Navigating the Psychosocial Pressures of Adolescence: The Voices and Experiences of High School Youth

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This article describes pressures and problems in adolescents' family, peer, and school worlds that they perceive as powerful enough to have an impact on their ability to engage optimally in school and learning endeavors. The study sample includes 55 ethnically and academically diverse youth in four urban desegregated high schools in California. The primary data were obtained through four in-depth interviews with each student over a period of 2 years. Using the Students' Multiple Worlds Model and Typology (Phealan, Davidson, & Yu, 1993), which provides a framework for examining the interrelationships of sociocultural components in students' worlds, we discuss the problems reported by youth in each of four category types: (a) congruent worlds/smooth transitions; (b) different worlds/border crossings managed; (c) different worlds/border crossings difficult; and (d) different worlds/border crossings resisted. Further, we describe social, emotional, and educational consequences of the problems that youth face.

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In this article we describe conditions and circumstances in students' family, peer, and school worlds that they perceive as creating pressures and stress powerful enough to divert their attention and interest from school. We also discuss the social and emotional consequences of the problems that youth face, and touch briefly on school factors that can exacerbate their concerns. The results reported here are part of a larger qualitative study that focuses on students' multiple worlds, boundaries and borders between worlds, and adaptation strategies students employ as they make the transition between these sociocultural contexts (Phelan et al., 1993).

Researchers, educators, community leaders, and parents are increasingly turning their attention to the range of challenges faced by today's youth, while the popular media reminds us daily of the difficulties that many children and adolescents in this society face. We know, for example, that teachers and schools often fail to engage students in academic and learning endeavors (Fine, 1991; LeCompte, 1987; LeCompte & Dworkin, 1991); that large numbers of students do not complete high school (Fine, 1991; LeCompte & Dworkin, 1991; Rumberger, 1983; Weis, Farrar, & Petrie, 1989); that instances of teenage pregnancy, while continuing to decline in the general population, are increasing among 15- to 17-year-old African-American and Hispanic females (AAUW Report, 1992); that more children live in poverty and in single-parent homes than ever before (Fine, 1991; LeCompte & Dworkin, 1991; Youth and America's Future, 1988); that the abuse of drugs and alcohol is rampant among some sectors of the adolescent population (Dryfoos, 1990; McCord, 1990; National Institute of Drug Abuse, 1987); and that suicide rates are the second leading cause of death among young people aged 15 to 24 (Blumenthal & Kupfer, 1988; Gispert, Wheeler, Marsh, & Davis, 1985; Wetzel, 1989). Further, we know that peer groups are instrumental in the lives of adolescents and can pull young people towards behavior destructive to themselves and others in the society. For example, although gang activity can provide friendship, emotional support, and a sense of security and protection, it can also expose youth to violent and dangerous confrontations (Huff, 1990; Moore, 1978, 1991; Vigil, 1988a, 1988b, 1993). Further, developmental psychologists remind us of the often difficult biological and social benchmarks that young people of this age face (Feldman & Elliott, 1990). In short, few people in the society are unaware that navigating the psychosocial pressures of adolescence can be a difficult and arduous task.

In response to the problems that abound, schools and community organizations have intensified efforts to develop and implement services to assist youth. For example, a wide range of community-, school-, and district-level programs have been generated to target at-risk and troubled youth, culturally and linguistically diverse populations, and a range of mental health issues faced by young adults (Dryfoos, 1990; Heath & McLaughlin, 1993; Pease-Alvarez & Hakuta, 1993; Reingold, 1989). Strategies and programs that engage ethnic and immigrant youth academically have been identified and implemented to override the negative effects associated with low socioeconomic status and language and cultural barriers (Abi-Nader, 1990; Heath, 1982; Scarcella, 1990; Sleeter, 1991; Trueba, 1988; Trueba, Moll, Diaz, & Diaz, 1982; Vogt, Jordan, & Tharp 1987). At the classroom
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level, cooperative learning (Cohen, 1986; Johnson & Johnson, 1981; Sharan, 1980; Slavin, 1989; Slavin & Madden, 1989), teaching for understanding (Cohen, McLaughlin, & Talbert, 1993; Prawat, 1989) strategies for identifying and addressing the needs of students with various learning styles (Dunn, 1990; Gardner, 1987), models of teaching (Joyce, Weil, & Showers 1992), and a myriad of other pedagogical methods designed to reach all youth are currently being implemented in schools throughout the country.

In this article we identify pressures and problems that students say affect what they do, how they respond, and what actions they take with respect to school. This work differs from previous efforts in several respects. First, rather than assuming that minority status, linguistic differences, part-time employment, peers, and/or poverty necessarily create problems for young adults, we have asked students to tell us what affects their lives and their ability to connect with and engage in educational settings. Second, we focus on all students, rather than only those typically identified as at risk. Current efforts, for the most part, direct attention to the problems and difficulties of students who possess characteristics traditionally identified with “at-risk” populations (Rumberger, 1983, 1987). Successful, high-achieving students (considered less vulnerable) are often omitted from consideration. And yet, we find that these youth, too, experience pressures and circumstances that can adversely affect their lives in school. Therefore, we have not ignored students who appear, by conventional standards, to be successful and well adjusted (i.e., European-American, middle to upper middle class youth, or high-achieving minority students). Finally, we consider the implications—educational, social, and emotional—of the stresses that young people report. Our overall purpose is to contribute a more holistic understanding of the circumstances and events that impinge on students’ lives and their ability to profit from educational settings.

Students’ Multiple Worlds Framework

Previously, we have presented a model of the interrelationships between students’ family, peer, and school worlds, and in particular, how meanings and understandings derived from these worlds combine to affect students’ engagement with schools and learning (Phelan et al., 1991, 1993). The Students’ Multiple Worlds Model directs attention to the nature of boundaries and borders as well as processes of movement between worlds. Figure 1 visually represents these relationships. Specifically, we are concerned with adolescents’ ability to make the transition to school and classroom environments successfully. This approach stands in contrast to single context approaches that compartmentalize aspects of students’ lives—those studies in which peer group, family, and school variables are studied independently of one another. We have also generated a typology (detailed in previous work) that describes four distinctive patterns that students employ as they make the transition between and adapt to different contexts and settings. Although we do not suggest that the types we describe necessarily include all students, they do depict generally the patterns of students in this study.
Figure 1. Students’ Multiple Worlds Model

1. **Congruent worlds/Smooth transitions**: These students describe values, beliefs, expectations, and normative ways of behaving as similar across their worlds. Moving from one setting to another is harmonious and uncomplicated. Many of these students are European American, middle to upper middle class, and high achieving, but not always. Some minority students also describe similarities in the sociocultural aspects of their worlds and find transitions smooth. Likewise, academically average students can also exhibit patterns that fit this type.

2. **Different worlds/Border crossings managed**: For some students, differences in family, peer, and/or school worlds (with respect to culture, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and/or religion) require students to adjust and reorient as movement among contexts occurs. Students in this category perceive differences in their worlds but utilize strategies that enable them to manage crossings successfully (in terms of what is valued in each setting) although many talk of pressures not commonly recognized by adults in their school environments. High-achieving minority students frequently exhibit patterns common to this type.

