working full-time, sir.

At the AEO Conference a student speaker who followed Charles Robinson not only articulated the message that obstacles could be overcome, he embodied it: He was a paraplegic in a wheelchair. After describing how an accident had left him paralyzed from the waist down, he recounted how he nonetheless graduated from high school and college and urged students to do the same.

In addition to being told that many obstacles to success could be overcome, students at these assemblies heard a related message, one connected to the myth of educational opportunity: The individual is responsible for the consequences in his or her life, both success and failure. As the representative for the State Commissioner of Higher Education at the AEO Conference stated:

> I'm sure you must find it exciting and frightening as you anticipate your high school graduation....I am sure you have often wished for control over your own lives and for the freedom to make your own choices....You will soon be required to make many of your own decisions. And, *you* will have to bear the responsibility for those decisions.

In a related vein, the emcee at this assembly, the Superintendent of Eastown schools, attributed failure to pursue higher education to a lack of individual initiative:

> You're at the cross-roads. You're...making decisions about your future....[Y]ou'll find in the months to come [that] decision-making about colleges [is]...going to be a very, very difficult time....Some students just put it aside and say, "It's too difficult, Forget it, I don't want any part of it." And they end up not going to school.

To make a similar point, Anthony Carmello involved a student from the audience:

> I want you [directing himself to a male student seated in the audience] to share with me, as a young man, I respect your opinion, you tell me and you tell your peers right now, there are many contributing factors to your life--your family, your friends, this school. Who else do you think is responsible for what you will become? Tell me honestly, don't pay me lip service! You'll never see me again. You speak your mind. I'll listen to you. [Student mumbles something.] You hear what he said? [Audience: "No."] Did everyone hear what he said [pointing to the student]? [Audience: "NO!"] He said, "I AM RESPONSIBLE FOR MYSELF!"....THAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WINNERS AND LOSERS OUT ON THE STREETS! WINNERS TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEIR OWN LIVES! THEY *MAKE* THINGS HAPPEN! Losers, you know what losers tell me?...."Me, I'm not responsible. I'm not responsible. It's *his* fault." That's called the "loser's lament." DON'T TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOUR OWN LIFE! BLAME THE OTHER GUY....WINNERS *MAKE* THINGS HAPPEN. LOSERS *LET* THINGS HAPPEN and then they blame other people. You said it all [motioning toward the student]. I *believe* what you said. You *are* responsible. *NO ONE* CAN HOLD YOU DOWN! *NO ONE* HAS THE RIGHT TO LIMIT YOUR POTENTIAL FOR SUCCESS! THE ONLY LIMITATIONS THAT EXIST ARE THOSE THAT ARE SELF-IMPOSED! YOU SAID IT, SIR [motioning to student again]. I DIDN'T.

Lt. Jones had a similar message:

> IF YOU DON'T MAKE IT IN LIFE, IT'S NOT MY FAULT. IT'S NOT THE TEACHERS FAULT! IT'S NOT YOUR PARENTS FAULT! IT'S *YOUR* FAULT. [Extended silence.]

By the end of his talk, Jones was adamant about individual failure and responsibility:

> I WAS THE ONLY BLACK NAVY JET ATTACK PILOT IN THE WHOLE UNITED STATES NAVY at one time....I was the only one, but it wasn't the Navy's fault. IT WAS *YOUR* FAULT BECAUSE SOME OF YOU IN HERE DON'T THINK YOU CAN BE PILOTS! AND SOME OF YOU IN HERE DON'T THINK YOU CAN BE SAILORS! AND SOME OF YOU IN HERE DON'T THINK YOU CAN BE DOCTORS AND LAWYERS AND TEACHERS AND ENGINEERS! WELL NOW I HOPE YOU DO. YOU SEE, IF YOU DON'T FURTHER YOUR EDUCATION, IF YOU DON'T BECOME SOMETHING IN LIFE, IT'S NOT WRONG ANYMORE, IT'S A SIN!...IF YOU DON'T MAKE IT, THERE IS NO EXCUSE! IF YOU DON'T MAKE IT, YOU DIDN'T WORK HARD ENOUGH TO GET IT! IF YOU DON'T MAKE IT, IT HAS NOTHIN' TO DO WITH YOUR FINANCIAL BACKGROUND, OR YOUR PARENTS OR ANYBODY ELSE. IF YOU DON'T MAKE IT, IT'S BECAUSE YOU DIDN'T CARE ENOUGH ABOUT YOURSELF!

