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ZOE SEMISC, 15 "I didn't even consider myself as being in a specific group. Maybe it's my school, but it's not that cliquey."



BRYAN REYNOSO, 14 "Me and my friends consider ourselves the cool kids because we're just very chill and love making music and performing and dancing."

KURT VONNEGUT JR. WROTE about many scary things: the firebombing of Dresden, the aftermath of the Vietnam War, the specter of individuals controlled by the state or by technology. But the most unnerving image he ever put on paper may have been this, written when he was 47 years old, recounting the words of a fellow Indianapolis high school grad: "When you get to be our age, you all of a sudden realize that you are being ruled by people you went to high school with ... You all of a sudden catch on that life is nothing but high school."

It's a chilling vision. The cutthroat competition, ruthless power plays and rigid status hierarchy all extended into eternity? Even those of us who liked high school wouldn't want to spend a lifetime there.

Or maybe we do. Popular culture is dominated by depictions of high school: *Glee* and *Gossip Girl*, *High School Musical* and *Prom*. Earlier generations mined the same terrain, from *Grease* and *The Breakfast Club* to *Beverly Hills, 90210* and *My So-Called Life*. Our educational system is fixated on the performance of high school students, the key to their all-important college admissions. Social-networking sites mean you never have to lose touch with your friends from high school. And every spring we enter the prom-commencement-reunion cycle, a trifecta of tearjerkers that suggest that high school is

Recent research suggests that popularity isn't an entirely positive phenomenon

still very much with us. The latest trend is "adult proms": formal dances for grownups, complete with sequined dresses and rented tuxedos, which are being held this spring in Fort Wayne, Ind.; Beverly, Mass.; Decatur, Ga.; and Cedar Rapids, Iowa. "Prom the way you always wanted it," read the ad for an adult prom in Green Bay, Wis.

Are those four fraught years the crucible in which our adult identities are forged, or are they a passing phase, faded as an orchid corsage? I found myself confronted by this question when the phone rang at my house this spring. "Hello, Annie," said the startlingly familiar voice on the other end. "This is Mr. Frank." In an instant, the 20 years since I graduated from high school evaporated, and I was back in his 11th-grade history class—back in the world of pop quizzes, of homeroom and gym class, of cafeteria cliques and student-body elections. But Mr. Frank was calling to invite me to be the commencement speaker at this year's graduation.

I couldn't have been more flabbergasted if he had called to award me a Nobel Prize. I had been a quiet and studious teenager, a bespectacled wallflower among the chatty debutantes and lacrosse players at my all-girls private school. I bloomed later, in college, where I wrote a column for the school newspaper and co-edited a campus magazine; as an adult, I became a journalist and an author—which, presumably, is why my school asked me to speak. But what would I say? My idiosyncratic path toward career and family would seem to offer little guidance to young people on the matters they find most pressing: What does the future hold for them? How will their teenage experiences affect their adult lives? Will the identities they formed in high school carry over into the real world, or will they be able, if they choose, to leave them behind?

Popularity Contests

"WE'VE ALL WONDERED AT TIMES IF HIGH school determines who we become as adults, and now we have the empirical data to test that notion," says Pamela Herd, an associate professor of public affairs and sociology at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Herd is the co-director of the **Wisconsin Longitudinal Study**, one of the largest and longest-running investigations of how lives unfold in high school and beyond. The study, funded by the National Institute on Aging, has followed more

DANIELLE LEVIT FOR TIME (3)



RACHEL TRACHTENBURG, 17 "I would identify myself with artsy weirdos."

than 10,000 members of Wisconsin's 1957 graduating class for more than 50 years, beginning when they were seniors and continuing through decades of establishing careers and raising families to their lives as retirees and grandparents.

The Wisconsin program is the granddaddy of a generation of studies that are just coming to fruition. They're being joined by a slew of shorter-term studies conducted by psychologists, sociologists, economists and epidemiologists, researchers from varied fields who have all taken an interest in the high school years. "Social scientists are realizing that many of our adult outcomes can be traced back, at least in part, to our experiences in high school," says Robert Crosnoe, a sociologist at the University of Texas at Austin and the author of *Fitting In, Standing Out*, a new book that draws on his seven-year study of the adolescent social scene.

