

Students' Perceptions of Causes and Consequences of Embarrassment in the School

Wilfred B. W. Martin¹

memorial university of newfoundland

This paper is developed from qualitative data collected as part of a larger study of the schooling experiences of high school students in Atlantic Canada. Within a sociological orientation, students' perceptions of the causes and consequences of embarrassment in the school are identified. These causes are seen in students' perceptions of the extent to which teachers are *understanding*, *patient*, and *caring*. The fact that teachers often appear to favour certain students and treat some as "kids," and the views that teachers are sometimes nosey and egoistic also underlie causes of student embarrassment. In addition to the negative effects on student learning and their attitudes toward schooling, the consequences of student embarrassment include developing a dislike for teachers, becoming "mad" at their teachers, fearing teachers' actions, and developing negative self-concepts. Issues related to teacher awareness of student embarrassment and the pedagogical overtones of these issues are addressed as well.

Cet article est basé sur des données qualitatives recueillies lors d'une étude plus vaste portant sur les expériences scolaires des élèves du cours secondaire des provinces de l'Atlantique. Cette étude à caractère sociologique fait état des vues des élèves sur les causes et les conséquences de certains embarras dans les relations entre les enseignants et les élèves. Ces causes, d'après les élèves, sont fonction du degré de *compréhension*, de *patience* et de *bienveillance* des enseignants. Le fait que ceux-ci favorisent certains élèves, ou qu'ils les traitent comme des enfants, ou qu'ils se montrent parfois fouineurs et égoïstes sont les causes sous-jacentes de l'embarras des élèves. En plus des effets négatifs sur les résultats scolaires et sur l'attitude des élèves envers l'école, les conséquences de cet embarras sont, entre autres, le fait que les élèves développent de l'aversion pour les professeurs, qu'ils deviennent agressifs envers eux, qu'ils craignent leurs réactions et, enfin, le fait qu'ils finissent par adopter une mauvaise perception d'eux-mêmes. L'importance du fait que les enseignants se rendent compte de l'embarras des élèves et les conséquences pédagogiques qui en résultent sont également abordés dans cette étude.

Embarrassing situations are inevitable in many social settings including the high school classroom and teacher-student interactions in general. Yet, embarrassment is one of the least studied experiences in the school. By focusing on the process of embarrassment from a sociological social psychology perspective, one is led to a fascinating glimpse of the intricacies of interaction and the complexities of developing selves and negotiating roles in everyday life. Before this paper focuses on students'

perceptions of the causes and consequences of embarrassment in the school, it is appropriate to note some dictionary definitions of embarrassment, to address the sociological features of the embarrassing process, and to outline the methods of collecting and analyzing the data on which this paper is based.

The term *embarrassment* refers to a complex feeling experienced under particular circumstances. The complexities of this experience and the difficulties of isolating its boundaries can be gleaned from a review of the meanings and synonyms usually given for embarrassment. *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (1961, p. 267) includes the following three definitions of embarrassment: "(1) to hinder from liberty of movement; to impede, (2) to confuse; perplex; also, to disconcert," and "(3) to render intricate; to complicate." This dictionary goes on to add that "Embarrass implies some influence that impedes thought, speed, or action, and may be used with reference not only to persons but to the things they plan or desire to do." *The New American Roget's College Thesaurus in Dictionary Form* (1968, p. 121) offers a dozen synonyms for the term embarrass, including *discomfort*, *demoralize*, *disconcert*, *discomfit*, *nonplus*, *bother*, *abash*, *encumber*, *trouble*, *hamper*, *complicate*, and *perplex*.²

A few of the distinctions between the meanings of these synonyms will help identify the parameters of the term. For example, a student may become *confused* because of a subject's difficulty or limited intellectual ability but not necessarily embarrassed by such confusion. However, one may become confused after experiencing embarrassment. Embarrassment is a feeling experienced in the presence of others, one of mortification or humiliation in that it may be brought on by one's own or another's fault or failure.

Several synonyms for embarrassment were used by high school students in the present study to describe their schooling experiences. Even though these synonyms were sometimes used without explicit reference to embarrassing situations, they may be seen as identifying processes associated with embarrassment in teacher-student interactions. These processes include *insults*, *humiliations*, *sarcasm*, *jokes*, and *criticisms* and are often intricately intertwined. But, the fact that many students pointed to specific varieties of schooling experiences suggests that these terms often refer to separate, and sometimes different, types of schooling experiences.