In closing, Jones told students:

> What I've done today is, I've taken away your funky little excuses--that you're not gonna make it 'cause your Black, or you're not gonna make it 'cause you're Puerto Rican, or you're Oriental, or you're a woman, or you come from Eastown or you come from here, or come from there.

In looking at the emphases and associations articulated in these three assemblies it is revealing of the influence of culture that they had so much in common. At each assembly the individual was portrayed as an empowered and autonomous entity capable of influencing critical aspects of her/his life--from the college one attended to the career one chose. Students were also told that effort, determination, and education offered a means to wealth, personal satisfaction, and social

mobility. And the influence of such potential obstacles in life as one's racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic background were downplayed, as the speakers portrayed failure as a largely individual phenomenon.

The Myth Endures

Durkheim wrote that while rituals may serve many purposes, the two most essential are social and moral:

> The representations which [rituals] seek to awaken and maintain in our minds are not vain images which correspond to nothing in reality....They are as necessary for the well working of our moral life as our food is for the maintenance of our physical life, for it is through them that the group affirms and maintains itself....After we have acquitted ourselves of our ritual duties, we enter into the profane life with increased courage and ardour, not only because we come into relations with a superior source of energy, but also because our forces have been reinvigorated...(1965:427).

Examining student, teacher, and administrator reactions to these speakers suggests how these assemblies fulfilled Durkheim's conception, reaffirming participants' faith in society's fundamental beliefs.

A student view

In various contexts student reactions to these assemblies suggested that they had either internalized some of what they had heard or had their existing beliefs reinforced. For instance, when Lt. Jones returned to Eastown the following fall for another series of assemblies, coverage in the *Gazette* featured student reactions to his talk.[10] As one article read:

> "He's great," said Emette Bryant a ninth grader who ended the morning thinking for the first time of becoming a pilot. "He's an honest man," said Luis Aparicio, another freshman. "He tells the truth. The way he talks, he gets to people. I like the way he gives a speech, and it really got to me."

Every article also ended with a student testimonial that described a transformation in his or her attitude about education and career possibilities. For example, after describing Lt. Jones' rapport with students as he signed autographs one article ended:

> When [Jones] asked Raymond Curtis whether he planned to go to college, the boy looked down and said no. "You're not gonna make it then," Jones said. "Look at me. Look at me. Look at me. Say, 'I'm going to be something and I'm going to go to college.'"
>
> Finally, while his classmates watched, Raymond Curtis mumbled the words. Then someone asked Curtis what he wanted to grow up to be. "I wanna be an airline pilot." Curtis said. Why? "Because he said so," answered Curtis, pointing to the man in the blue jumpsuit.

Another article ended with a girl discussing her transformation:

> When it was over Shalandra Scott, a 10th grader at Archibald High, borrowed a piece of paper and headed down the aisle to try to get Jones' autograph. She has been "messing up" lately, she said, skipping school and thinking that people would not let her succeed because she was black. But Jones changed that. "I learned a lot from what he said," she said, "and I think I'm going to take his advice, try to finish high school and go to college."

