

Are American Schools Creating a 'Stupefied' Generation?

In recent months, it has been reported that studying and performing Shakespeare has dramatic effects on the academic performance of young students. In fact, [one school in Australia](#) found their exam scores increased more than 40 percentage points after Shakespeare lessons were incorporated into the curriculum.

Because of these dramatic effects, I took notice of a [recent article](#) written by high school English teacher Sean Davenport. In the article, Davenport tells how he began requiring his 10th grade students to memorize and recite passages of Shakespeare. The kids balked at it, but struggled ahead.

One day a fellow teacher overheard the Shakespeare recitation efforts of Davenport's class and the following exchange ensued:

"[T]he teacher stopped and said, 'Mr. Davenport, you made your kids learn that speech?'

I said, 'Yeah. Why?'

And he said, 'I think that's too hard for them.'

He walked out of the room, and the young lady looked at me and said, 'What's he trying to say? Is he trying to say I can't do this?'

I said, 'That's exactly what he's trying to say. They don't think you can do it.'"

Davenport goes on to say that from that point on, his students dug in to the Shakespeare, determined to prove the teacher wrong:

“I never had another problem with any of my students learning something they were supposed to learn. They might not have all gotten A’s or B’s – but they no longer got D’s and F’s.”

Mr. Davenport’s anecdote touches on a problem that seems to rear its head now and then. That problem is the lack of advanced students in America’s schools.

According to the Nation’s Report Card, 27 percent of high school seniors are [proficient in writing](#). Of that number, only three percent measure at an advanced level. A similar scenario [plays out in reading](#). Thirty-seven percent of students are proficient in this subject, but only six percent measure at an advanced level.

One would think that schools would desire to increase these numbers; instead, as Mr. Davenport’s story and [other reports](#) seem to indicate, the education system continually seems to discourage students from aiming high. Why is this?

A possible answer to that question is advanced by the late professor and author Christopher Lasch. In his book, [The Culture of Narcissism](#), Lasch asserts:

“The deterioration of the educational system thus reflects the waning social demand for initiative, enterprise, and the compulsion to achieve.

Contrary to the pronouncements of most educational theorists and their allies in the social sciences, advanced industrial society no longer rests on a population primed for achievement. It requires instead a stupefied population, resigned to work that is trivial and shoddily performed, predisposed to seek its satisfaction in the time set aside for leisure.”

Based on this statement, could the lack of enthusiasm and encouragement for rigor and high achievement in today’s

schools be by design?

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