3. **Different worlds/Border crossings difficult**: In this category, like the former, students define sociocultural components of their family, peer, and/or school worlds as distinct. However, these students have either not learned, mastered, or been willing to adopt all of the strategies necessary for successful transitions—thus they often experience difficulty adjusting and reorienting as they move across borders and among set-
tions. Common to this type are students who are able to adapt in some circumstances but not in others; that is, they may do well in one or two classes and poorly in the rest.

4. **Different worlds/Border crossings resisted**: In this type, values, beliefs, and expectations across worlds are so discordant that students perceive borders as insurmountable and actively or passively resist transitions. Low-achieving students (seemingly unable to profit from school and classroom settings) are typical of this type, although some high-achieving students who do not connect with peers or family also describe Type 4 patterns.

The Students' Multiple Worlds Model and Typology focus on the individual as mediator and integrator of meaning and experience. Unlike most approaches that attend to stable characteristics (i.e., gender and ethnicity), or concentrate on language acquisition or achievement level alone, the framework we have developed is generic. It is not ethnic-, achievement-, or gender-specific, but rather transcends these categories to consider multiple worlds, border crossings, and adaption for all students. We have found that the generic nature of this model is particularly useful for understanding diversity within ethnic groups. For example, we see that all students—Latino, Vietnamese, Filipino, African American, and European American—may perceive borders differently and utilize various adaptation strategies as they move from one setting to another. In other words, youth of the same ethnicity describe patterns reminiscent of all four category types.

The Students' Multiple Worlds Model and typology emerged inductively from interviews and observations with 55 ethnically diverse students in four urban, desegregated high schools in two school districts in California. A majority of the students, selected to represent the diversity in many of California's large urban high schools, were freshman when the study began in fall 1989. Students vary with respect to gender, ethnicity, achievement level, immigrant history, and transportation status. Our original selection criteria included an equal number of academically high- and low-achieving students in each school with both minority and majority students included in the two achievement categories. Students were asked to participate by school personnel. Four in-depth interviews with each student provide information on students' perceptions of factors that have an impact on their involvement in educational settings. Observations in classrooms furnish documentation of interactions between adolescents and their teachers and peers. Student record data (including standardized test scores, grades, teacher comments, and attendance and referral records) contribute to the picture of achievement patterns and teacher perceptions of individual students over time. Additionally, we obtained demographic and descriptive information about students and their families. Finally, we interviewed teachers and administrators about their perceptions of individual students as well as classroom and school-level resources available to meet students' needs.

In this article, we use the Students' Multiple Worlds Framework to describe the pressures and problems students said affect their lives in school. Data analyses
and classification of students into the category types proceeded as follows. As
the study began, our emphasis was on students’ descriptions of school factors
that affect how well they do—for example, classroom organization, teacher at-
titudes and behaviors, pedagogy, and overall school climate. However, the use
of open-ended interviews allowed students to talk about other features of their
lives (i.e., peer and family concerns) relevant to their feelings about school. “I
wouldn’t let them put me in a higher track because I wanted to be with my
friends,” reported one student. “At least in my family it’s sort of expected that
you’re going to try to get As or something close,” said another. “Being Mex-
ican means being popular, cutting classes, acting crazy,” reported yet another
student. As a result, we developed the Students’ Multiple Worlds Model from
data obtained during the first wave of open-ended interviews.

We used themes that emerged from each interview wave to guide the em-
phasis of those interviews that followed. Thus, we designed second-wave in-
terviews to focus specifically on identifying the congruency of sociocultural
features in students’ family, peer, and school worlds. As students talked about
their worlds, they also related spontaneously their experiences in navigating
their various settings. Although we found a good deal of variety in their descrip-
tions, we also began to uncover distinctive patterns and strategies. Following
the second wave of interviews, we developed a typology to portray the pat-
terns that had emerged.

During the second year of the investigation (third-wave interviews) we pro-
ceeded to obtain more in-depth and systematic descriptions of students’ tran-
sition patterns. As students talked about movement between worlds, they also
began to speak more openly about the difficulties and problems they face. Thus,
our final interviews explored the specific nature and consequences of the types
of stresses that students described.

With data collection complete, we proceeded to classify students into the
four category types defined by the typology we had generated from data
gathered during the first year of the investigation. To do so, we coded and
analyzed the qualitative data (more than 216 transcribed student interviews)
to identify values, beliefs, expectations, and actions across students’ worlds (our
purpose in doing so was to assess congruency and difference) as well as to docu-
ment students’ perceptions of the difficulty of their transitions. We used stu-
dent record data and teacher interview data to validate our classifications. For
example, because our emphasis was on students’ transition patterns to school,
we reviewed students’ grades, teacher interviews, and students’ cumulative
record files to verify students’ own descriptions or when we felt there was am-
biguity about the most appropriate classification. Overall, students’ descriptions
matched remarkably well the relatively broad categories we had originally un-
covered. Their reports also revealed fairly stable transition patterns over time—
only 17 of 55 students described patterns that changed during the course of
the investigation. For purposes of this analysis, we classified these 17 students
in the category type that most accurately represented their transition patterns
during third- and fourth-wave interviews.

After classifying the students with respect to the typology, we coded the
interviews to identify specific difficulties and stresses that students said affect their lives in school. It is these results that we report in this article. By developing quantitative descriptions (i.e., the number and types of pressures and problems reported), we are better able to describe the attributes of each type. Although differences across types appear to be striking, it is important to keep in mind that such comparison serves only as an elaborated definition of the typology. In other words, our purpose is not to assess the extent of quantitative differences across types, but rather to illuminate the ways in which the types differ from each other. These analyses allow us to see where sources of pressure may arise (in students’ family, peer, and school worlds) and extend the substance of our core typology.

We feel that students’ descriptions of pressures and problems provide important information in their own right. Over and over students told us that many adults simply do not understand, do not take the time to hear, or do not appear to care about the difficulties they face. This analysis highlights students’ concerns and emphasizes their role as mediators of their own experience.

**Pressures and Problems Related to School**

Students report a wide variety of pressures emanating from their lives in school. Stress over grades, worries about homework, problems with specific teachers, difficulty understanding material, isolation in classes, and general worries and concerns about the future are commonly mentioned themes. The following descriptions more fully explicate the concerns of students within each of the four category types we describe (see Table 1).

**Type 1: Congruent Worlds/Smooth Transitions**

In this study, 10 students (4 European-American males, 5 European-American females, and 1 Filipina-American female) reported that values, beliefs, and expectations in their family, peer, and school worlds are essentially the same. All said they have no problem in moving among these settings. And almost all (90%) said they experience tremendous pressure to achieve academically. The one European-American male who did not talk about stress related to grades does not plan to attend college. Further, both his parents and teachers felt his average (primarily C grades) reflects his best efforts and ability. For the other nine students, maintaining high grades and doing well on standardized tests stood out as a primary concern in their lives. Further, these students closely linked achievement to long-range educational goals. For example, worrying about a test is at the same time worrying about one’s future. As one student put it, “Everything is riding on your grades.” This finding supports the work of other researchers who have discussed the future orientation of high-achieving, mainstream students (Spindler, 1987; Spindler, Spindler, Trueba, & Williams, 1990).