After Jones' first visit, a middle school teacher had her students write letters to him. Of the 104 letters that I read, I came across one criticism--a girl wrote that Jones was "sorta conceited"--although she said that Jones had many important things to say as well. The following letters are typical of what these middle school students wrote:[11]

> Dear Lt. Jones:
> Hello, my name is Deborah, I'm writing this letter to thank you for coming to our school. I can't speak for everyone at my school, but I can tell you that you are the best speaker this school has ever had. It was terrific the way you could get everyone excited and then get them quiet. You are a great speaker and I think I could listen to you say your speach[12] thousands of times and never get bored. It was a pleasure to hear you speak, but I think meeting you would be an even greater pleasure. You gave me a better view of life, I intend to live mine to the fullest, not giving up, and going through college even if I get really worn out doing it. Sir you are the best you know it, I know it, and everyone else who's every heard you speak knows it. Personally I think what you're doing by going to all our schools and speaking to us you've given us all a new perspective in life, for this I thank you whole-heartedly.
>
> Sincerely,
> a fan

> Dear Mr. Ellis Jones
> I'm glad you come to my school because you really helped the kids. You are so cute. The way you came strutting down the auditorium with your dark glasses. I thought you were dope [cool]. My cous' butchie he really admires you. He use to think his father was bad. You helped me alot thinking about my career. What i want to be is a singer. I was gonna work at McDonald's but when you said you were gonna pull up in your black limo i was afraid that i was gonna be the one handing you the fries. If you can do the butt in the bahamas i can do the twist in college.
>
> Dope on a rope,
> Stacy Duke

> Dear Lt. Ellis Jones
> Thank you for coming to [our school]. I realy like your speech. Fore a couple of days after that people where talking about you. I want to go to Harverd law school and become a lawyer. I realy hope you come back realy realy soon.
>
> Yours truly,
> Antonio Sousa

Student reactions to Anthony Carmello's talk were similar: many found him inspiring, informative, exciting, and thought-provoking. After his presentation Carmello distributed "comment cards" to students who remained (about one-fifth of the audience left the assembly to attend class roughly two-thirds of the way through his talk). Their responses were overwhelmingly positive. Of the 118 cards that were returned, 106 (90 percent), complimented Carmello. Four responses (three percent), were critical. And eight students filled out their names and addresses but included no comments--although five of the eight indicated that they planned to attend college, one point stressed in Carmello's talk. The following comments are representative of student reactions:

> Mr. C is a fantastic speaker about the real world and statistics!! Excellent!! I would like to hear him again!
>
> You were great!! I left feeling like a new person. So did my husband.
>
> In my opinion, it was the best lecture I've ever attended because it dealt with reality.
>
> The presentation made me situp and think about the reality of life after Earvin High School. It was powerful.
>
> Very interesting, clear cut approach. I'd definitely call it time well spent!
>
> I think the dude knew exactly what he was talkin' about. Totally fuckin cool.
>
> I really like your session. You tell kids to do the right thing, instead of dropping out. Go out there and be somebody. We are the future.
>
> The presentation was great!!! stimulating!!! interesting!!!
>
> He was great. He wasn't fony and he knew what he talked about. It was interesting.
>
> I really like your talk. You really gave me a reason to go and reach for my dreams.

The messages conveyed in these assemblies surfaced in other aspects of school life as well. For instance, an African-American senior whose graduating class attended all three assemblies wrote an article in the school newspaper that drew heavily on the myth of educational opportunity:

> Over my four years in high school I have heard a familiar phrase from my peers' mouths. "I don't like school; I'm getting a job and making some dough." I'm no different from any of these guys and girls. But something just does not register with me. How could you go through 10 to 12 years of school and then just quit without having a diploma in your back pocket? Sure, things get to be kind of a hassle sometimes but things get better. Remember all of the hard times you got through in the years of school you did have and you came out all right....Life in America is a big house, and the job of the head of the house is in the corporate system. And it is very picky who it lets in. You have to have the key. You know what this key is? It's spelled EDUCATION. Without it you're not getting in. Not through the front door or the back door. So you better get used to sleeping on the

> sidewalk....In closing, the bottom line is either you stick with it or you don't. If you do, there is a good chance there will be a light at the end of the tunnel. But if you don't continue with some type of education I can tell you what will be at the end of your tunnel, two brightly illuminated golden arches. You can either be the puppet or the puppeteer. Think about it.[13]

Like Charles Robinson, Lt. Jones, and Anthony Carmello, this senior embraced the myth of educational opportunity. He, too, viewed "EDUCATION" as the "key" to success and felt that failure to acknowledge this fact would have serious consequences ("Without it you're not getting in....So you better get used to sleeping on the sidewalk"). Moreover, if one sought an education, "there is a good chance there will be a light at the end of the tunnel." But ultimately, the individual was responsible--"Either you stick with it or you don't....You can either be the puppet or the puppeteer".