The antonyms of embarrass include such terms as *encourage*, *inspirit*, *uphold*, and *facilitate*. These antonyms point to the impeding, hindering, and hampering dimensions of embarrassment, hardly facilitative experiences in schools.

A SOCIOLOGY OF EMBARRASSMENT

In most social situations, embarrassment develops unintentionally and spontaneously in the flow of interaction and is caused by a loss of poise, as in the case of a student who trips over a desk. A student may also lose poise by not measuring up to the demands of a situation. Teacher expectations for a student, perhaps expressed through frequent or difficult questions to that student or through evaluation of the student's work, may bring a student's credibility into question and thereby result in student embarrassment.

In contrast to unintentional embarrassment, there are situations where plans are made to discredit individuals and to embarrass them deliberately – for example, “practical jokes, teasing, initiation into secret societies, puncturing false fronts, and public degradation” (Gross & Stone, 1964, p. 13). Practical jokes and teasing are undoubtedly part of the evolving social structure of most groups of high school students. Looking at teacher-student interactions from the student perspective, certain teachers often appear to be intentionally embarrassing their students in front of the class. Whether the student embarrassment is intended or unintended, the interactions in the social setting affected are interrupted and the role performances are impeded, hindered, or inhibited, at least temporarily. Hence, we need to deal with self and role processes in analyzing embarrassing experiences.

Goffman (1959, 1961, 1967) and others (Argyle, 1969; Gross & Stone, 1964) have analyzed embarrassment in terms of “the presentation of self” and “the performance of role.” For example, Goffman has noted that embarrassment “has to do with the figure the individual cuts” (1967, p. 98) in interaction. According to Gross and Stone, embarrassment occurs “whenever some *central* assumption in a transaction has been unexpectedly and unqualifiedly discredited for at least one participant” (1964, p. 2). Under such circumstances one's *identity* is discredited. At all times in the interacting process, one's self-concept is on stage and each actor in the situation is expected to acknowledge and honour the self presented by other actors. When one's identity is discredited by another actor, embarrassment is experienced, and one is inhibited from continuing with the role performance because of a need to take stock of the situation, to redefine it, and to determine the conditions for continuing one's role performance. On a theoretical level, these conditions have been identified as the need for “maintaining an appropriate identity,” “maintaining poise,” and “sustaining confidence in each other” (Lauer & Handel, 1977, p. 249).

With reference to the school, it is obvious that for some high school students their *identity* as students is important. The person who establishes an identity as above average or average may experience a collapse in this identity when performing below these expectations. An honours student who receives a failing grade in a mathematics examination, for example, may experience a sudden collapse in identity. Under such circumstances, one becomes embarrassed, and plans need to be developed to continue to function in one's role.

Argyle (1969, pp. 389–390) emphasized the importance of maintaining poise by introducing the ideas of “meshing” and “social skills” in his analysis of embarrassment. Accordingly, “failure of meshing, or failure to agree on the roles played by those present” produces embarrassment. And, embarrassment is also caused by the disruption of social skills. These skills may be disrupted by social accidents such as tripping, stumbling, or forgetting someone's name. A more comprehensive discussion of the process involved in losing one's poise has been given by Gross and Stone (1964, pp. 6–11). They have identified ways in which loss of poise commonly occurs in everyday life. For example, “spaces must be so arranged and maintained that they are role-enabling” and the transgression of space can bring about a loss of poise, as in the case of the student accused of intruding into the interactions of other students or into the interactions between teachers and students. Also, a teacher may embarrass students by entering into their private space. The breaking down of socially defined boundaries has been referred to by different students in the present study as “the invasion of privacy.” Teachers are frequently accused of such invasions. Other components of self and situation identified by Gross and Stone (1964, p. 8) are *props* (decor of the setting), *equipment* (movable items in the setting), and control over one's clothing and body.