Although they are not particularly surprising, data from in-depth interviews provides a closer look at the hidden costs that emanate from the stress these young people experience. For example, Ryan,1 a European-American, high-achieving, intrinsically interested learner explains:
### Table 1
School-Related Pressures and Problems by Student Type \( (N = 55) \)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pressure mentioned</th>
<th>Type 1 ( (N = 10) )</th>
<th>Type 2 ( (N = 16) )</th>
<th>Type 3 ( (N = 19) )</th>
<th>Type 4 ( (N = 10) )</th>
<th>Total ( (N = 55) )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classroom</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty understanding material</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Picked on by teachers or other adults for reasons of race, gender, values, beliefs,</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>personal attributes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel alone or isolated</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressure to hide ethnic self in reaction to peer values and behavior</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total achievement in relation to long-range educational goals</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worried about uncertain future, e.g. not sure what steps to take</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General worry about high school graduation, e.g. &quot;making it through&quot;</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worried about lack of access to information, help, assistance relevant to future</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>possibilities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time pressure, e.g. combination of work, school, and household responsibilities</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(more students worked but did not express time pressure)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Excessive pressure to achieve academically can result in unintended educational costs. For example, some students described their emphasis on "learning to play the game" rather than learning to learn. Others reported their inability or their lack of inclination to remember content material following exams. Further, some students said they worry so much about their classroom performance that their ability to concentrate is obstructed.

Wendy, European-American female: Like usually, if I just go to class...I just sit there and listen. I find that if I have to worry about maybe someone calling on me or something and then I'll forget everything they're talking about cause I'm worrying about what the question is going to be.

Interviewer: Really?

Wendy: Which is kind of dumb, but...If I would just listen I'd know the answer to the question anyway. [ES37STD:1250-1262]

Perhaps most alarming, however, are students' reports of their decreasing intrinsic interest in learning. Ryan's description exemplifies this point.

Ryan, European-American male: I like writing except that writing is fun until you have to do it for a grade. Like I'll think of schemes or something for my ships—like a history—and I'll write it down. It's fun to write, but I always worry that I'm going to get a bad grade when I do it for school. So it seems like for school you have to write the way your teacher wants you to write. [ES37STAB:35-44]

Discussions with Ryan suggest that he spends a great deal of energy trying to comply with what it is he perceives teachers want in order to assure his academic success. His comments are reminiscent of the suggestions by some researchers that the use of extrinsic rewards in educational settings (i.e., grades) can foster compliant behavior (Eisner, 1985) despite the fact that many educators say their goal is to promote student initiative.
Students' descriptions of the stress they feel has social and emotional costs as well. For example, Valerie, a high-achieving European-American student, said that her preoccupation with grades leads to competitive behavior with friends.

I'm so competitive with my friends when it comes to grades and stuff. In math I hope I do better than my friend. ... She must be like, "So, I'm getting tired of you asking me what did you get." And I sort of wish I wasn't quite so competitive about it, but I want the highest score.

Although competition is not necessarily bad, when it becomes a driving force overriding relationships with friends, students are often left with conflicting and troubling thoughts.

Finally, eight of the Type 1 students talked about how upset they become when receiving less-than-perfect scores. For example, Marian, a Filipina-American student, said, "I don't like any Bs, you know. I get really upset when I get a B." All of these students were uncomfortable, and many expressed dislike for the behaviors they have adopted in order to succeed.

Only recently have educators and others become cognizant and concerned about the psychosocial costs that may result from students' obsession to obtain high grades and elevate test scores. Further, there is increasing speculation (and some evidence) about the possible relationship of academic pressure to emotional and physical symptoms, that is, depression, anxiety, illness, suicide, and so forth. For example, in 1990, the Palo Alto Youth Council surveyed students at its two city high schools. The summary report contains the following comments:

It is not surprising that 85% of the respondents plan to go on to a 4-year college after graduation. However, this quest for academic excellence does not seem to be without some potentially dangerous side affects. Ninety-five percent of the respondents claimed that academic stress manifests itself by worrying about grades, trying to meet parental and self expectations, trying to get into the best college, achieving athletically and having little or no social life. Also of concern should be the number of these young people who ignore and/or accept their feelings of exhaustion, general unhappiness, depression, school phobia, and drug/alcohol use as a result of this stress. (Burnett, 1990-91, p. 2)

Even more alarming are suggestions that pressure and stress are associated with increases in suicide rates among young adults. For example, Wetzel (1989, p. 29) states, "Experts and laypersons alike associate increases in the suicide rate with competitive pressures for success, to the decline of the nuclear family, and more generally, to ennui—an increased sense of aloneness and depression in our society."

In our sample, which includes 10 students in the congruent worlds group, 6 were involved in rather dramatic events—for example, one student broke
his hand ramming it through a garage door in a fit of rage; one student was diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder and is currently on medication and in therapy; one student died in his sleep; two students say they were intensely distracted because of suicide threats by their friends; and one student attempted suicide twice during the 2-year course of our study. Although we do not know if pressures to achieve academically are, in fact, related to any of these incidents, it is noteworthy that such extremes occur for so many young adults who are frequently perceived to be well adjusted, successful, and problem-free. In fact, school officials in this study initially characterized all of these 10 students as "model" young adults. As LeCompte and Dworkin (1991, p. 48) pointed out in describing contemporary at-risk youth, "Adhering to the traditional [dropout] profile can, however, obscure other even more dramatic trends and problems." Perhaps the point is illustrated best by a forthright, high-achieving young woman in our study who asked if she could list her participation in our research on her college application form in order to augment her chances of getting into Stanford.

**Type 2: Different Worlds/Transitions Managed**

Of the 55 students in our study, 16 described differences across their worlds but nevertheless felt that they were able to make the transition to their school settings successfully. These students—one European-American female, three European-American males, one Japanese-American female, one Vietnamese female, three Vietnamese males, one African-American female, one Filipina female, two Latino males, and three Latina females—also reported pressure to do well academically (69%). However, unlike Type 1 students, half of these adolescents (50%) expressed discomfort and stress in classes where they feel isolated and alone (see Table 1).

*Ivonne, Mexican-American female:* Well, I kind of feel uncomfortable. Not many Mexicans and Hispanics are in [my] classes. They [other students] probably think of me as weird, because they probably have this view that most Hispanics are dumb or something. They have that opinion, you know, [Hispanics] get bad grades. So, I don't know why I feel uncomfortable. I just... it means you're not really with any other... many people. Maybe by the end of the year they will realize that I belong. [RA28STD:544–570]

*Trinh, Vietnamese-American female:* Because I'm Vietnamese I notice the little things more than other people. Just like, I don't really get noticed by all the popular people. OK, everyone in the class, I know their names and everything... Like being Vietnamese... like they have a lot of Americans in here. That there are more of them, and when you're alone, you're nervous over little things. [RA30STEN:1212–1260]

Many times these students are one of a few (if not the only) minority students in their high-track classes. Teachers frequently perceive these students as successfully assimilated and well adjusted. If they fail to speak up aggressively and
often (which is not unusual), teachers attribute their quiet and self-effacing demeanor as characteristic of a particular cultural group. Although there is no question that interaction patterns are influenced by culture, these students' comments provide a more complex view of the dynamic that operates to render them silent. For example, Joyce, an African-American, high-achieving (Type 2) female says:

*Joyce:* Sometimes I feel that I shouldn't belong in there [advanced math] because like there's a lot of smart people in that class and I just don't feel like I'm smart enough to be in that class. But when I can do it.