Teacher and administrator views of the "American Dream" assembly[14]

Like their students, many teachers and administrators found Lt. Jones' talk inspiring. They felt that his message was accurate and important and that students should hear what he had to say--so much so that after his presentation, the Eastown School System invited him back and required all juniors and seniors from the city's public high schools to attend his speech--at a cost of over $10,000.[15] Students from other local high schools were also invited. It was estimated that over 15,000 students heard Jones speak during his two visits to Eastown.

Not only did school administrators and city officials feel that Jones had a valuable message for students, but many teachers shared this perception. A teacher who helped arrange Jones' first Eastown visit, for instance, discussed her reactions to him in an article she wrote for a community newsletter:

> Our guest, Lt. Ellis Jones, grew up in the projects of Harlem and went on to become the Navy's only black fighter pilot. Since earning his wings, Lt. Jones has chosen another kind of flying high. He brings his message of education and drug-free living to students, parents, and teachers across the country. He encourages youth to think about the choices they are making every day, urging them to follow his simple formula: "Education + Hard Work - Drugs = Success and the American Dream."
>
> Last summer, I saw Lt. Jones on the "Today Show." As I watched...I was impressed by his rapport with students. When I heard that Lt. Jones would again be on television, this time featured on a network special, I asked [my middle school] teammate to tape it. The next day, after seeing Lt. Jones for herself, she proclaimed, "We must have him!"
>
> It was clear to both of us that Lt. Jones' message would be appropriate; he focused...on self-esteem, decision-making, and education. In addition, we realized that a high-energy speaker could...have an impact on...the students he addressed. Furthermore, we knew that the media would cover his visit, bringing his message to many more people than would see him live....

Lt. Jones was able to establish a rapport with both the students and the community leaders in Eastown. He spoke to hundreds of students in a way they could understand, referring to problems and choices that they all had to make on a daily basis. By addressing these young people with firm compassion and honesty, Lt. Jones got through to them in ways others could not....Through this and other projects, we hope to improve the attitudes of our students about themselves, the value of an education, and remaining drug free.

In a "letter to the editor" published in the *Eastown Gazette*, another teacher who helped organize Jones' first visit wrote:

Miracle in Eastown

Navy Lieut. Ellis D. Jones, spent three days recently in Eastown talking to about 4,500 students, teachers, and community leaders. Lieutenant Jones' gift of delivering a stay-in-school/stay-off-drugs message electrified his audience because it was not the hackneyed refrain that students have learned to ignore. The sincere, powerful and inspirational message that he brought to Eastown helped motivate students by raising their self-esteem and belief in themselves.

And then a great miracle happened here: Even before Lieutenant Jones left the city, some students re-enrolled in school, found employment, pledged to eschew drugs, and made a commitment to get an education and be successful....As one of my students wrote: "The world really needs people like you, Mr. Jones, to talk to all of us, including adults, to set things straight like education, drugs and discrimination. You made me realize that you have to believe in yourself and not stop until you succeed."

Arlene Nolet
Eastown

Some Earvin teachers also embraced Jones' message and felt that it was something they should reinforce. Two days after his presentation an Alliance School team reflected on his talk during a "planning period," a twice-weekly meeting when a team of teachers and a university professor met to discuss and address program concerns. On this day the teachers and professor commented extensively on the "American Dream." In the first part of the meeting, the teachers and professor focused on the impact of Jones' talk and how they might build upon his message:

Teacher #1: I cut out the newspaper article [on Jones] in the *Gazette* and hung it up on the bulletin board in my classroom because I want students to see it. I thought it was a super presentation.

Teachers #2: [The Director of Media Services] taped it. We can show it to our classes if we want to. Has anyone heard what the students thought about it?....

