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Introduction

Education is the great equalizer. That's what I heard growing up, the son of a mother from poor Appalachian stock and a father from working-class Detroit. *If you work hard, do well in school, and follow the rules, you can be anything you want to be.* It's a fantastic idea. How remarkable it would be if only it were true.

I've been working with and around educators for the better part of 20 years now, and this I know for certain: Most of us *want* it to be true. We desire an education system that works for every student—not only one that gives everybody a fair shake, but also one that helps make up for the challenges bearing down on students who face the most barriers in and out of school. Many of us celebrate the Horatio Alger education stories: the young woman experiencing poverty who becomes valedictorian, the homeless student who wins a college scholarship, the janitor who works her way through Harvard. We want to believe that schools, of all places, offer equal opportunity for people experiencing poverty, even when the odds are stacked against them.

Unfortunately, schools as constituted today are not the great equalizers they are cracked up to be. Not for most students, at least (Katz, 2015). This, too, I know for certain: Students from families experiencing poverty continue to bear what Jonathan Kozol (2012) called the *savage inequalities* of schooling. The examples are numerous. They are assigned disproportionately to the most inadequately funded schools (Strange, 2011) with the largest class sizes and least experienced teachers (Kids Count, 2016). They are more likely than wealthier peers to be teased or bullied (Carbis, 2015) and to attend schools with fewer extracurricular options (Phillips & Putnam, 2016). They are denied access to the sorts of school resources and opportunities other children take for granted, such as engaging pedagogies (Battey, 2013; Shields, 2014) and arts education (DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, & Edin, 2016). By these and almost every conceivable measure, students from families experiencing poverty, the ones most desperate to find truth in the “great equalizer” promise, pay a substantial price for their poverty, even at school. Of course, teachers did not invent these conditions, but often are blamed unjustly for their effects. In fact, teachers in high-poverty schools,

along with increasing numbers of their colleagues at *all* public schools, also are denied access to adequate resources.

Complicating matters, as Sue Books (2004) explained, students experiencing poverty “bear the brunt of almost every imaginable social ill” (p. 34) outside of schools, many of which directly or indirectly affect their abilities to do well in school. Starting at birth, youth experiencing poverty have less access than their wealthier peers to a bevy of important resources and services. These include quality preschool (Waldfogel & Putnam, 2016), consistent quality health care (Perrin, Boat, & Kelleher, 2016), and healthy food (Andress & Fitch, 2016). If we’re doing due diligence, we should begin this conversation pre-birth, asking which families have access to high-quality prenatal care.

As I consider these realities, what stands out most about the barriers low-income families face is that none of them, *not a single one*, has anything to do with students’ intellectual capabilities or desires to learn. They in no way reflect breakdowns in families’ cultures, mindsets, grittiness, or attitudes about education. If anything, they reflect just the opposite: the level of society’s commitment—*our* commitment—to fulfill the promise of equal educational opportunity.

If you are a teacher, counselor, school psychologist, or school administrator, you might be thinking, *That’s awfully sad, but it’s a little outside my purview. I have no control over who has health care or high-quality preschool.*

Fair enough. In fact, in today’s world of hyperaccountability in education, where high-stakes testing is used to assess not only student learning, but also teacher and administrator performance, educators often are held accountable for not doing what is more or less impossible to do: making up for all of the barriers and inequities students experiencing poverty face starting prior to birth. As schools decrease children’s access to nurses, to art and music education, to recess and physical education, and to all manner of other opportunities and resources that improve school performance for youth experiencing poverty, who are least likely to have access to them outside of school, they also limit our abilities to do our jobs in the most effective and rewarding ways.

I believe this is a set-up and a dangerous shift of attention. The testing regimens and test score obsessions have shifted focus away from the savage inequalities of schooling, as well as bigger societal disparities that affect student learning. And they have shifted that focus onto teachers and their unions, school administrators, and other educators. Imagine how patterns of family involvement might change if every parent had access to one full-time job that paid a living wage, or how patterns of student attendance and engagement might change if every student had access to high-quality preventive health care. Consider what it means that these are the most

formidable barriers to eliminating educational outcome disparities, yet mainstream conversations about poverty and education are almost always silent on them.