*Interviewer:* Cause the class is more diverse, not just white students?

*Joyce:* Um-hum. Yeah, I feel better when there's more diversity because there's different people around you. You're not alone, you know. Only one who's not the same as the rest. [VA16STD:1415–1422; VA16STEN:1662–1685]

Without friends with whom they can talk, these students have no way to test the reality of their perceptions. The resulting meanings that students attach to themselves and others not only leave them fearful but also inhibit their verbal participation in classes. As one high-achieving Latino student said,

*Student:* If I raise my hand and say the wrong thing, I feel dumb.

*Interviewer:* Because you're Latino?

*Student:* Yeah. [HT28STD:576–595]

The unspoken questions that academically able minority students contemplate, "Am I going to make friends?" "What will people think?" "What if I sound dumb?" "Am I really very smart?" are not so different from those expressed by females in gender studies that focus on behaviors in mixed-gender groups (AAUW Report, 1992). However, in-depth interviews with Type 2 students suggest that the pressures they feel and their resulting fear of speaking up also emanates from their perception of differential power relationships within their classroom contexts as well as suspicion or knowledge of their classmates' prejudices. Numerous scholars have described how these forces work to constrain and silence student voices (c.f., Gray, 1985; Neira, 1988).

The educational ramifications of this dynamic are not insignificant. In classes, students' silent responses can prevent them from obtaining help or assistance. Further, students' limited participation restricts the possibility for the exchange of diverse ideas, thus inhibiting the liveliness and richness possible in classroom contexts. And finally, when students remain silent, bridges to friendship and understanding are less likely to be made—thus having a negative impact on both minority and majority youth.

"Hiding oneself" has emotional costs as well, not the least of which is danger to individual identity. Neira speaks powerfully to this point:
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When trying to live in two different worlds, one is in peril of not belonging to either of them. One is left in a state of confusion... Being put in the position of changing one's character every morning and afternoon to adapt to two different worlds endangers one's identity. (Neira, 1988, p. 337)

Further, when students attempt to overcome feelings of isolation by “fitting in,” there is the danger that they may feel it necessary to devalue aspects of their home and community cultures—thus causing them to sever important links to emotional support. Finally, silence precludes students from challenging conventional stereotypes, that is, that they are unworthy, not as smart, less deserving.

As other scholars have pointed out, tracking practices clearly exacerbate problems of isolation, thereby increasing students' feelings that they must submerge aspects of their ethnic identity (Fordham, 1991; Davidson, 1992). We know, for example, that minority students are consistently overrepresented in lower tracks and conspicuously absent in those that are advanced (Oakes, 1985, 1989). In this study, all of the students are, to some degree or another, tracked. Tracking practices may well exacerbate the isolation encountered by many Type 2 students.

At the classroom level, teachers’ attitudes as well as pedagogical practices can mitigate, to some extent, students’ feelings of isolation (Phelan, Davidson, Cao, 1992). For example, teachers whom students perceive as caring, considerate, and open often create classroom environments that foster the free exchange of ideas. Further, classes that are structured to encourage and promote student/student interaction also facilitate students’ ability to connect with their peers, thus promoting their chances of feeling personally valued. Unfortunately, our observations confirm other research findings that document the overwhelming tendency for teachers to talk and students to listen (Goodlad, 1984; Sirotnik, 1983).

Type 3: Different Worlds/Border Crossings Difficult
The 19 youth we place in the third category include 1 European-American male, 1 European-American female, 2 Vietnamese males, 3 Vietnamese females, three Latino males, 4 Latina females, 3 African-American males, 1 African-American female, and 1 Palestinian male. These youth, like those in the previous category, also express fear of being isolated in their classes. However, because many of these students move from class to class with their friends in regular or remedial tracks, isolation is sometimes mitigated. Indeed, some even choose to remain in lower-track classes specifically to be with peers with whom they feel comfortable. However, for 68% of Type 3 students—those whose worlds are different and find border crossings difficult—frustration and worry about not understanding content material is of primary concern (see Table 1).

Jamie, African-American female: Some books are hard to understand and comprehend. They have regular words in it, but you like still don't understand the meaning of it. Some people, they can understand that.
Comprehension difficulties arise from a number of sources. For immigrant students, language problems as well as lack of access to individualized teacher assistance can create tremendous strain. Chieu Huynh, a recently arrived Vietnamese student, describes having to compete with classmates for scarce teacher and tutor time.

_interviewer:_ Do you ask for help?

_chieu:_ I ask her for help, but I still don't understand it. I try to see the teacher, but there are so many people. I can't ask him. Every problem is hard to understand, so I can't ask him every single problem. There's so many people in line. There's only one teacher. I don't get my turn, so I don't go in. So I get further and further behind. I can't catch up. [ES42:125-149]

For others, skill levels are low and pedagogical styles are unsuited to meet students' needs:

_regina, mexican-american female:_ Sometimes I don't understand, sometimes it's just I don't want to do it, or mostly because I don't understand it. . . . I always need someone to like go over the example or whatever. 'Cause he will just read them out of the book as he gives the page, and he goes on and on and on and I don't know where he's at. I'm lost and I give up. I'm just "OK." He keeps on talking. I just pretend I'm reading. [ES54:549-561]

Students' comprehension difficulties are exacerbated by course content that they find boring, teaching styles that do not take advantage of their strengths, and low expectations that stem either from the belief that they are incapable of doing well or that they willfully choose not to do so. Inability to concentrate, tuning out, viewing school as boring—all are consequences that occur when students have difficulty understanding material in classes where teachers fail to perceive students' learning needs. Some students adopt alternative (and maladaptive) means to cope with the frustrations they feel; for example, copying friend's work, creating disruptions in class, or withdrawing quietly from the classroom, the teacher, other students.

Students say that teachers who are sensitive and empathetic to problems they encounter in mastering subject-matter knowledge make a difference in their feelings about school and their ability to achieve academically. Students' comparisons of classes also serve to illuminate teacher attributes that create bridges to understanding. For example, Andrea compares her current algebra teacher, in whose class she is earning an A, to her algebra teacher a year ago, in whose class she received an F.
Andrea, Vietnamese-Chinese-immigrant female: [My current algebra teacher], he's very nice and he helps you in any way. And he explains every problem. He gives you about two quizzes before a test and that really helps. But [last year] Ms. Rupert, she just gives you a test and it's really hard to understand and it doesn't seem to cover the material that she covered in class. [ES48STD2]

From Andrea's perspective, teacher encouragement and personalized attention were particularly significant when she began to lag behind. Andrea's comments give voice to the work of other researchers who stress the significance of teachers who exhibit caring and personalized relationships with their students (LeCompte & Dworkin, 1991; Phelan et al., 1992; Richardson, Casanova, Placier, & Guilefoyle, 1989).