Teacher #3: From all that I heard, they liked it.

Teacher #4: Mine, too. I asked students if he was a great speaker and they said, "Oh yeah!" But the effect won't be immediate. It will click into place later down the road.

University Professor: It's too bad that we didn't plan some follow-up questions to this for after they returned from the assembly.

Teacher #2: I was offended, as a teacher, that I couldn't do any follow-up. It sounded great but I didn't know anything about it....It's good that the kids had the seed planted in their minds but if we don't do some follow-up, what's the point? It may save a few of them....

Teacher #5: Kids can want to all they want, but they still have to do it. Maybe we should bring it up in a couple days, after some digestion.

Teacher #2: The kids told me, "He really understands kids." When Letitia Davis told me, "He said you can get scholarships," I saw her eyes light up, like she knew.

Teacher #3: I heard one say that too.

University Professor: Can we follow-up on this?

Teacher #1: I can copy some "thought questions" on how students can develop their own potential and we could use it with advisory groups.[16] We can introduce the topic but relate it to Ellis Jones.

Teacher #2: It might be good to bring this up in an advisory group and mention Ellis Jones.

Teacher #5: It might be good to see [the video] a little at a time so we could focus on the different parts of his talk.

Teacher #1: I felt helpless when I got back from the assembly. The kids were boiling over. What could I possibly say that has more relevance than what they just heard? Class would be anti-climactic? Without direction, it was a let-down.

Teacher #4: That's part of the problem. How do we follow-up on that? We can't get that level of intensity or excitement.

Teacher #1: How about trying to address two questions in advisory groups? The first question: What do you want? Second question: How are you going to get it? What will you do? Focus on the doing. Tell them that Ellis Jones set up the target and now you [students] have to develop the bow and arrow....Remember what Ellis Jones said. The students liked him because he told them that they have self-worth. But there is no way to hang on to it for many of our students. The kid has to have a way, that we help develop, for the kid to feel good.

Teacher #5: But it has to fit within appropriate classroom behavior and good manners.

Teacher #1: We have to convince students that they have to do what *we* want him or her to do in order to get what *they* want. For example, we have to communicate in a way the student understands. So we have to talk from his view point, like Ellis Jones did.

Teacher #2: Maybe we need to set up a dialogue so kids can talk about what they want and how they might go about realizing their goals. Ellis Jones said when he [entered into] his "common sense computer"[17] that he wanted to "make a lot of money and not work hard" that his [computer] told him that he could either be a drug dealer or a pilot. We could discuss that sort of dilemma in advisory groups. We can let them know that we really care about them.

After discussing students reactions to Jones' talk and considering how they might reinforce some messages that Jones had introduced the teachers and professor spent the rest of the meeting discussing

what it would take for their students to be successful, including what role they, as Earvin High teachers, might play. [Picking up where the previous dialogue ended.]

Teacher #5: But how many kids know what they want?

Teacher #2: It's just important that we ask the question.

Teacher #3: The process is what's key.

Teacher #1: ...We should want to know what they want and they should know that there are choices available. So the point is that students need to leave their options open. Students should know to avoid any actions that may close a door for them so that they can expand themselves if they want to.

University Professor: We're getting at a real fundamental point. It is something crucial for all that we do. When I say we can do this in class, I don't mean stopping class to do this, but that we send the kids lots of messages through our verbal and nonverbal interactions, through the structure of our classes, through our whole persona. We're white, middle-class people. We have to face this everyday. They aren't kids that we grew up with, but they can make it. They're our reason for being here. We have to believe in them.

Teacher #1: The main reason most people don't succeed is because they don't believe they can. I know a person who can't read and write but who owns an auto body business. He makes a million dollars a year. We have to help students find the direction that they're going in. The kids have to believe they can succeed.

Teacher #5: But we have to go one step further. Believing that you can do it is not enough. You have to do it.

University Professor: Yes, they have to believe it first. Then they'll be able to do it.

Teacher #5: But we're dealing with kids without white, middle-class values and to be successful in the white, middle-class world they have to know how to succeed in it. So we have to show them this. [University Professor: How?] We have to model it.