Maintenance of confidence is also important for role performance, in that interactants, for example, teachers and students, must not undermine the assumptions they hold about each other. More specifically, an abrupt switch in a person's identity can produce embarrassment for other actors no longer comfortable with assumptions once held about a person and who, perhaps, are uncertain of the meaning of the new identity. To illustrate, a student whom a teacher has recommended to other teachers as hardworking and honest changes identity in the presence of those others and neglects work assigned and is caught cheating on an examination. The teacher who recommended this student to others is embarrassed because there is a breaking of confidence.

An underlying assumption in focusing on the self and role dimensions of embarrassment is that an individual must have an audience in order to

experience this emotion. In other words, maintaining an identity, maintaining poise, and sustaining confidence are predicated on the importance of an audience for one's self-concept. Thus the existence of an acceptable working arrangement between oneself and others is of paramount importance. In particular, isolating the causes and consequences of student embarrassment can be an important step in attempting to understand the complexities of teacher-student interactions.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Student responses to the last item on a survey questionnaire administered to a sample of high school students in Atlantic Canada form the data base for this paper.³ This item read as follows:

Obviously, this questionnaire covers only a small part of your experiences in the school. Please outline other aspects of your experiences in the school which concern you. Feel free to add any views you might have concerning your school, your teachers, your textbooks, and the way you are expected to study.

The questionnaire was administered to a total of 20,351 high school students in the four Atlantic provinces. It covered a wide range of topics including student councils, school prefects, school rules, disciplinary procedures, and participation in extra-curricular activities. Not one of the questions referred to student embarrassment. However, one part of the questionnaire suggests that teachers vary in expectations of students and behaviour toward students, and it then asks students to indicate how often teachers do certain things such as "show that they understand how you feel, especially when you are upset," "threaten to punish you if you do not do as you are instructed to do," "give students too much freedom," "encourage students to talk and express their ideas, even though they realize that those ideas are different from their own," and "do things that help create conflict and strife between teachers and students." Another part of the questionnaire asked students to agree or disagree with specific statements which also might be seen to be tangentially related to student embarrassment. These statements included the following: "I usually enjoy school," "the punishments which teachers give in this school are usually fair," "teachers and principals expect you to behave in a reasonable way," "I am concerned about my teachers' attitudes toward me," and "I want all my teachers to like me." Whether these or other parts of the questionnaire initiated students' thinking about embarrassing experiences in the school can only be a subject of speculation. The fact is that even though student embarrassment was not mentioned on the questionnaire, 600 of the 16,764 students who responded to a request

to outline aspects of their schooling experiences made reference to, and in some incidences elaborated on, the embarrassment they have experienced in the school. But this is what we might expect if embarrassment is so much a feature of social roles.

Comments relating to student embarrassment were separated and studied to see what general themes, if any, could be identified. Issues seen to be recurring in these comments were identified as themes about student embarrassment. Two major themes identified in this way are dealt with here, that is, the student-perceived causes and consequences of student embarrassment. Once these themes were isolated and the data categorized accordingly, the next step was to focus on each theme to pinpoint more specific topics within the general themes. These general themes and specific topics are illustrated in this paper with verbatim comments from high school students.

CAUSES OF STUDENT EMBARRASSMENT

Given the authority structure of the classroom and the power processes in teacher-student interactions, it is not surprising that student embarrassment is common. Students are on the lowest rung of the authority ladder in the classroom, and they believe that their attempts to gain power in this setting are often nullified by teachers. Perhaps this explains the somewhat negative orientation of students to teaching-learning processes. Hence, comments such as "some teachers tend to put down students in front of their classmates, thus causing an amount of embarrassment for students" are not surprising to many people.

In addition to such remarks, many indicated why they think teachers define students and teaching-learning situations in ways that lead to student embarrassment. These reasons are seen here as underlying causes of student embarrassment and can be categorized as follows: lack of teacher understanding and patience, uncaring attitudes of teachers, giving favours and holding grudges, treating students as kids, teacher interference in private matters, and egoistic teachers. These causes are intricately intertwined with one another, and several may be at the root of any embarrassing situation in the school. In fact, each cause of embarrassment may be seen to be part of the overall treatment which teachers are perceived to give to certain students in specific situations.