All of the Type 3 students were well aware of the implications of failing grades, and most (63%) said they worry a lot about their uncertain future. Further, all said they very much want to graduate. Although frequently teetering between passing and failing, these are not students who reject the educational system unilaterally. On the contrary, they seem to have internalized, to some extent, cultural messages that stress the importance of education for obtaining access to future opportunities. Often doing well in one or two classes and not so well in others, these students are viewed by some teachers as lazy, recalcitrant, and uninterested.

Type 4: Different Worlds/Border Crossings Resisted

Although our sample does not include the most alienated and troubled students (i.e., those in gangs, in trouble with the law, etc.), all of the 10 students we have classified as Type 4—those whose worlds are different and who resist crossing borders—were at-risk of dropping out of high school prior to graduation because of low grades and lack of course credits. At the same time, 90% of these students (which include three European-American males, one European-American female, one Vietnamese male, four Latina females and one Latino male) reported that a primary source of anxiety stems from their concern and worry about an uncertain future (see Table 1). Contrary to the popular belief that students who are failing do not care, many (80%) expressed discouragement and despair knowing that their chances of making it through high school are not good. However, unlike Type 3 students who struggle to achieve, most Type 4 youth in our sample have simply given up (with respect to completing course work). Many blamed themselves. Others alternated between self-blame and criticism of both the dominant cultural ideology that “anyone can make it,” and a system generally unresponsive to their needs. This “contradictory consciousness” is similar to that voiced by the dropout youth described by Fine (1991).

Nonetheless, many of the youth in our study clung to the hope that they would graduate and often developed elaborate and unrealistic rationales to protect themselves from the hopelessness they felt, that is, “Even if I have to stay here [in high school] 6 years, I'm going to graduate.” However, such plans do
not eliminate fear and uncertainty. Many appeared to be paralyzed and felt impotent about what to do. Although they knew that they should do well in school, their continued failure served as a reminder that they were incapable of achieving within school-defined parameters of success. Many appeared to simply “drift” away—a concept described by LeCompte and Dworkin (1991).

Related to students’ concerns about an uncertain future is the fact that many Type 4 students (40%) reported that they receive little help or assistance, either with regard to course selection or career possibilities.

Sonia, Mexican-American female: OK, well last year I didn’t have no idea of what I wanted to take. Because you know, I mean you have to have so many credits for this, so many credits for that, so many credits for college and all kinds of stuff like that. And I go “Well, if I do get to go to college, I have to have these requirements?” I was always worried about what I was taking and everything. But I didn’t know what I had to take or anything. That was last year. I choosed them myself. I just chose whatever. I didn’t talk to nobody. [EX56STD:2685–2696]

We found that many students receive little, if any, assistance in thinking about their future. “Basically what they tell us is what classes to take and what your GPA should be, but that’s about it.” [HT34STD:577–580]

Interestingly, nearly three quarters (70%) of Type 4 students described difficulties with at least one or two teachers. From their perspective, they were singled out and “picked on” for reasons of ethnicity, gender, behavior, values and beliefs, and/or personal attributes. Saul Ortiz, a Mexican-American transfer student, described being pushed to the breaking point in his history class:

Well, we didn’t get along [the teacher and I] when I first went in there. He asked me how come I didn’t have a history class at Caulfield High School. And I go “I just didn’t.” ‘Cause I was in low classes at Caulfield. And then he started yelling at me, he’s all, I should have had a history class, I should have asked for it and all this. And I go, “Don’t yell at me.” I just told him straight off, “Don’t yell at me.” And he got all mad and “Saul, go sit in the back of the room.” So I sat in the back of the room. He never passed me out any papers. I was there for I think about a month and he didn’t give me not one.

And then one day we had to do a collage. And he gave me that paper, he’s all “I don’t think you’ll do it, but I’ll give it to you anyway.” And I did it and he gave me an F. I did it good too. I put all the stuff about war and peace... I put some pictures from Time magazine and stuff, you know, grenades, and then I put “peace” and I put flowers and stuff. He gave me an F. Some guy that did worse than mine he gave about a B. I just took it and ripped it. He’s all “At least you got a grade.” I go, “Yeah, it’s an F.”

And then the next day I just went in there and he started yelling at me. And I just started yelling back. He said [that] I was a smart aleck and I just started yelling. I couldn’t handle it anymore. I had to sit in SIS [School In-House Suspension] for the rest of the year. [ES39STC:447–494]
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Others, like Sonia, a Mexican-American student, were sensitive to issues of race and ethnicity, interpreted teacher comments as racist, and felt personally devalued:

Sonia: Yeah it's weird, 'cause most teachers, you know—white teachers—some of them are kind of prejudiced.

Interviewer: What makes you know that?

Sonia: It's probably the way they look at you, the way they talk, you know when they're talking about something—about something like when they talk about the people who are going to drop out, and they . . . look around, look around [at you].

And then Mr. Kula, when he's talking about teenage pregnancy or something like that. He turns around and he looks at us. It's like—he tries to look around the whole room, so we won't notice but like he mostly like tries to tell us, tries to get it through our heads, you know. Sometimes I think he's prejudiced. And sometimes I think he's trying to help us. [ES56STB:1890–1913]

Further, Sonia's description of teacher actions and comments illustrates the use of humiliation techniques that apparently some teachers believe will motivate students to perform.

Sonia, Mexican-American female: And I was sitting down looking for my papers because I just barely walked in and—not even a minute ago—he walks by and he goes—he points at me and he goes, "Nonworker," and then he points at those two girls and he goes, "The talkers," and then he points at all these white people and he goes, "The worker, the worker, the worker," and I just like, you know, "What is it?" You know. [ES56STB:1945–1956]

None of the schools involved in this study had formal structures for "resolving" conflicts between students and teachers, although some students reported that other adults in their school environments (i.e., Vice Principal of Discipline, a counselor, another teacher) are willing to listen to their views, thus diffusing the anger and resentment they feel. However, in most cases, school structures (i.e., in-house suspension) are designed as punitive means to maintain compliance to norms rather than resolve conflicts that occur.

Pressures and Problems/Family World

The literature abounds with descriptions of adverse conditions in students' families that affect their ability to engage in school settings. However, it is noteworthy that the most frequently cited family stress by students in this study (78%) is that their parents pressure them to do well in school (see Table 2). Students across types described parents who urge them to raise their grades, do well on tests, complete their homework, or at least pay attention and attend to school matters.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pressure mentioned</th>
<th>Type 1</th>
<th>Type 2</th>
<th>Type 3</th>
<th>Type 4</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>(N = 10)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement pressures (total)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents who help</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents who are unsure what to do</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family conflict (total)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonphysical family conflict</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extreme fam. conflict resulting from member's involv. in physical, sexual, &amp;</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>substance abuse</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family disapproves of friends boy/girlfriend</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major household, child care, and/or family business</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressure to uphold cultural values and expectations in conflict with school or</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>peer expectations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family liaison to outside world because of language and cultural differences of</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>parents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorce</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illness of a family member</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death of a family member</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worried about sibling(s), e.g., possibility of alcohol, drug abuse, peer influence</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic stress</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family level</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal level</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family instability, e.g., mobility, shifting household configuration</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Further, parents’ emphasis on academic achievement is forceful and consistent enough to cause their children to feel uncomfortably stressed. (More than 78% of students described their parents’ emphasis on school success, but some said they do not experience undue pressure as a result.) These findings, although contrary to common beliefs that many parents are not concerned with their children’s school performance, support the work of other researchers who continue to point out that most parents do indeed care about their children’s education (Chavkin, 1993; Comer, 1986; Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1991; Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1991).