Teacher #2: If we're role models, we need to create an environment where kids can succeed. If kids don't do the work, we have to ask why they don't do it. Maybe our writing was not clear, maybe it was too confusing, maybe it wasn't broken down into small enough steps. We have to set them up for success and they'll start to like to come to class. We have to help them build up their confidence.

Teacher #4: What bugs me is the failure to try. Even when the assignment that I give is easy, some students will not do it and just shoot the breeze. They'll give you any excuse like, "I don't have a pencil or any paper." But it's just an excuse. And what they're telling you is that they didn't care enough. So if you make it too easy, other kids will be turned off.

Teacher #5: If it's too easy, they won't make it in the world.

Teacher #2: I'm not worried about the real world but preparing kids for [their next science] class, [chemistry]. We have to bring the kids along. The kids get excited taking chemistry now. And [the chemistry teacher] is tailoring chemistry to the kids and preparing them for physics. *That's* what we need to do.

Teacher #5: We need to do both things. We can't divide up their assignments too much for them. They're not going to have someone take them under their wing in the real world.

University Professor: But practice thinking in small bites. It's the way to start. We don't want to throw them into the real world in 9th grade.

Teacher #5: But some will be in the real world.

University Professor: But I think that you expect too much from your students. They are from different middle schools. We have to nurture them. We have to take them through different levels of cognitive development....We are the nurturing group....I think it comes down to: do we like the kids or not? We [on this teaching team] like them. We believe in them. And we work as hard as we can to help them succeed....[But] I think that deep-down some teachers don't like the kids that they're teaching. And we deal with their products. It's not because the work is too hard, it's because they have no self-confidence. So first give them that before they try. I think a lot of inner-city teachers don't like the kids they're teaching....And that's what we may have to confront.

Throughout this meeting teacher comments suggested that they shared many of the same beliefs about individualism and success as Lt. Jones (as well as Robinson and Carmello). One remark, for instance, sounded as though it could have been said at one of the assemblies: "The main reason most people don't succeed is because they don't believe they can. I know a person who can't read and write....He makes a million dollars a year." There was also a sense that, as Jones stressed, students have lots of "funky little excuses": "Even when the assignment...is easy, some students will not do it....They'll give you any excuse." Underlying this reaction was student apathy: "[W]hat they're telling you is that they didn't care enough." Moreover, the final decision regarding educational achievement rested with the individual: "You have to do it."

Although many comments voiced in this meeting accorded with Jones' message, there was a point of difference: some teachers and the university professor acknowledged that students faced some "real world" obstacles that were outside their control, including teachers who might not like them. The teachers, therefore, had to be supportive of their students. Still, this perspective--that forces beyond the control of individual students nonetheless influenced their educational experiences--was addressed infrequently and did not arise until late in the meeting. In addition, no one acknowledged any disjuncture between this discussion of student lives and what Jones had said: "IF YOU DON'T MAKE IT IN LIFE...IT'S YOUR FAULT!" Moreover, when concerns were raised regarding the equity of

students' educational experiences, they were often countered. After teacher #2, for example, discussed a teaching strategy that might help students succeed in school one teacher remarked, "What bugs me is the failure [of students] to try." Another added, "If it's too easy, they won't make it....they're not going to have someone take them under their wing in the real world." When the professor suggested that, as White, middle-class adults the teachers may send students negative messages in subtle ways, a teacher quickly offered an alternative interpretation: "The main reason most people don't succeed is because they don't believe they can." Thus, while alternative interpretations of student failure were expressed in this meeting, it seems revealing that one major proponent of this view, the university professor, was an outsider to Earvin High. Further, when this point was raised, by the professor or teachers, others in the meeting generally volunteered alternative perspectives regarding educational achievement.