Lack of Teacher Understanding and Patience

High school students often feel that teachers need to understand the student perspective in the teaching-learning endeavour. Patience in teaching-learning situations, for example, is uppermost on the minds of

many students (Martin, 1983, pp. 65–67). Students sometimes perceive teachers' lack of understanding of students' feelings and their impatience with students as the root of some of the embarrassment caused. To illustrate, "teachers do not understand that a person can be shy," and, consequently, teachers "continue to embarrass [students] in front of the class about their shyness"; teachers expect too much academic work from students and they do not understand why they fail their examinations; and teachers lack patience and get "mad" with their students for not measuring up to teacher expectations.

Uncaring Attitudes of Teachers

Students from different schools scornfully expressed the opinion that teachers do not care about their feelings. But most students emphasized the importance of having teachers who are caring and concerned about them. In fact, a student's sense of the teachers' caring and/or lack of respect may be at least part of the cause of teachers' definitions of students and of students' actions, definitions which give rise to student embarrassment.

The perceived lack of respect which produces embarrassing situations comes through in the claims that "some teachers try to destroy students" and that "there are a few [teachers] who make a student feel worthless, incapable of comprehending anything, and totally undermined." Another observation on teachers' lack of respect for their students came from a francophone student. To translate this student's comments:

The first thing I want to say is that there are some teachers who really have *very little* respect for the students!!! There are even some who make fun of us from time to time, for no reason at all other than to have a good laugh, to embarrass us, etc. But the minute you say something to him, you're sent to the principal right away. *It's really shitty.*

Not unrelated are students' claims that teachers are sometimes "rude" and "ignorant," and, even though teachers are seen to be helping students in some ways, they "are sometimes nasty in many ways." It has also been observed that while "teachers are very rude ... they expect students to be *polite* all the time." Other students complained that teachers sometimes falsely accuse students of cheating and lying, thereby causing student embarrassment.

Giving Favours and Holding Grudges

While some students are seen to be mistreated, neglected, or victimized, from the perspectives of many students, teachers' pets constitute an important part of classroom culture (Martin, 1984). For example,

different students suggested that “teachers play favorites” and that those who are not favoured get “called down on what [they] don’t know [while teachers] say nothing about what [they] do know.”

On occasions, students who perceive themselves as pets are embarrassed by the special treatment they see themselves receiving from their teachers. For example, one Grade 9 girl who perceived herself as a teacher’s pet reported that teachers “should not” have pets “because it is hard for” those students to adjust to such treatment, that is, it is hard in terms of interaction with other students and in knowing how to respond to teachers’ actions.

The distinction between students who are favoured and those who are not favoured and the associated embarrassment experienced by students have been noted by different students. There is a relatively widespread belief amongst students that teachers hold grudges. The view is that “teachers can get on your back for nothing” or because they “just want someone to pick on.” Many students believe that teachers’ treatment of them is a direct result of teachers’ definitions of their previous behaviours. Whatever the reason for teachers having favourite students and holding grudges against others, it is clear that the existence of pets and victims is the source of considerable student embarrassment.

Treating Students as Kids

Students think they should be treated as adults while they commonly believe that their teachers treat them as children. That students are still young was seen by some as the reason why some of their teachers are often “looking down on” them and causing them to be embarrassed.

Rules and teachers’ implementation of these rules have also been known to give students the impression that teachers think of them as kids. Rules such as those dealing with dress requirements, talk and noise in the classroom, student movement in the school, visits to the bathroom, smoking, dances, chewing gum, boy-girl relationships, punctuality, and leaving the school grounds seem to be particularly fertile areas for student embarrassment. More specifically, the negatively oriented definitions which students give to certain rules and their comments on the effectiveness of the penalties for breaking school rules (Martin & Baksh, 1984, pp. 74–79, 111–157) suggest that implementation of certain school rules often causes students to be embarrassed. To illustrate the importance of one of these categories of rules, a Grade 10 girl claimed to be embarrassed when teachers implemented a rule concerning boy-girl relationships in her school. She reasoned:

The school has too many rules. One of the rules which I disagree with most is “you’re not to hold hands on school property.” That is not fair. Why embarrass us

when we are holding hands? I don't see anything wrong with holding hands as long as it doesn't go any further.

Teacher Interference in Private Matters

Students are often embarrassed when they interpret teachers' actions as intruding into their personal lives, when one or more of their teachers "poked [their] noses into" what students defined as private matters. "Teachers are too nosey" and they embarrass students by criticizing them for things which "are none of [their] business." Teacher interference with matters perceived by students as private not only causes embarrassment for students but, from the student perspective, also influences teacher-student interactions in general.