However, students said different things with respect to whether or not their parents’ emphasis on achievement is accompanied by their ability to assist their children in matters pertaining to school, that is, assistance on homework assignments, communication with teachers and school officials, filing college applications, and so forth. For example, 80% of Type 1 students said their parents assist them with school-related matters, that is, with specific course content, intervention with teachers, and facts about college. The following examples illustrate the help these students receive.

*Help with course content, European-American male:* If I have really hard questions [about calculus], I’ll ask my dad. But unfortunately, my dad knows so much more than the calculus teacher does that calculus is a second language to him, so everything is so easy for him and so complicated for me. [OB04STB:690–696]

*Intervention with teachers, European-American female:* She [mother] keeps on calling and telling her [the Spanish teacher], asking her if she can have us talk more. . . . She [the teacher] just says that oh, she’s going to do it, she’s going to do it. She just says all that and then my mom just made another appointment [to talk to the teacher].

*Facts about college, European-American female:*

**Interviewer:** How about college, Wendy? Who do you go to for information about that?

**Wendy:** My mom. I ask her. And I ask my dad ’cause he went to Bishopville Polytech. And I talk to him about that. I ask my mom about interesting things that I would like to do. ’Cause I don’t want to get stuck in a job I don’t like. [EX47STD:1981–1992]

In contrast, only one Type 3 student (5%) and two Type 4 students (20%) reported that their parents are knowledgeable enough to assist them. Even though these adolescents say that their parents pressure them to do well. The following response is typical.

*Jamie, African American female:* See, my sister was the first girl that went to college. . . . So I’m the second girl, and there’s like a stress on me in a way because they’re like “What’s your grades? What’s your grade point average, Jamie?” And I tell them I get a “D” and “Oh God! You
Further, many Type 3 and 4 students also bore responsibility for assisting their siblings in matters pertaining to school.

_Donna, Mexican-American female:_ I'm like a second mom at home, OK? And that's a tradition, . . . when my mom's not home, and even when she's home, they ask me to help them with their homework and stuff, and my mom can't do it, you know, 'cause she didn't go to high school.

[RA52STEN:510–522]

That some parents can and do intervene on behalf of their children while other families lack the knowledge and skills to do so illustrates vividly differences in students' access to "cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1977). Moreover, many Type 3 and 4 students must deal with parents who stress achievement but do not possess the knowledge and skills to assist them in school-related matters. A good number of Type 2 students (25%) also face this problem. We know that bridges to minority parents are sorely lacking in many schools where parent-involvement strategies continue to target primarily middle-class parents, ignoring minority parents who are concerned, but are either uncertain of the steps to take or espouse a different style of parent participation (Chavkin, 1993; Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1991).

With respect to other family pressures, interviews confirmed that many young adults find themselves involved in circumstances frequently cited as prevalent in many of today's families. For example, nearly 50% of the students reported that family conflicts impinge negatively on their psychological well-being, interfering, more or less frequently, with their ability to concentrate in school. These students said that at times they are severely distressed over family controversies, which range from heated verbal conflicts, to alcohol-induced fights, to physical abuse, and other intense, confrontational situations between family members. At the same time, they were well aware that many teachers are disinclined to consider the problems they have.

_Maureena, Mexican/Filipina-American female:_ Students have problems inside. Sometimes you have a personal problem that you really can't stand it, you know, and you just don't want to do anything. And then maybe if you told your teacher, "Look, I'm going to take this [schoolwork] home," you know, and this and that, and "I have a problem," and [teacher] "Oh, you have a problem. Why don't you leave your problems at home? This is school." [VA22STD:1056–1067]

All the teachers should be a little sensitive—our personal lives really do affect us in school, and I know it's not supposed to be the place to take care of it, but you know, if it's the only place we have.

[VA22STC:246–252]

This statement illustrates poignantly students' need for consideration of the circumstances with which they must deal outside of school. Students told us that
programs and services that connect them with appropriate mental health services, student support groups, and simply having adults who are willing and able to listen can often reduce the stresses they feel.

Although they take different forms, family conflicts appeared to crosscut student types. It is remarkable, however, that 19 of 26 students who reported stress from family situations continue to function in school (that is, maintain passing grades). In fact, 10 of 26 are high-achieving students in advanced-track classes.

Still another pressure for some students was their parents’ view that they should uphold cultural traditions and behaviors (this could be true as well for religious observances) that sometimes conflict with norms and expectations in their peer and/or school worlds. Over one third of the students in our study said this is true. For example, with respect to school, the following issues can arise: cultural norms that hold teachers in high regard, thus requiring respectful behavior that precludes asking questions, speaking out, challenging ideas (expectations common in some classrooms); cultural beliefs that emphasize the importance of modesty, thus contending with physical education requirements for students to suit up and shower together; cultural values that stress the importance of academic study and the irrelevance of extracurricular activities; and belief in the omnipotence of the family with respect to transmitting specific knowledge; for example, sex education, appropriate male and female role behaviors, and so forth. We have also found that immigrant parents and some minority parents who are unfamiliar with extracurricular events worry when their children do not return home immediately after school.

When these and similar issues arise, students are caught in a bind between family and school. In many cases, teachers’ lack of knowledge about the lives and culture of their students causes them to misinterpret students’ responses. Further, without bridges to connect minority parents with school, the ability and opportunity to negotiate solutions is curtailed.

Other pressures and problems reported by students confirm the variety of stress-producing situations faced by many of today’s youth. Illness of a parent, severe economic circumstances, death of a family member, divorce, and family instability are only some of the ills that have an impact on the mental health and functioning of these young adults—particularly with respect to their ability to profit optimally from their school and classroom environments.

**Pressures and Problems With Peers**

Students across types said that with their friends they can be themselves. Rather than encountering constant pressure and conflict, students congregate with young people with whom they can relate. Perhaps most important, being with friends provides a fresh release from family and school pressures. Students’ descriptions confirmed the work of other researchers who pointed out the many positive aspects of adolescent peer relationships. (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984; Ianni, 1989; Savin-Williams & Berndt, 1990) The following responses are typical:
Psychosocial Pressures of Adolescence

Ryan, European-American male: Yeah, when I'm with them [friends], like we can do just about anything we want. You don't have to worry. When you're just with them it's like there's no real rules. [ES37STB:535–543]

Trinh, Vietnamese-American female: Friends are important because I can talk and share things that I wouldn't normally with my family. I can tell them things and they would see both sides of the story unlike when I tell my parents, and they usually just speak of their point of view.