When I sat down to sketch out the first edition of this book, I initially intended to write about that very problem: how we ultimately cannot eliminate educational outcome disparities, such as differences in graduation rates, without addressing these larger societal and socioeconomic disparities. *However*—and this is a big, fat “however”—we all, whether teachers, counselors, social workers, or administrators, have a substantial amount of power to mitigate these barriers. We have the power and, of course, the responsibility to ensure we do not reproduce inequitable conditions in our own classrooms and schools.

I decided to write a book about *that* responsibility, how best to prepare ourselves, as people working in schools and school systems, to create and sustain equitable learning environments for students experiencing poverty. But I decided to do so by making a connection I find sorely lacking in most conversations about poverty and schooling: We cannot understand the experiences of families experiencing poverty, or how they relate to school, or how best to engage them, if we do not understand poverty and economic injustice. I made this decision for two reasons. First, many of the best minds in education have written books and essays that detail with impressive precision the relationships between larger economic inequalities and educational disparities. I find John Marsh’s (2011) book, *Class Dismissed*, and David Berliner’s (2013) essay, “Effects of Inequality and Poverty vs. Teachers and Schooling on America’s Youth,” particularly helpful in this regard. One limitation of these exposés, as poignant as they are, is that they never manage to describe how school workers can help create the change for which the authors advocate. Yes, of course, all youth ought to have access to health care. Yes, of course, we should confront economic injustice. I have spent much of my own activist and scholarly energies on these issues. But what should people who walk into classrooms and schools full of students each day do in the meantime?

The other reason I chose to write a book about teaching and leading for equity is that, of the many popular books that do introduce practical blueprints for teachers and school leaders (see especially Jensen, 2009; Payne, 2005; Templeton, 2011), few sufficiently acknowledge the larger societal barriers described by John Marsh, David Berliner, and others. Absent this acknowledgment, so much of the available literature on which educators rely in hopes of developing deeper understandings of poverty misinterprets educational outcome disparities as reflections of the supposedly deficient cultures, mindsets, and grittiness of families experiencing poverty. If we want to fix educational outcome disparities, this argument goes, we begin by fixing students and families experiencing poverty rather than by fixing

the inequities they experience. The result tends to be dangerously narrow framings. We see these in so much of the brain-research-based approaches, which often suggest that instructional strategies are suitable responses to lifetimes of inequality. Or we get a list of ubersimplistic practical solutions based more on stereotypes than reality.

I decided to write a book from a practitioner's point of view, but one that takes an "open systems" or "relational" approach. This approach nudges us to understand what happens in school within the context of conditions that exist outside school walls (Flessa, 2007). After all, these external conditions—living in food deserts or working multiple low-wage jobs to try to make ends meet—influence families' interactions with schools, which, in turn, influence our perceptions of families.

Consider the example of family involvement, often identified by educators, policy wonks, and researchers alike as the school success panacea for families experiencing poverty (Dotterer & Wehrspann, 2015; Hill & Craft, 2003). It is all too common for those of us who have not experienced sustained poverty to assume that if parents do not participate in on-site opportunities for engagement, they simply do not care about their children's education. How often have you heard those sentiments in a faculty meeting or teachers' lounge? How often have you thought them yourself? *Those parents never show up for anything. No wonder kids are failing when their parents don't value their education.* Unfortunately, many educators seem to have bought into this stereotype—this false stereotype, as it turns out (Johnson, 2016; Williams & Sánchez, 2012). (More on this in a moment.) Given a limited understanding, it can be easy to interpret lower rates of on-site school involvement as indicative of a culture or mindset of poverty that devalues education. We might respond, as many schools do, by offering parenting workshops or circulating memos about the importance of parent engagement.

How might our perspective change if we step back for a moment and attempt to understand on-site family involvement patterns in relation to the social conditions described by Marsh (2011) and Berliner (2013)? What if we soften our impulse to find fault in communities experiencing poverty so a fuller picture can come into focus, even if there are parts of that picture we don't feel equipped to change? What if we account for the fact that parents experiencing poverty are more likely than their wealthier peers to work multiple jobs and to work evening shifts? They are less likely to have paid leave and, as stands to reason, less likely to be able to afford to take unpaid leave. Finding and affording child care is more difficult for them than for wealthier parents as well, and they are less likely to have convenient transportation options (Jarrett & Coba-Rodriguez, 2015; Robinson & Volpé, 2015). And, of course, parents in low-income families are more likely than wealthier parents to have experienced school as unwelcoming or even hostile (Lee & Bowen, 2006).