Egoistic Teachers

Students are often annoyed with teachers who seem to want to be right in their assessments, interpretations, actions, and plans of actions vis à vis their students. It has been claimed that these teachers do not accept students' interpretations and views. In effect, students who become annoyed with such teachers often complain about what they perceive to be teachers' self-concepts. Many teachers are seen to "think [they are] better than" their students and to believe that this gives them "the right to insult [and] to put students down." Also, at the core of students' perceptions of their teachers' self-concepts are student interpretations of teacher perceptions of the power and authority relationships between them.

The comments of one Grade 10 girl are interesting because she implied that while the fact of telling students off has a negative effect on student self-concept, it may be an ego booster for some teachers. She observed that "teachers love to tell students off, it seems to help them." She also claimed that some of them "don't care" what effect it has on students; whether you "pass or fail they still get paid." A couple of other students suggested that certain teachers sometimes attempt to embarrass students in order to make themselves "look good." However, such actions have been reported to have negative results for teachers in that students develop dislike and disrespect for them.

SOCIAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES OF STUDENT EMBARRASSMENT

Prior to focusing specifically on the pedagogical consequences of student embarrassment, it is necessary to address certain social-psychological consequences of the embarrassing experiences. These social-psychological consequences are covered under four headings: developing a dislike for

teachers, becoming “mad,” becoming afraid of teachers’ actions, and developing a negative self-concept.

Developing a Dislike for Teachers

One of the main themes in student observations concerning the consequences of student embarrassment is their dislike for teachers who appear to initiate their embarrassment. The categorization of teachers into those who embarrass students and those who do not is clear in the comments of many students. As put by one Grade 11 student, “All the teachers are rather nice, except for the ones which sometimes embarrass you in front of the whole class.” Other students reported they “like most of the teachers” even though “some are sarcastic.”

The implication is that they do not generally like the sarcastic teachers. In fact, students often “turn against teachers” who embarrass them. One student, for example, reported that she hates “the way teachers make [her] feel inferior to them.” Such teacher action, she claims, “is embarrassing to students.” She explained further that everyone knows teachers make mistakes just as students do, but teachers often pretend that “they never make” any mistakes. One student echoed the views of others from different schools when she suggested that teachers who are perceived to deliberately attempt “to trip up” students are often perceived to be “poor teachers” and are not liked.

Becoming “Mad”

Another dominant theme in student reports is one reaction to being embarrassed, namely, getting “mad.” For example, one Grade 11 girl wrote:

I intend to do my best in all subjects even though I dislike one or two of my teachers. I find that some of the teachers embarrass a student too much. Myself, for example, I am sensitive student and it gets me mad when a teachers does that to me.

Certain students complained that “it makes [them] mad when [they] can’t go up and ask a teacher to help” without the teacher’s “biting [their] heads off.” This is seen to be deliberate. It is also reported that some teachers “just keep bogging [students] right down in work” and make them “feel as low as possible.” For many students, this teaching strategy “is enough to drive [them] mad.”

The experience of one Grade 10 boy is not an isolated case; students are “burnt up” by teachers who treat them “like dirt,” and they reason

that getting embarrassed “like that would make anyone mad.” Without describing their emotions as being “mad,” other students indicated that they were very unhappy with being “made [to] feel bad,” “put down,” “left behind,” and “embarrassed” by their teachers.

Becoming Afraid of Teachers' Actions

Students in each Atlantic province wrote about their fear of being embarrassed by their teachers. This leads to *anticipatory embarrassment*. For example, certain students claimed to be afraid to respond to teachers' questioning just in case they would give the wrong answer and receive demeaning comments from their teachers and/or their peers. Indeed, teachers and students have been reported as making “fun of” wrong answers given by students, and, on occasions, these reactions have caused students to be so embarrassed that they “wished [they] didn't answer the teacher in the first place.”

Many students in the present study reported that they hesitate to ask certain teachers for explanations of something they have already been taught even though they do not understand the material covered. They are afraid of being embarrassed by the responses they might get from their teachers. They told of getting responses such as: “I told you how to do it yesterday,” “We went over that several times already,” “How come you don't understand this stuff yet?” or “I'm not going over it anymore, next time you listen.”