Friends seem to see things more clearly because they can relate to it more, whereas the parents see things how it was when they were that certain age ... I feel more comfortable with [friends] because I have the same interests, whereas if I got with my parents, many times my ideas will not coincide with theirs. [With friends], I can be myself without worrying of their high expectations of me. I can act silly without having them stare at me and think I'm children like in the family world. [HT30—essay]

Although often comfortable with their friends, students also spoke of the pressure they experience from peers to participate in behaviors that worry adults (cutting classes, drinking, excessive partying, etc.; see Table 3). Nearly 30% of the total number of students reported pressure from friends to engage in actions that adults in their lives do not condone. Clearly, with respect to school, tardies and truancies are especially problematic for students at risk of not graduating.

Extracurricular school programs (i.e., sports, drama, social events, and government) that involve students in activities with their friends are instrumental in providing opportunities for positive peer interaction. However, strategies to involve students are often those most familiar and comfortable to mainstream youth. At the classroom level, we find little to compete with the advantages students find among their peers, and, for the most part, we find that teachers fail to take advantage of students' orientation toward their friends. For example, encouraging students to work in groups, fostering discussions in which students talk and listen to each other, and encouraging students to help one another with class assignments are pedagogical methods infrequently used.

Perhaps the most striking and disturbing finding with respect to pressures that students said emanate from peers is that over one third of the students (19 of 55) talked about repeated incidents of discrimination in their school environments. (All 19 are minority students.) These incidents took the form of direct verbal or physical assaults, racist comments that were overheard, and implicit messages that exclude minority students from participation in or access to resources and/or space available to others. Such incidents cause strain and distress. Marian, a high-achieving Filipina-American student, described it like this:

Marian: You get kind of discrimination from all sides, you know. From whites and from a lot of Mexicans, 'cause they really hate Asians... 'Cause a lot of gang members will go, 'This

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### Table 3
Peer-Related Pressures and Problems by Student Type ($N = 55$)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pressure mentioned</th>
<th>Type 1</th>
<th></th>
<th>Type 2</th>
<th></th>
<th>Type 3</th>
<th></th>
<th>Type 4</th>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Congruent worlds/ Smooth transitions</td>
<td>(N = 10)</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>(N = 16)</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>(N = 19)</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>(N = 10)</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>(N = 55)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict with friends</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressure to participate in socially defined unacceptable behavior, e.g. cutting, drinking, drugs</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oppositional school behavior, e.g. pressures against “acting white” or “selling out,” which stems from working hard in school (Ogbu, 1987)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintaining high academic standards of group</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worried about friends’ well-being, e.g. pregnancy, possible suicide, drug abuse, family problems</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressure to assoc. with own ethnic group members</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected to maintain the symbolic markers of ethnic group, e.g. support group members in conflict</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination, e.g. feel devalued because of culture, ethnicity, language</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>6</td>
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was our land, and the Asians are taking over,' and everything. The Japanese are—everyone is Japanese to them or Vietnamese. It's really messed up, so... There's a lot of discrimination in this school.

Interviewer: So it's not an easy feeling of being able to really mingle with...

Marian: No, you have to be a certain way, I guess if you want to mingle. But no, you can't do that. [RA34STC: 1588-1637]

Elvira, a high-achieving Filipina-American female, gave a more personal example.

And well, most of the people here are friendly. There are a few that are like kind of not... I don't know, I guess they are not willing to integrate or they don't really want to. Sometimes I'm fine. But like walking with a friend, there are these two guys and they're like saying, 'New York City, here comes de' program' [referring to Elvira and her friend as transported students]. I hate that, it's like 'Oh my god,' and I try to ignore them but... [CA09STAC:113–128]

In what follows, several students from one high school speak emotionally about the prejudice they experienced.

Rosa, Mexican-American female: It's like—I don't mean this to you or nothing, but a lot of the white people like to stay to themselves. Like they're scared to touch us or something... They would really give you hard looks because of your skin, and they try to talk about you, and they don't understand that all Mexicans don't speak Spanish. They walk around you...

Interviewer: As if you weren't there?

Rosa: Yeah. Or they just stare at you like you're an alien or something. I don't know, just a lot of kids here [at this school] are racist against Mexicans and blacks. [ES40STC: 22–27, 75–87]

Saul, Mexican-American male: [If] you're a Mexican, you know, they'll like kind of leave you out, kind of push you out, push you out, push you away from what they're talking about. I don't know why, it's just how it is. [ES39STAC:620–629]

Andrea, Vietnamese-Chinese-immigrant female: I'd like to play with Americans, but they hate Vietnamese, so we hate them. [ES48STACB:1320–1324]

Duc, Vietnamese immigrant male: The American kids are very mean. They are prejudiced. They never associate with the Vietnamese. They play with their own group. [ES53STACD:140–147]

Tensions, hostilities, and direct encounters with racism perpetuate stereotypes, foster misunderstandings, and thus serve to maintain rigid and impene-
trable borders that block interaction between student groups. Students respond to discrimination from their peers in a number of ways. Some internalize the hostility and often yield to an overwhelming sense of hopelessness. Others react with anger and attribute stereotypes to all other members of a particular group (i.e., gringos). Still others ensconce themselves in the midst of protective peers to separate themselves as much as possible from students who are culturally different. Many of these students also avoid taking classes without their friends. Finally, some students attempt to hide who they are and “fit in” with the mainstream crowd.

Discrimination in school environments can have school-wide consequences as well. For example, discriminatory acts can push students towards peer group norms that inhibit school success. Further, tension and stress resulting from racist and hostile comments diverts students’ attention away from academic goals. Here again, barriers to fostering positive attitudes among cultural groups are hindered by classroom practices that fail to encourage student/student interactions, by school-level polices that condone tracking, and by discipline policies that unwittingly “pit” students against each other. (See Davidson, 1992, for a description of how discipline policies can adversely affect student relationships.) Although many schools sponsor events such as “International Day,” these sporadic attempts to promote exchange are often limited in scope and number. Further, without more concerted and widespread efforts to promote cultural exchange (i.e., by modifying Eurocentric curriculum, by changing traditional classroom practices, and by impacting overall school climate), there is danger that such “cultural” events will serve only as arenas in which predominate views and behaviors are played out.

_Javier: Mexican immigrant male:_ Here I feel that no Hispanic has any control. They think they have some, but they don’t. Not one, not one Hispanic has influence.

_Interviewer:_ Can you give me an example?

_Javier:_ Well, here, some guys go around in gangs. And there are Americans, how is it said? “Gringos” [laughs], that also go around in gangs. And they don’t even speak to the Mexicans. The day that was Open House, no, not Open House, International Week, we made food, tostadas, and we were all in a big circle, all of us who were selling outside with table. And we were selling, but we were [excluded] out of the [main] circle... Like I said, none of us has any influence. I think that we need a Hispanic principal.

[ES38STD:206–239]

**Discussion**

The necessity of navigating a variety of social contexts has, over the years, provided adolescents with opportunities for personal and social growth. However, when the challenges required for successful transitions and adaptations stretch young people beyond their abilities and capacities, pressures and stress result. By studying the interrelationships of sociocultural components in adolescents'
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worlds and the manner in which they navigate their settings, we have been able to create a framework that makes these phenomena more comprehensible. The Students’ Multiple Worlds model and typology are the primary products of our research thus far. Our conceptualization cuts the pie differently, so to speak—first, by focusing on the congruence of students’ worlds, and second, by paying attention to transition and adaptation patterns. In so doing we have been able to direct attention to the nature of problems, not only of students who are visibly in need, but also those whose difficult experiences are often submerged.