Then there is this: Decades of studies show clearly that parents of families in poverty are as involved, or even *more* involved, in their children's educational lives when compared with their wealthier peers when we consider at-home involvement along with on-site involvement (Milner, 2015). Similarly, decades of research shows that people of all economic conditions, all races and ethnicities, whether from rural or urban regions, care deeply about their children's education—that they have the exact same attitudes about the value of schooling as their more economically stable peers (Johnson et al., 2016; Lucio, Jefferson, & Peck, 2016; Noel, Stark, Redford, & Zukerberg, 2013). The issue, these studies suggest, is not that low-income communities don't care about education. The issue, instead, is that we as a community of educators are so desperate to step gingerly around a real confrontation with the inequities harming students that we build initiatives for closing educational outcome gaps around anything—grit, growth mindset, fictitious mindsets of poverty, lies about who does or doesn't value education—other than the actual causes of the gaps.

I wrote this book, in part, to push us past these presumptions and doomed-to-fail initiatives and toward deeper, more empathetic, more holistic and equity-informed understandings of poverty's and economic injustice's effects on students' school experiences. I wrote it to push us past the simplifications and stereotypes that hamper our abilities to be the equity-minded educators and leaders we want to be.

I also wrote it because I believe in the transformative power of educators, perhaps not always as frontline people in the struggle to end global poverty (at least not on our own), but as people committed enough to walk into classrooms and schools full of students, dedicated to do the right thing by each of them despite all the challenges. I believe we want a more complex conversation about poverty than we get from books about grit or mindsets of poverty. More importantly, I know we're capable of digging deeper into questions about what we can do to better facilitate educational opportunity for each family. I believe we can, and must, begin by dropping the deficit views about fixing low-income families, then by equipping ourselves with a more structural view of how access and opportunity are distributed in and out of schools. We begin there. Then, with that structural view, we start gathering tools and strategies based on what works. That, in a nutshell, is what this book is about.

In pursuit of these goals I construct this book around a framework, co-developed by my supergenius colleague, Katy Swalwell (2011), called *equity literacy*. I dedicate Chapter 2 to describing this framework and how it builds upon and differs from other popular frameworks for discussing poverty, equity, and schooling, from *cultural proficiency* to *mindsets of poverty*. The gist, for now, is this: Equity literacy is comprised of the knowledge, skills, and will that enable us to become a threat to the existence of bias

and inequity in our spheres of influence. It fosters our abilities to recognize, respond to, and redress conditions that deny some students access to the educational opportunities enjoyed by their peers (Gorski, 2016a). Whereas many popular approaches ask us to focus on culture—the *culture* of poverty, *cultural* competence—equity literacy asks us to keep *equity* at the center of our conversations, to focus on how to create and sustain equitable learning environments free of even the subtlest biases and inequities. This requires different, although in some ways complementary, kinds of knowledge and skills from what those culture-based paradigms require. After all, simply knowing (or presuming) something about a student’s culture or having the skills to interact cross-culturally is not the same as knowing how to recognize and respond to subtle class biases in learning materials or inequities in school policies.

Parts of the picture I paint are uplifting and hopeful, partially due to the amazing perseverance of high-poverty communities and partially because of the inspirational capacities of educators to advocate for students. Admittedly, other parts are bleak. The odds are stacked heavily against the most economically marginalized students and families, despite the skills, gifts, and determination they bring to the table. But there is something we can do about it, and we all have a role in that something.

DEFINITIONS AND DISTINCTIONS

Let’s start at the beginning, with terminology. Already I’ve been using words like “students experiencing poverty” and “low-income families.” It can be difficult to find any two people willing to agree on what these words and phrases mean. My intention here is not to provide social science textbook definitions for these terms or to debate the widely variable semantic arguments for this or that terminology. Rather, my intention is to describe what I mean by the terminology I use. There is no “correct” definition or terminology. However, our understandings of poverty can be influenced by the language we use.

In this section I describe how I use the following terms: (1) socioeconomic status, (2) poverty and people who are *economically marginalized*, (3) working class, and (4) income and wealth.

Socioeconomic Status or “Class”

When I ask people what poverty means, they usually mention the financial component first. They might say, “Poverty means not having adequate financial resources.” Almost inevitably, though, they turn quickly to other sorts of resources, everything from *life attitudes* to *resilience* to *positive dispositions*.