Other comments can be used to illustrate the relatively widespread fear of teachers' actions which often results in student embarrassment. For example, one Grade 9 girl wrote that “it is nice to be able to ask the teachers something about school work,” but she felt that she could not bring herself to ask some of her teachers because they “freeze upon you so that you [are hesitant] about asking them.” Another Grade 9 girl expressed the view that students are nervous because they “feel they are very mistrusted by their teachers.” A third Grade 9 girl reported that certain “teachers have a habit to ‘put down’ their students,” with the result that students are too “frightened to speak out and express themselves when asked to do so.” One Grade 12 girl was afraid to speak out in class because her teachers were “down on her.” She claimed they were so because of something that happened between her and another teacher in the school “a few years ago.” In other words, this student thinks she is victimized by her teachers.

Some students reported that they “dread” to get the results of certain tests because of the embarrassing comments which certain teachers have been known to make when reporting on the results of tests to the

class. Specifically, one Grade 10 girl reported that one of her teachers “thinks he’s having fun when he gives back our tests.” This teacher was reported to have made “nasty” and “sarcastic” comments about students’ performances on tests, thereby implying that they “are not studying” or they “don’t have the brains” required to do better. Similarly, the view of another Grade 10 girl was that while “most of the teachers are alright ... some are childish” about marks and rules and they try to “make [students] afraid of them.”

Developing a Negative Self-Concept

People’s perceptions of others’ attitudes toward them are at the core of their self-concepts. These perceptions are often gleaned from the actions and plans of actions of those others. Hence, it is not surprising that students’ self-concepts are often affected by their perceptions of the actions and plans of actions of their teachers. Teacher-initiated embarrassment often has a negative influence on students’ self-concepts. To illustrate, one student complained that some of the teachers “just yell and scream and embarrass” their students. And, according to this student, “teachers like that cause a lot of people to become insecure of themselves and think they can’t do anything.” Another student reported that “some teachers put too many students down” and “when a teacher preaches this to a student then the student will stay no good in anything.” In fact, many students from all parts of Atlantic Canada pointed to the negative effects of teacher embarrassment on student self-concept. Related to this is the need for positive reinforcement rather than being made to “feel rotten,” a matter addressed for different students in the present study.

PEDAGOGICAL CONSEQUENCES OF STUDENT EMBARRASSMENT

Students comment that some of them not only have problems learning in school but even quit school because they cannot tolerate embarrassment at the hands of their teachers.

Student Learning

The same themes as those relating to the social-psychological consequences of embarrassment (that is, dislike for teachers, becoming mad, fear of teachers’ actions, and negative self-concepts) relate to student learning. Student learning is negatively affected by each of these consequences of embarrassment. Certain students have been explicit in

their reference to the ineffectiveness of embarrassment as a strategy to motivate learning. To illustrate here are two of their comments:

Yelling at students and putting them down to make them try to learn something has very rarely worked.

One complaint is that some teachers scream at you and like to put students' on the spot. This discourages students and creates a lot of tension in the classroom. I think that under such circumstances the students learn absolutely nothing and the teaching method is not all that effective.

While not using the term embarrassment, other students suggested that students "can't concentrate" if they are afraid to ask questions of their teachers or if they expect teachers "to pounce on" them for answers. After noting that "criticizing [and] embarrassing [students] in front of the class [does not help students] to learn anything," one student added that such experiences have negative repercussions because "the pupils only get discouraged." In sum, many students in the present study reported getting discouraged when they were embarrassed by their teachers.

It is interesting to note though that, for some students, embarrassment seems to positively influence student learning. For example, it has been claimed that when students are embarrassed for not studying or failing to complete written homework on time, they become "afraid not to be prepared," that is, afraid of teachers' reactions which could cause embarrassment. Hence, they are motivated to study in order to avoid such negative experiences in the classroom. Similarly, it has been observed that "if teachers are too slack," not "forcing" students, not "yelling at" them, and not "getting on [their] backs" which could "embarrass" them, "nothing gets accomplished because there is too much freedom in class."