In this article we describe pressures and problems that students, in each of four category types, said affect their lives in school. The problems that young people face emanate from a variety of sources—namely, their family, peer, and school worlds. However, regardless of source, the pressures that youth experience have the potential to have a negative impact on their ability to engage productively and optimally in school and learning endeavors.

For example, we have found that many students who describe worlds as congruent and express little difficulty in making the transition between contexts (Type 1) experience pressure from teachers and parents to achieve academically—that is, to maintain exceptionally high grades and test scores. Although congruent worlds and smooth transitions imply harmony and compatibility, this does not mean necessarily that students’ lives are without pressures and stress. Although it is not particularly surprising that pervasive high expectations across students’ worlds may well leave them feeling overwhelmed, it is exactly these students who are often perceived by teachers and others as “on the right track,” “well adjusted,” and “least in need.” With the tremendous day-to-day demands of teaching and the large numbers of students to whom teachers must respond, it is understandable how students who appear to be doing well (academically and socially) can be overlooked. Further, predominant values in school settings (i.e., academic success, achievement, and future orientation) can serve to obscure potential developmental needs and problems of students that result from differential adaptation to standards of excellence. Finally, many high school teachers and counselors serve as brokers for the university system and thus emphasize repeatedly the advantage of advanced-level classes, the importance of high grades, the need to elevate AP and SAT scores, and the necessity for students to enroll in special classes to do so. Although setting high standards and encouraging academic excellence are certainly important educational goals, it may be important as well for educators to give attention to identifying and assisting students who experience undue pressure to succeed, as well as to emphasize educational goals beyond those that are outcome based. The findings here suggest that striving for “success” (in terms of grades and test scores) can have psychosocial costs that are unintended.

Students whose worlds are different but who manage to successfully traverse borders (Type 2) are like the previous students, often overlooked as experiencing difficulties. They, too, present few problems from the perspective of teachers and adults in school environments. However, in addition to experi-
encouraging pressure to achieve academically, many of these youth (particularly high-achieving minority students) express discomfort in high-track classes, where they feel isolated and alone. Uneasy with peers who they feel devalue who they are, silenced by their perceptions of unequal power relationships, and fearful of standing out, many of these students feel compelled to hide major parts of who they are. Further, we have seen that the obligation that many high-achieving minority youth feel to uphold family values and traditions can leave them conflicted as they attempt to adapt to the prominent values and norms within their peer and school settings. Even though these students are able to cross borders successfully, many are forced to deny fundamental aspects of their personal and ethnic identities. Teachers’ perceptions that students “fit in” and have little trouble academically and no apparent problems socially can divert their attention from the energy and efforts these youth expend in navigating their daily circumstances. We feel it is important for educators to move beyond common stereotypes of “model” high-achieving minority youth to be able to respond more adequately to the pressures and problems they too can face in their adjustment to school.

Students whose worlds are different and cross borders only under certain conditions (Type 3) often teeter between engagement and withdrawal. For these students academic success occurs sporadically, and yet we find that many are worried and concerned about their future and unsure of steps to take to optimize their chances for success. Other scholars as well (Fine, 1991; LeCompte & Dworkin, 1991) point out that students’ expressions of “not caring,” disinterest, and indifference are often symptomatic of other issues and concerns. Further, the frustration that many of these students reveal with respect to understanding course material speaks to the need for practitioners to consider reasons other than those frequently associated with intermittent success; for example, lack of motivation, failure to assume responsibility, recalcitrance, and so forth. We feel it is particularly important for educators and researchers to turn attention from within-child deficit views to developing strategies that capitalize on the strengths that many of these youth possess. For example, we find that in classrooms where students flourish (and experience less stress), teachers know the students well, are attuned to their needs, and show personal concern for their lives. In contrast, in classes where students do poorly, teachers often classify these adolescents as overall low achievers and are unaware of their accomplishments in other classroom settings. Attempts to build the types of cultural capital that many of these youth and their families lack (e.g., help and assistance with school work, knowledge about the implications of specific courses, understanding and navigating the school system generally, access to information about colleges, and so forth) may well create situations and circumstances that reduce the pressures these students described.

And finally, students whose worlds are different and who are unable to navigate borders (Type 4) are burdened with the knowledge that their chances of graduating from high school are remote and their futures bleak. However, rather than receiving help and assistance, these students say they must contend with teachers who single them out unfairly and a system that fails to pro-
provide them with information relevant to future possibilities. Many of these youth speak of classroom and school climate features that do not support their needs. However, the inability of these students to cross borders successfully does not necessarily imply that they are completely opposed to school. Even though most have given up with respect to completing academic work, many continue to voice a desire to obtain the skills necessary for future opportunities. Further, many students in this category type say that particularly stressful and relevant to their feelings about school are interactions with others in their school environments. They describe discriminatory acts (by adults and peers) that leave them feeling devalued because of their ethnicity, culture, and/or language. For these students in particular, feelings of social marginalization appear to affect their ability to profit from educational settings. Interventions to have a positive impact on students’ relationships with each other are important at all levels within school environments. Particularly necessary are strategies that enable students to articulate and examine their own presuppositions about other social and cultural groups in a context that makes explicit unequal power relationships in the classroom, school, and larger society. Enabling all students to broaden their views and develop richer and more complex understandings of themselves in relationship to culturally diverse peers may well lessen the circumstances that Type 4 youth equate with pressure and stress. The quality of peer relationships bears directly on students’ psychosocial and academic well-being.

Attempts by academicians and professional educators to have an impact on circumstances that affect the ability of youth to connect successfully with educational settings are evident in a burgeoning literature and the development of a plethora of programs to target at-risk youth. Both scholarly and practical efforts to address the problems that today’s youth face have been instrumental in highlighting significant issues and providing a base upon which programs and services have been built. However, the role of educators with respect to the needs of adolescents must continually be examined and modified as new information is uncovered. The research reported here adds to the growing body of knowledge about the circumstances of today’s youth. On the practical side, we expect that the Students’ Multiple Worlds Framework will eventually have utility for differentiating methods of counseling and for informing the way in which instructional settings can best be organized to enable students to successfully navigate their worlds. Modulating to individual differences appropriately has always been a major challenge in both counseling and instruction. By focusing on pressures and problems of students who display a variety of transition and adaptation patterns, we expect that this framework will have the greatest utility by helping to make these particular dimensions of individual differences more comprehensible, thus adding to the base of frameworks that are available for selecting counseling and educational treatments.

Students’ voices and concerns—their role as mediators of their own experience—need to be taken into account as pedagogical strategies, programs, and services are developed and implemented. It is our hope that the framework we have developed will be useful to those disciplines and practices that attempt
to better understand the needs of youth and the types of interventions that can have the most positive impact on the contexts of their lives.

Notes

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1 Pseudonyms are used throughout this article.
2 Quotations throughout this article are identified by interview file code and line numbers. The interviews are part of a public-use database that will eventually be made available to interested researchers through the Center for Research on the Context of Secondary Teaching at Stanford University.

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