

ONE OF THE ELITE

Sue Belovich

[Assignment: Write a narrative essay about education as you have experienced it. Your essay should respond to class discussion about school and provide your personal perspective.]

(1) Going through high school is much like being processed at a meat packing plant. At first glance, this statement sounds preposterous. However, I admit, with sadness, that students are classified much like meat is graded. Especially as students progress through high school, they are pushed closer to one of the extremes. Some students become intellectual elites, the "Grade A Top Choice." Others fade into the oblivion of shop hall and are reduced to meat by-products and dog food. Unfortunately, this very practice was used at my high school. Although Northern High was a nationally recognized learning facility, it, in a sense, butchered its students. After being processed and finally packaged from the Northern student plant, I feel that I am a reliable witness to Northern High School's gourmet recipe for creating a snob.

(2) Being an intellectual, so to speak, I had often heard arguments like the one above. However, I never believed them. I thought that people exaggerated the severity of the situation. After all, I never noticed any of this so called "educational discrimination"; that is, not until the first day of my senior year, when this unbelievable segregation and discrimination became a disquieting reality.

(3) It was a beautiful summer day in late August. I was excited and depressed at the same time. It was the first day of my senior year. I was excited to begin the new year, see the friends I hadn't seen all summer, and cross one day off the list of one hundred and forty-nine school days left until graduation. I was sad to see the long lazy days of summer come to an end. When I reached school, I found my group of particular friends. They were gathered in senior hall comparing tans and interesting vacation spots from the summer past. We finally exhausted the conversation about tanning oils and began to compare class schedules. I was surprised to discover that none of my friends were scheduled to have economics at the same time I was. I thought, "Oh well, I will surely know someone in my class." I couldn't have been further from the truth.

(4) The 7:45 bell rang and we were off to first hour. I said, "Good-bye and see you at lunch," to my friends and proceeded to walk toward my scheduled economics class. I looked at my schedule and realized I needed to find room 135B. I entered social studies hall . . . 131, . . . 133, . . . finally 135. I made it. The 8:00 bell had not rung yet. (Later in the year I realized that

this was the first and only time that I was on time for the class.) I hesitated, then I walked in. I looked around and I was terrified by what I saw. I didn't know a single soul. Surely, I was in the wrong class. There must have been a mistake. . . . I couldn't have class with these people (none of them were in National Honor Society). I was positive that through some computer mix-up, I was scheduled into the wrong class. Maybe the wrong room number was printed on my schedule. The familiar faces from advanced placement and college prep courses were down the hall. As these thoughts rushed through my head, I took a seat and waited for the teacher to appear. Once the teacher arrived, he explained that economics was required for graduation. Therefore, the class wasn't divided into levels. Again, the surprise--this was the first class since my freshman gym not to be divided into sections according to ability.

(5) For a moment, I felt relieved to be in the right class. Rescheduling was a hassle to say the very least. After this brief moment of relief, I snapped back to my earlier apprehensions about not knowing anyone. But, just then, I brightened at discovering, sitting in the row behind, someone I took to be an exchange student. He was tall, blond, and good looking. I was sure he was from Finland or Sweden. While the teacher passed out the books, I decided to start a conversation with the exchange student. After all, we were both in a foreign situation (so I thought of my own presence in that classroom). I turned around and said, "What part of Finland are you from?" He looked at me strangely. Then I said, "Oh, sorry, are you from Sweden?" He roared with laughter. After about three minutes of intense laughter, he said, "Hi, I'm Scott from town. I've been a student here at Northern for three years. Who are you?" I apologized for my mistaken assumption and introduced myself. I felt like an idiot.

(6) By this time the teacher had begun to lecture. He asked a few general questions like "What is GNP?" This is the point when I really made a fool of myself. I actually raised my hand. There were incredulous stares. People were shooting daggers at me with their eyes. I answered, then vowed never to do so again. Unfortunately, since I was the only one either willing to or stupid enough to answer, the teacher kept asking, "Sue, do you know what I'm talking about?" He ignored the rest of the class. I could have died. They hated me for answering his questions. To be honest, I would have hated me too.

(7) Later that day, I once again saw my new friend Scott. I apologized again for thinking he was an exchange student. He confessed that he thought I was a student teacher. He had never seen me before and thought I looked older and smarter because I wore tortoise frame glasses. Obviously, we both had judged books by their

covers, so to speak. Even in a class of four hundred plus, it seems outrageous that two people could be complete strangers. My school system, prestigious enough to have many exchange students and student teachers, had created segregation among its own student body. I just couldn't believe that divisions made to induce the best possible learning situations, were, in fact, teaching us to be prejudiced.

(8) Even though this story is amusing, the sad fact is that it's true. After that day, I made a conscious effort to meet people who weren't "Grade A Top Choice." I found that they were far from being "dog food." They had just as much to offer as anyone else. Sitting in the gymnasium on graduation day, I eagerly anticipated hearing Dr. Parker, our principal, say "Susan Kathleen Belovich" and receiving my diploma. As I listened to the other names, I realized that I didn't recognize twenty-five percent of the names I heard called out that day. Even though I met all the intellectual requirements for graduation with honors, I felt as though I had missed out. I didn't know twenty-five percent of my class because I was "one of the elite." Then, I thought back to that first day in August. I can honestly say that the most important lesson I learned that entire year had been gathered in the first fifty minutes of the first day. And I regretted the opportunities denied or not taken. I realize now that Will Durant is absolutely correct when he says, "Education is a progressive discovery of our ignorance."