It's not just the turbulent life stage of adolescence that has consequences for our later lives, Crosnoe stresses, but also the interactions of this developmental transition with the structures and hierarchies of high school. The institution has its origins in the secondary schools of the early 19th century, but it was only in the past 50 years or so—when high schools swelled as the children of the baby boom entered adolescence and youth culture took center stage—that our popular notion of high school took shape. Namely: high school as a formative life

experience, as social as it is academic, in which students encounter a jostling bazaar of potential identities—from jock to prep to geek—and choose (or are assigned) one that will stay with them for years to come.

And yes, there's some truth to the year-book predictions, social scientists find. Broadly speaking, the brainy grinds and the glad-handing class officers achieve success as adults. The jocks are fitter and in better health. The outcasts and dropouts are more likely to be depressed and unemployed. The kids who drank and smoked pot under the bleachers are mostly still drinking and doping, sometimes to excess.

But it may be time for a re-evaluation of many of our notions about what matters in

high school, say researchers who study adolescence and its aftermath, including popularity and friendship, intelligence and hard work. For example, "popularity is not all it's cracked up to be," says Kathleen Boykin McElhaney, a psychologist at the University of Virginia. Her study of 164 adolescents, published in the journal *Child Development* in 2008, found that teenagers who don't belong to their schools' in groups can still function well socially—if they find a comfortable niche among their classmates. As long as they feel happy with themselves and their friends, it doesn't matter how popular they are. "Our work shows that popularity isn't all that important," says McElhaney. "The key is finding a group of people with whom you can feel at ease being yourself."

Indeed, recent research suggests that popularity isn't entirely positive. Belonging to the cool crowd is associated with higher rates of drinking, drug use, sexual activity and minor delinquency during adolescence. And the connection between social status and risky behavior may be a lasting one: a study co-authored last year by Marlene J. Sandstrom, a professor of psychology at Williams College, reported that popularity in high school was associated with higher rates of substance abuse and sexual promiscuity in the three years after graduation.

What's more, popular kids may not even be well liked. Researchers distinguish between two types of popularity: "perceived

'I was a floater, someone who could sit at the edge of a lot of different groups in the cafeteria but who never felt fully part of any of them.'

—ALEXANDRA ROBBINS,
AUTHOR OF *THE GEEKS SHALL INHERIT THE EARTH*



ERIKO TSUJIMURA, 16 "I would consider myself a secret dancer, because people secretly don't know that I do dance. I'm also kind of a freak."



EMMET TERAN, 14 "I'm a stand-up comedian. I don't belong to any specific groups, but I like to make people laugh."

Where Are They Now?

Some archetypal qualities carry into the real world

The Class Officer

High school students who are involved in extra-curricular activities like community service and student government are more likely to vote, volunteer in their communities and be involved in social causes as adults.

The Cheerleader

Using data from the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study, researchers have determined that the more friends students had in high school, the more money they were earning 35 years later—an effect they call the "popularity premium."

The Brain

High school students with good grades and test scores are more likely to go to college and more likely to excel once they're there. More surprising, data from the Wisconsin class of '57 show that the higher a student's academic rank in high school, the lower the probability that he or she experienced health problems in late middle age.

The Jack

Research has long reported that male high school athletes make more money as adults than do men who didn't play sports. More-recent studies show that athletics can make a difference for women too: girls who play sports become women who make more money, are more likely to enter high-skill, male-dominated professions and enjoy better health as they age.

popularity," or how socially prominent individuals are, and "sociometric popularity," or how well liked they are. Membership in the two groups often doesn't overlap. Sociometrically popular teens have a wide group of friends and are described by classmates as "trustworthy" and "kind"; perceived-popular students are admired and envied by their peers but are also regarded as "arrogant" and "stuck-up." And no wonder: many studies have linked perceived popularity to high levels of what researchers call "relational aggression": spreading gossip, engaging in taunting and bullying and practicing exclusion and the silent treatment in order to maintain one's social position.

If the populars don't have a lock on friendship, neither do the brains have an exclusive claim on post-high school success. In a study conducted last year, Stephen D.H. Hsu and James Schombert, physics professors at the University of Oregon, analyzed undergraduates' high school test scores and college grades. "Low SAT scores do not preclude high performance in most majors," they reported. High-achieving students often get that way through dogged effort, they pointed out, rather than innate brilliance. "Our results suggest that almost any student admitted to university can achieve academic success, if they work hard enough," the authors concluded.

Another study, by economists Jeffrey S. Zax and Daniel I. Rees of the University of Colorado, examined the connection between individuals' IQ and academic perfor-

mance, measured in the last year of high school, and how much money they were making in their mid-30s and then in their early 50s. Using data from the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study, they concluded that "previous analyses have overstated the role of intelligence in economic success." Hard work and the development of capacities like conscientiousness and cooperation also matter for success—not to mention personal satisfaction and fulfillment. Coveted as they are in high school, brains and popularity get you only so far in the real world.