"I Feel Like Quitting School"

Undoubtedly, there are many reasons why students drop out of school. These reasons include the social, economic, and cultural backgrounds of students (Martin & Macdonell, 1982, pp. 296-301). But, in addition, there may be certain elements within the teaching-learning processes which militate against students' commitment to schooling. Indications from the present research are that embarrassment and related insults, humiliation, sarcasm, and jokes contribute to students' desires to quit school. For example, one Grade 9 boy observed:

The teachers treat you too childish, they don't mind embarrassing us in our school and that really makes some people mad, and sometimes because of this people get disgusted and quit school.

After complaining about teacher expectations relating to homework and the process of being “made a fool” because one “forgets something small,” one Grade 10 boy concluded by declaring: “School is boring and if I could I would love to quit.” Another Grade 10 boy in a different school expressed the view that certain teachers deliberately embarrass students so that they will quit school.

Without indicating whether she wanted to quit school altogether or just avoid certain classes, one Grade 11 girl claimed that “being embarrassed in class by students and teachers ... makes [her] want to just run out of class.” According to one Grade 9 boy, embarrassing situations in the school encourage students “to play hooky.” Others elaborated similar reasons for wanting to leave school.

TEACHER AWARENESS AND PEDAGOGICAL CONCERNS

The present data base – student embarrassment from the perspective of high school students in Atlantic Canada – has hinted at but not provided any answers to several interrelated questions concerning teacher awareness of student embarrassment in school. These questions are important in understanding the social and psychological dimensions of student embarrassment and the consequences of this emotional state for teaching and learning in the classroom. These questions are about the extent to which teachers are aware of student embarrassment, whether student embarrassment is predominantly intentional or unintentional, and the extent to which student embarrassment is an effective teaching strategy in the intellectual, social, mental, and moral development of students. In other words, it would be interesting to isolate the positive and negative effects of student embarrassment (intentional and unintentional) on all facets of student learning and development.

Embarrassment has been a part of the teaching process for some time, and it seems as if teachers’ actions have often been designed to create embarrassing situations. Historically, the practices of placing misbehaving students in the corner and of having slow learners wear dunce caps have often been based on the assumption that students can be embarrassed into changing their behaviours and into improving their academic standings. The practice of having students stand in the corridor just outside of the classroom door for a specific time, usually for “the rest of the period,” is still found in many schools in Atlantic Canada. Similarly, the idea of keeping a student waiting outside the principal’s office knowing it will be a considerable time, perhaps a half-hour or more, before the principal will be ready to talk to the student in his office is part of the disciplinary processes in many regional high schools.

Aside from these more visible teacher strategies concerning student learning and student misbehaviour, some of the students in the present study suggest that teachers are aware of the embarrassment which they bring to their students, and a few of these students suggested that certain teachers often deliberately embarrass their students as part of the routine classroom interactions. While the most comprehensive analysis of student embarrassment would involve studying both student and teacher constructions of reality in teacher-student interactions, student definitions of reality are still of great importance in planning for all teaching-learning situations. In other words, students' perceptions of teachers' actions toward them are important ingredients in the development of their identities as students and as persons, their orientations to the working out of their interactive roles with one another and with their teachers, and in their career and school choices.

The *Teachers' Handbook* for one of the regional high schools in Nova Scotia participating in this study contains the following suggestion regarding maintenance of "constructive control" in the classroom: "Embarrassing students in class is the least effective method of discipline." Certainly, the tone of observations from students in different parts of Atlantic Canada about their embarrassing experiences is generally negative. However, as noted by a few students, there may be positive features of student embarrassment, for example, the special effort in order to pass an examination, and so avoid the embarrassment caused when a teacher announces one's low mark to the class, or the extra effort put into completing one's homework, not exactly for what one is going to learn from the exercise but in order to avoid ridicule by one's teacher. One of the main purposes of putting an extra effort into study may be to avoid embarrassing situations, but it is possible that one will learn something (about specific content, how to discipline oneself, or obeying instructions) in the meantime.

On a somewhat different yet related level, there may be some extremely important positive functions of student embarrassment. It is common knowledge that embarrassment is part of the developing social order in everyday life. Hence, one could argue that, if the school is to be an agent of socialization for everyday life, one must learn about embarrassment not as part of the formal curriculum of the school but through experience in teacher-student interaction. Though embarrassment results in and is indeed recognized by certain emotional disturbances such as blushing, fumbling, sweating, quavering speech, and hesitating movements, the fact that one experiences embarrassment may indicate that one has learned the acceptable ("proper") demeanour for the setting.