Summary

The previous discussion revealed how these assemblies promoted the myth of educational opportunity in a ritualized fashion----by altering spatial and temporal dimensions of these events, by highlighting particular cultural values, and by having heroes who embodied these cultural ideals deliver the talks. The preceding discussion also examined how various persons (including students, teachers, and administrators) shared many of these heroes' perceptions regarding individualism and the myth of educational opportunity (Henry 1965; Peshkin 1978).[18] Although these assemblies emphasized opportunity and individual autonomy, such messages differed from the real world experience of many Earvin students--thereby suggesting why "myth" offers an appropriate way to conceive of educational opportunity for Earvin students. As Leach wrote about belief (myth) and its influence on "history": "The significance of history lies in what is *believed* to have happened, not in what *actually* happened. And belief, by a process of selection, can fashion even the most incongruent stories into patterned (and therefore memorable) structures" (1969:81; emphasis in original).

At the AEO Conference, for instance, the Governor (through a letter) told students:

> This conference will allow high school seniors to become aware of the abundant post-secondary educational opportunities available....Countless possibilities and choices await you....This conference will help you to provide the direction and guidance needed to enable each of you to choose the educational opportunities that are best for you.

While students were told that the assembly was intended to "increase the number of minority and low income students who enter and graduate from post-secondary institutions," Charles Robinson, the featured speaker, only referred to education three times. The first was a reference to higher education: "Oh, I heard a lot of speeches about the dangers of substance abuse and chemical dependency, about seeking higher education. But they were all given by people who'd only read about it." Recalling past achievements, he made a second allusion to education (although not post-secondary): "Not very long ago...my future was very bright. I was a high school graduate....I was starring on Broadway. The world was my oyster...." The third reference occurred when he discussed overcoming cocaine addiction: "With prayer and with help, I was able to kick the habit and I went back to school. I got a bachelor's degree in three-and-a-half years. I graduated second in my class....I went straight from there to graduate school and I just finished my master's degree." Still, Robinson never specified where he went to school, what fields he earned his degrees in, how he planned to use his education, or why he was successful; for most of his twenty-minute speech, Robinson detailed the development and effects of his cocaine addiction.

An assertion that played a central role in Anthony Carmello's presentation also differed from the experiences of Earvin students. As Carmello told students:

> You can go to college *anywhere you choose*....You want to go to [an Ivy League] University...and you're not accepted. What do you do about it? You go somewhere else, and you *prove* yourself. You ace your courses....You will transfer into almost any school you choose.

In my four years of research no Earvin student was ever accepted to an Ivy League school. I knew of only one who applied. No guidance counselor could recall any student in the past ten years who had been accepted to an Ivy League school.

There was also a disparity between the words of Lt. Jones and the world of Earvin High students. For instance, Jones told students:

> See, you have the greatest thing that a country can have. You have somethin' called "freedom." Not only are you free to mess up, use drugs, drop out of school and be a bum and not be successful, but you remember this: YOU ARE ALSO FREE IN THIS COUNTRY TO BE A DOCTOR, AN ENGINEER, A TEACHER, A LAWYER, A CONGRESSMAN, A SENATOR, OR THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES!

Yet, structural features of the Eastown School System seemed to run counter to Jones' words: While minorities comprised 65 percent of the Eastown student population, in 1990, of the 1178 teachers in the school system, 86 were minorities, seven percent of the teaching population. Of the system's 46 guidance counselors, two were minorities. In the city's 34 schools, there were three minority principals. And in Central Administration, of 26 full-time positions, three were held by minorities. So, while students were told that they were free to be "A CONGRESSMAN, A SENATOR, OR THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES," opportunity seemed more complex and problematic than that.

In closing, it is important to acknowledge that these assemblies represented efforts by the speakers, teachers, and school system to help students achieve academically by increasing their motivation. While I believe that educational opportunity was more problematic than it was portrayed by the various speakers, these assemblies were not intended to deceive students. However, by viewing student achievement through the lens of American culture--especially in terms of individual autonomy and responsibility--students, teachers, and administrators were predisposed to understanding student success (and failure) as an individual phenomenon attributable, in great part, to individual initiative and determination.

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NOTES

[1] As a student and teacher, student reactions to collective punishments were predictable: students consistently, and often vocally, resisted these efforts--suggesting that cultural norms were violated and that students felt such a response was justified.