The Quirk Factor

THAT'S A MESSAGE MANY OF TODAY'S HIGH school students need to hear. An increasing number of American teenagers feel excluded by a relentlessly conformist school environment, says Alexandra Robbins, author of the new book *The Geeks Shall Inherit the Earth*. They're the casualties of a *Lord of the Flies* social scene defined by the pressures of standardized tests and college admissions, the hypersexual and hyper-materialistic advertising of retailers like Abercrombie & Fitch and the mean-girl dramas of shows like *Gossip Girl*. Robbins calls them the "cafeteria fringe": the kids who can't find a seat at the table at lunchtime, who are rejected for infractions as minor as wearing the wrong jeans.

An author of several best-selling books on young people, Robbins began thinking about these students' plight when she was visiting schools across the country to speak



JULIA CUMMING, 15 "I think it's important to have at least a few close friends."

about her 2006 book, *The Overachievers*. "Kids would come up to talk to me after my readings, and the ones I found most interesting and appealing were often those who described themselves as outsiders," she says. "I wanted to know what their experience of high school was like and what happened to them after graduation."

The result was *The Geeks*, which contends that young people will be well served in adult life by the same characteristics that made them unpopular in high school. She calls this premise "quirk theory" and describes it this way: "Many of the differences that cause a student to be excluded in school are the identical traits or real-world skills that others will value, love, respect or find compelling about that person in adulthood and outside the school setting." If Robbins is any guide, high school outcasts have a lot to look forward to. Attractive, confident and successful, Robbins cheerfully admits that she was a dork in high school. "I was a floater," she says, "someone who could sit at the edge of a lot of different groups in the cafeteria but who never felt fully part of any of them." Finding herself at home on many weekend nights, Robbins threw herself into her studies. She was admitted to Yale and flourished in college and in life.

But she remains in touch with her inner outsider. "I'm still a dork," she claims. "I'm sure my dorkiness has helped me in my work—helped me to connect with teenagers and convey their sense of the world in my writing." Robbins wants kids who are

suffering through high school now to know what she's come to realize in retrospect. "There is nothing wrong with you just because you haven't yet met people who share your interests or outlook on life," she tells readers of *The Geeks*. "Unless you are doing something unhealthy or destructive, take pride in your beliefs, passions and values. Know that you will eventually meet people who will appreciate you for being you."

For some unhappy teens, though, life is bad in high school and threatens to stay that way if they don't get help. For these students—the ones with drug and alcohol problems, the ones who are bullied and harassed, the ones who drop out of school altogether—intervention by adults is more important than ever, says Crosnoe. "Education is critical to making our way in today's society, especially today's economy, and kids who miss out on the full academic and social experience of high school will feel the effects of that lack reverberate through their lives for many years to come."

For the rest of us, high school is one important experience among many—a lasting influence but hardly determinative. In the study by Zax and Rees, the authors ended on an unexpected note. "The most striking result," they said, was how little they were able to predict about people's adult lives from characteristics measured in adolescence. At least 75% of the variation seen among people in middle age couldn't be foretold from what they were like in high school—meaning, they wrote, that "there is plenty of oppor-

tunity for individuals to rise above or fall below the level to which their endowments and environment might direct them."

This, I've decided, is what I'll tell the class of 2011 at my high school: Don't put any limits on what you think you can do. I was a shy, bookish teenager who hid behind long hair. Now I go on television to talk about my books and articles and give speeches without feeling a single butterfly. What you'll become may be beyond your imagining now. Who, after all, would have predicted that a long-haired loner like Bruce Springsteen from Freehold High School in New Jersey would become the Boss? That Barry Obama, the scholarship kid at Punahou School in Hawaii, would become President of the United States?

Or consider the student who was the Tuesday editor of his high school's daily newspaper, the kid who worked at the family hardware store in the summer, the one affectionately called Snarf by his classmates for absentmindedly sniffing his armpits. Who would have predicted he'd go on to write *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Cat's Cradle*? To his classmates, he was just "Kurt Snarfie Vonnegut Jr.," as the gibe in his high school yearbook went.

But that was before: before Vonnegut fought in a world war, before he fell in love with his wife and raised his children, before he trained his keen eye and acid tongue on the foibles of American society. The same society that just loves to reminisce about high school. ■