CONCLUSION

From a sociological perspective, embarrassment occurs when a central assumption in a transaction is discredited for at least one participant. Such an interruption in a transaction has consequences for one's identity; hence, there is a need to redefine the situation and to determine the conditions for continuing one's role performance in it. These conditions include maintaining an appropriate identity, maintaining poise, and sustaining the confidence of others in the transaction. It is imperative that high school students develop acceptable working relationships among themselves and between themselves and their teachers. The complexities of student embarrassment must be studied to understand these relationships. This analysis of student embarrassment is one attempt to become sensitive to different dimensions of the student perspective on these experiences in the school.

NOTES

- ¹ Appreciation is expressed to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for financial support of the research on which this paper is based, Grant #410-81-0776, and to the anonymous reviewers for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper.
- ² Four of these synonyms (*abash*, *discomfit*, *disconcert*, and *hamper*) are found in a longer list of synonyms given in *Funk & Wagnalls Standard Handbook of Synonyms, Antonyms and Prepositions* (1947, p. 174). Here are the other synonyms of embarrass as given by Funk & Wagnall: *bewilder*, *chagrin*, *confuse*, *discompose*, *dishearten*, *fluster*, *hinder*, *humble*, *humiliate*, *impede*, *mortify*, *overawe*, *rattle*, and *shame*.
- ³ The study questionnaire is part of a larger research project which also uses case study techniques and formal interviewing to study classroom experiences of high school students in Atlantic Canada.

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Diese Abhandlung wurde von qualitativen Daten entwickelt die als Teil einer Untersuchung größeren Umfangs in die Schulerfahrungen von Hochschulstudenten in den atlantischen Provinzen Kanadas gesammelt wurden. Innerhalb einer soziologischen Orientation, wurden die Empfindungen der Studenten über die Gründe und Folgen der Verlegenheit in Schulen identifiziert. Diese Gründe erscheinen im Rahmen der Empfindungen der Studenten in dem Mass in dem Lehrer verständnisvoll, geduldig und teilnehmend sind. Die Tatsache das Lehrer oft bestimmte Studenten vorzuziehen scheinen und andere Studenten als Kinder behandeln oder manchmal neugierig und egoistisch sind, werden als Hauptgründe der Verlegenheit der Studenten angeführt. Neben der negativen Auswirkung der Verlegenheit der Studenten auf deren Lernen und Haltung zur Erziehung, findet man unter den Folgen dieser Verlegenheit ein "nicht leiden können" und ein "böse werden" auf den Lehrer, eine Furcht for dem Lehrer und ein wachsendes negatives Selbstbildnis. Probleme in Bezug auf das Bewußtsein der Lehrer über die Verlegenheit der Studenten und die pädagogischen Nebenbedeutungen dieser Probleme werden auch abgehandelt.

Este documento fué preparado a base de datos cualitativos recolectados como parte de un estudio más amplio de las experiencias escolares de estudiantes de secundaria en las provincias atlánticas del Canadá. Dentro de una orientación sociológica, se identifica cómo perciben los estudiantes las causas y consecuencias del embarazo sufrido en la escuela. Estas causas, desde el punto de vista de los estudiantes, son un función del grado de *comprensión, paciencia, y benevolencia* de los docentes. El hecho de que a menudo los profesores favorecen a ciertos estudiantes y tratan a algunos estudiantes como si fueran niños, y de que algunos profesores se meten en lo que no les importa y son egoístas, también son causas subyacentes del embarazo de los estudiantes. Además de los efectos negativos sobre los resultados de los estudiantes y su actitud hacia la escuela, las consecuencias del embarazo estudiantil incluyen desarrollar antipatía hacia los profesores, estar "furioso" contra sus profesores, tenerle miedo a sus reacciones, y desarrollar una auto-imágen negativa. También se aborda el estudio de problemas relacionados a la concientización de los profesores acerca del embarazo del estudiante y las consecuencias pedagógicas de estos problemas.

Wilfred Martin is a professor in the Faculty of Education at Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's, Newfoundland A1B 3X8.