[2] This is not to say that American society aknowledges no forces outside individual actors. Affirmative action and social welfare problems are signs that our society is aware that broader social conditions can influence individual lives. Still, as Spindler et al. (1990) observed, American values often fluctuate between opposite poles. During the eighties, with Ronald Reagan as president, America tended to attribute much responsibility to individuals.

[3] To convey aspects of particular speaking styles, I employ capital letters, italics, and bolding. Normal-sized text signifies a normal tone of voice. Italics denote a shift in pronunciation, an inflection intended to emphasize a particular word. Capital letters signal that a person was shouting. Boldened capitals signal that a speaker shouted even louder than he had previously. Capitals and italics are combined when a person was shouting and putting an inflection into his voice.

[4] While each speaker highlighted individual achievements, all three also alluded to mistakes they had made in life and urged students to avoid doing the same.

[5] This "formula for success" was also featured in Jones' autobiography. Since "Lt. Ellis D. Jones" is a pseudonym, there is no reference.

[6] In my four years of research, Earvin's entire student body came together as a single entity once each year--for pep rallies prior to the homecoming football game.

[7] The next school year, Jones did a series of assemblies in Eastown. The finale was held in the local civic center and all 11th and 12th grade students in Eastown were required to attend (a stipulation of Jones' before he agreed to do the performance). At this presentation, rock music played as Brown walked into the auditorium and a video projection of himself served as the backdrop to his talk.

[8] In *Savage Inequalities*, Jonathan Kozol identified a similar phenomenon: "Celebrities are sometimes hired, for example, by the corporations to come into the Chicago schools and organize a rally to sell children on the wisdom of not dropping out of school" (1992:80).

[9] Michelle Morgan is a pseudonym.

[10] Because Jones' presentation in the winter of 1989 was received so positively, the Eastown School Department hired him to address all Eastown juniors and seniors the following fall. This presentation was held in the local civic center and nearly 12,000 students from throughout the state attended. This second talk closely paralleled the first. Many quotes cited in these *Eastown Gazette* articles were exactly what Jones had said in the previous appearance. The use of student reactions described in these articles, therefore, seems appropriate.

[11] These letters seem especially significant *vis-à-vis* the myth of educational opportunity at Earvin High since this middle school enrolled over 70 percent minority students and was one of Earvin's "feeder" schools.

[12] All student writing cited in this text is presented as students produced that work.

[13] Citing their longitudinal study of university students as well as similar research conducted by the American Colleges Examination Board, George and Louise Spindler note that "minority students do not differentiate from 'Anglo' students in their responses [to the Spindlers' 'values projective technique']. In fact, minority students tend to be more oriented to the presumed core values than are mainstream students" (Spindler et al. 1990:25). Of course, this may reflect the fact that both study samples reflect the views of students who aspire to attain a college education.

[14] For two assemblies—the AEO Conference and Anthony Carmello's talk—I collected no data regarding faculty reactions, in part, because few faculty attended either assembly.

[15] Besides the presentation for juniors and seniors, Jones spoke at various middle schools during his second visit. In addition to the $10,000 paid to the American Dream Foundation, funds were needed for transportation, police services, and rental of the civic center. These expenses were covered by the Eastown Mayor's office, the State Attorney General's office, and a local bank.

[16] All Alliance School students had a faculty advisor who met with them to solicit feedback on program developments, to discuss important social issues (e.g., the use of violence to resolve disputes and teen pregnancy), and to help students make decisions about their education.

[17] During his talk, Jones discussed the "common sense computer," a source of insight that he said everyone had. This computer helped people determine an appropriate course(s) in life. For instance, when he entered into his computer that he wanted to make a lot of money and not work hard, it told him that he had two options: sell drugs or be an airline pilot. Since it also informed him that he might go to jail for dealing drugs, he chose Navy flight school.

[18] As male speakers were featured at these assemblies, their messages likely reflected a masculine view of the world. Still, it seems significant that many females responded as positively to their messages as males (including teachers as well as students).