

*from*

**THE**

**GEEKS**

SHALL INHERIT

**THE EARTH**

**Alexandra Robbins**

In the decade I've spent examining various microcosms<sup>1</sup> of life in U.S. schools—from the multitude of students pressured to succeed in school and sports to the twenty-something products of this educational Rube Goldberg machine<sup>2</sup>—a disturbing pattern has emerged. Young people are trying frantically to force themselves into an unbending mold of expectations, convinced that they live in a two-tiered system in which they are either a resounding success or they have already failed. And the more they try to squeeze themselves into that shrinking, allegedly normative space, the faster the walls close in.

The students outside these walls are the kids who typically are not considered part of the in crowd, the ones who are excluded, blatantly or subtly, from the premier table in the lunchroom. I refer to them as “cafeteria fringe.” Whether alone or in groups, these geeks, loners, punks, floaters, nerds, freaks, dorks, gamers, bandies, art kids, theater geeks, choir kids, Goths, weirdos, indies, scenes, emos, skaters, and various types of racial and other minorities are often relegated to subordinate social status simply because they are, or seem to be, even the slightest bit different.

Students alone did not create these boundaries. The No Child Left Behind law, a disproportionate emphasis on SATs, APs, and other standardized tests, and a suffocating homogenization<sup>3</sup> of the U.S. education system have all contributed to a rabidly conformist atmosphere that stifles unique people, ideas, and expression. The methods that schools and government officials claimed would

◀ **allegedly**  
(ə leɪˈɪd lē) *adv.*  
questionably  
true; supposed

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1. **microcosms** (mīkrō kăzəmz) *n.* small communities representative of a larger whole
  2. **Rube Goldberg machine** a comical machine that makes a simple process needlessly complicated
  3. **homogenization** (hə məjˈə nīz əˈshun) *n.* blended into an even mixture

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improve America's "progress" are the same methods that hold back the students who are most likely to further that progress.

In precisely the years that we should be embracing differences among students, urging them to pursue their divergent interests at full throttle, we're instead forcing them into a skyline of sameness, muffling their voices, grounding their dreams. The result? As a Midwestern senior told me for my book *The Overachievers*, high schoolers view life as "a conveyor belt," making **monotonous** scheduled stops at high school, college, graduate school, and a series of jobs until death. Middle schools in North America have been called "the Bermuda triangle of education." Only 22 percent of U.S. youth socialize with people of another race. U.S. students have some of the highest rates of emotional problems and the most negative views of peer culture among countries surveyed by the World Health Organization.

**monotonous** ►  
(mə nāt' n əs) *adj.*  
unvarying; dull  
and uniform

Too many students are losing hope because of exclusion or bullying that they believe they're doomed to experience for the rest of their lives. It is unacceptable that the system we rely on to develop children into well-adjusted, learned, cultured adults allows drones to dominate and increasingly devalues freethinkers. In 1957, theologian Paul Tillich told a graduating university class, "We hope for nonconformists among you, for your sake, for the sake of the nation, for the sake of humanity." More than half a century later, schools, students, and sometimes parents treat these nonconformists like second-class citizens, **squelching** that hope. There is too much pressure on children to conform to a narrowing in-crowd image, when we should be nurturing the outsiders who reject that image. In large part, those are the individuals who will turn out to be the kinds of interesting, admired, and inspiring adults who earn respect and attention for their impact on their community or the world.

**squelching** ►  
(skwelch' in) *v.*  
suppressing; silencing

Or even the celebrisphere. ...

Musician Bruce Springsteen was so unpopular in high school that, "other people didn't even know I was there," he has said. He started a band because "I was on the outside looking in."

Television host Tim Gunn, who identified himself as "a classic nerd" in school, was "crazy about making things: I was addicted to my Lincoln Logs, Erector Set, and especially my Legos," he has said. "Between my stutter and my fetishizing of Lego textures, I was taunted and teased." Now Gunn is a fashion world icon precisely because of his eye toward "making things"—and his catchphrase, "Make it work," has become famous.

All of these people exemplify what I call **quirk theory**.

### **QUIRK THEORY:**

Many of the differences that cause a student to be excluded in school are the same traits or real-world skills that others will value, love, respect, or find compelling about that person in adulthood and outside of the school setting.

Quirk theory suggests that popularity in school is not a key to success and satisfaction in adulthood. Conventional notions of popularity are wrong. What if popularity is not the same thing as social success? What if students who are considered outsiders aren't really socially inadequate at all? Being an outsider doesn't necessarily indicate any sort of social failing. We do not view a tuba player as musically challenged if he cannot play the violin. He's just a different kind of musician. A sprinter is still considered an athlete even if she can't play basketball. She's a different kind of athlete. Rather than view the cafeteria fringe as less socially successful than the popular crowd, we could simply accept that they are a different kind of social.

To date, musician Bruce Springsteen (shown on the left in his 1967 high school senior yearbook photo and on the right in performance) has won a total of twenty Grammy Awards.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

#### **Alexandra Robbins (b. 1976)**

Best-selling author Alexandra Robbins has made a career out of writing about teenagers, college students, and recent graduates. After graduating from Yale University, she worked for *The New Yorker* magazine and wrote her first book. While researching her book about secret societies at Yale, Robbins found Yale graduate and former president George W. Bush's high school transcript and SAT scores. When published, the story made the young journalist famous. When not writing, Robbins speaks at schools about cliques, popularity, and bullying. In 2007, she won the Heartsongs Award for positive contributions to the mental health of children and young adults.